DSPACE

https://dspace.org/

Words or Beings?: an enquiry into the treatment of character in JM Coetzee's first five novels

Mafokwana, Mathibela Wilson

2021
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/35571

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

WORDS OR BEINGS: AN ENQUIRY INTO THE TREATMENT OF CHARACTER IN JM COETZEE'S FIRST FIVE NOVELS

Mathibela Wilson Mafokwana

8374066

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts by Dissertation.

Johannesburg, 2019

Table of Contents

DECLARATION 3
Abstract 4
Dedication 5
Introduction 6
Research Question: Equivocating with intent between subject positions 7
Chapter One -*Dusklands* 16
PART I 19
PART II 29
Chapter Two - *In the Heart of the Country* 41
Chapter Three - *Waiting for the Barbarians* 60
Chapter Four – *The Life & Times of Michael K* 76
Chapter Five - *Foe* 98
Chapter Six - *Conclusion* 121
Bibliography 131

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree Masters of the Arts by Dissertation at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

_____

(Signature of candidate)

_____day of

_____20_____at_____

Abstract

The first five novels of JM Coetzee are often seen as anti-realist and their protagonists accordingly often read in terms of psychological or political allegories, or, alternatively, as self-reflexive fictional constructs. But Coetzee's representation of character can be regarded fruitfully as oscillating between the "realistic" and metafictional, reflecting the dialectic between self-determined (absolute subject position) and determined (relative subject position), and thus resulting in the characters displaying extreme psychological conditions: paranoia, narcissism, sadomasochism, autism and hyperconsciousness. Through close reading of the texts this study shows how the account of subjectivity as unitary, autonomous, transcendent and self-defining is problematised; that the body, far from having metaphysical meaning, is shown to be both a facticity and a textual sign; that the tension between the vivid, objective and plausible portrayal of characters and the self-confession/exposure of their fictionality leads to extreme psychological conditions.

Dedication

In memory of my parents:

Matome & Mashiko Mafokoane;

And to inspire my children :

Forah, Lehlohonolo, Onthatile, Onalerona & KgosiOtsile.

Introduction

JM Coetzee's first five novels, while different in style and thematic concern, self-reflexively and systematically flaunt and interrogate their constructedness, while laying bare the conditions of their fictionality. More to the point, Coetzee's novels set up and sustain a tension between the "realistic" and metafictional modes of literary representation. While this is a common feature of most postmodernist text, Coetzee sustains this tension in a systematic and self-conscious fashion.

I consistently put the term *realistic* in inverted commas in order to convey the idea that the tension is between, on the one hand, Coetzee's attempt to create a "reality effect" of characters, as opposed to a faithful description of the characters' reality, and on the other hand, his deployment of metafictional writing, which according to Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984), "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2).

My intention, throughout this study, is to demonstrate that this tension plays out in particularly striking ways in relation to Coetzee's representation of character and subjectivity. The key feature will be to demonstrate that the characters are self-reflexively made to share the awareness of the tension between being produced by a "realistic" discourse and being produced by a metafictional discourse.

I have chosen Coetzee's first five novels because each of them, in different ways, demonstrates the implications that the tension between "realistic" and metafictional modes has for narrative characterisation, or characters' understanding of their own

subjectivities, and subjectivity in general. As I will demonstrate, one of the major implications is that the tension produces the kinds of psychological extremities so characteristic of most of Coetzee's protagonists, namely, delusion, paranoia, narcissism, sadomasochism and hyperconsiousness.

Research Question: Equivocating with intent between subject positions

My approach to the question of how "realistic" and metafictional modes of representation serve to define the subjectivity of Coetzee's characters is informed by Antony Easthope's account of subjectivity in *Discourse as Poetry* (1983). Relying on Althusser's conception of ideology as socially constituted subjectivity, Easthope (28 – 29) argues that there are two major subject positions: the absolute and the relative. Subjects who reflect the absolute subject position are constituted to 'mis-see' themselves totally as transcendent, self-authored egos. In the relative subject position, on the other hand, subjects display a degree of recognition of their position as socially and linguistically produced.

Part of the Althusserian thesis, which informs Easthope's argument, is that ideology is inscribed in signifying systems, of which literature is an essential part. In its representation of a world of absolute subject positions, realism performs the work of ideology. As Lennard Davies suggests:

> The novel is a form which depends on mimesis — the imitation of reality through realist techniques — and because of that fact, novels depend on their ability to make readers feel as if they're witnessing not art but life. In this sense novels parallel ideology, which attempts to destroy the veil of its own artifice and to appear as natural as common sense.(25)

Realist texts mask the constructedness of characters, thus making us believe that we are getting to know about real people, independent of the events in which they are made to live in the text. This is an essentially ideological gesture that serves to position us as unified subjects. To posit a unified subject is to deny the role society and language plays in the production of subjectivity and to put undue onus for social change on the individual. Challenging this view acknowledges the need for social change through transformation of social (including narrative, literary and linguistic) structures (Davies, 119).

Because Coetzee's first five novels display strong metafictional proclivities, it is legitimate to argue that the characters' subject positions, their status as constructs produced within a specific novelistic discourse, expose their delusion and/or paranoia as self-authored or self-authoring individuals. Coetzee's metafiction operates through a parody of an outworn literary tradition. As per Teresa Dovey's classification in The *Novels of JM Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* [1988] (10 -11) the tradition plays out according to generic structures such as, journey of exploration (*Dusklands*), romantic pastoral (*In the Heart of the Country*); the liberal humanist novel (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), the novel of the inarticulate victim (*Life and Times of Michael K*) and the post-colonial/ feminist/post-modern text (*Foe*).

Dovey posits a straight line between Coetzee's fiction and criticism, characterising the novels as "criticism-as-fiction, or fiction-as-criticism" (9). According to her, Coetzee's novels redramatise the indissolubly entwined paradoxes of the Lacanian subject that all, Dovey argues, emanate from the paradox of the divided self. Thus the focus in Dovey is on the texts as subversive adaptations of prior texts and their potency as allegories of both reading and writing. Dovey reads Coetzee's treatment of character as primarily Lacanian. This approach seems to put character solely at the service of Lacanian (psychoanalytic) diagnostics. My focus is, by

contrast, on how, given the five texts' metafictional thrust, the characters are made to deal with the inevitable tension between their self-reflexively assumed autonomy and the fact that they are after all effects of literary techniques.

When they insist on their autonomy, Coetzee's characters inhabit the absolute subject position. In other words, they deny the notion that their subjectivity is produced by linguistic and societal forces. And when their fictionality is exposed they are shown to inhabit the relative subject position. In effect, they are forced to confront the idea that, far from being self-authoring egos, they are in fact socially and linguistically constructed, even determined, subjects.

This tension between the absolute subject position and the relative subject position is writ large in the novels I propose to study. Consider, for example, Eugene Dawn as he resigns himself completely to the external forces that assigned him a name, thus determining his destiny: "My name is Eugene Dawn", he declares, "*I cannot help that*. Here goes" (*Dusklands*, 1, my emphasis). This statement of a relative subject position is made separate from the narration proper, which almost immediately undermines Dawn's claim of the relative subject position when he, as a self-mythologising mythographer, inhabits the absolute subject position. As his private life encroaches on his public life, he starts to suspect that he is a construct created by forces beyond him and he finally descends into mental fragmentation. Reading the end in view of the beginning, we realise that Dawn's character development is fundamentally ambiguous: while in the end he still recognises his constructedness (relative subject position) he deludes himself into thinking that he is autonomous enough to find out by whom or what he is constructed, "I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am" (*Dusklands*, 51).

In *Dusklands* Coetzee presents us with two absolute subject positions, one of a cultural theoretician and a conquistador elephant hunter in and twentieth and the eighteenth centuries respectively, based on self-assertion through domination. I have said earlier that in the relative subject position the character is made to acknowledge that s/he is constituted by forces beyond his or her control. *Dusklands* introduces the other as one of those forces. Part of my argument is that characters who inhabit the absolute positions delude themselves that their identity is independent of the other and language. Jacobus Coetzee's need for validation by the Namaquas and the Hottentots, dramatises how his identity, contrary to his delusion, is dependent on the other.

Magda, the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country*, betrays a more intense acknowledgement of her status as fictional construct, thus conflating the absolute and relative subject positions when she says, "I create myself in the words that create me" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 8) and, strongly suspecting that she is a mere sign, she reconciles herself to the author's designs, "If I am an emblem then I am an emblem" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 9). Thus we see Magda's ambivalent relationship to language, as a subject-constituting force. As a white woman with authority over her black servants, she tends to be a custodian of colonial language (what she calls "the old, old code") and as a woman in a patriarchal society she wants to be free from this language which positions her as sexually other. Her attempts to be neither Master nor Slave, to reconcile all contraries, to resolve her existentialist paradox, to attain a private language of the heart, are at the end, futile as the tension between absolute and relative subject position proves to be irreducible.

In *Waiting for the* Barbarians, the Magistrate's desired absolute subject position outside language and discourse, "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history

that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects" (*Waiting for the Barbarians,*154), proves unattainable, because as he lectures a boy he has unjustly sentenced, "We cannot just do as we wish ……We are all subjects to the law, which is greater than any of us. The magistrate who sent you here, I myself, you — we are subjects to the law" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 138). The Magistrate's complicity as a functionary of the colonial legal structure he purports to protest against, is brought into sharp relief when he, in a quest for narcissistic recognition, and a moment of sadomasochism, is shown to be fascinated with the body of the barbarian girl and seeks to read the marks of torture that the torturers left on her. His attempt to take up an autonomous stance outside the social formation that produces his subjectivity is exposed as a fallacy.

Michael K, by contrast, is determined to elude the clutches of realism, specifically the attempt to present him as a fully present character. As he puts it:

> What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the window. He must live so that he leaves no trace of this living (*The Life & Times of Michael K*, 135)

Whether we take "…in times like these…" to refer to a specific political era as David Atwell does (90 - 91) or to an unspecified time, as David Attridge does (48), Michael K, inhabiting the absolute subject position, refers to specific social forces, the effect of which he feels he has no choice but to elude. A dialectic between Michael K's "Life" (Absolute subject position) and "Times" (Relative subject position) plays itself out undecidably throughout the text.

In *Foe*, Coetzee's fifth novel, we find that the identity crisis experienced by the characters as they try to exercise their freedom while suspecting that they are fictional constructs, presents itself in an authorial fashion. Susan Barton's assertive self-delusion "…. I am a free woman

who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire." (*Foe*, 131), is subsequently contradicted by her profound self-doubt. This is particularly apparent when Foe introduces the girl claiming to be her daughter and the maid (The daughter and the maid are characters are drawn from Defoe's novel, *Roxana*) into the room in which he and Susan are talking, Susan says:

> But if these women are creatures of yours, visiting me at your instruction, speaking words you have prepared for them, then who am I and who indeed are you? (*Foe*, 133).

Her identity crisis is staged in authorial terms as she wonders what, if the woman who claims to be her daughter and the maid are actors in Foe's well-wrought plays, the implications for her existence are. She soon has to come face to face with her "reality",

> I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt… I am doubt itself (*Foe*, 133).

Thus, we see Susan Barton's initial absolute subject position as she mistakenly thinks of herself as a free agent, evolve into a profound existentialist anxiety. Made to inhabit a relative subject position, she finally realises that, far from being self-representing, she is a scripted subject.

When Foe says to Susan Barton,

> Let us confront our worst fear, which is that we have all of us been called into the world …. by a conjurer unknown to us …. Have we thereby lost our freedom? Are you, for one, any less mistress of your life? Do we of necessity become puppets in a story whose end is invisible to us, and towards which we are marched like condemned felons? (*Foe*, 135)

He might as well be addressing himself to all of Coetzee's characters. Foe's paranoia, his worst fear, that he is a fictional construct is, as we have seen, shared by all of the characters. The tension between the absolute subject position (freedom) and the relative subject position (puppets…marched like condemned fellows) is poignantly enacted in the above passage.

Before I conclude my Introduction, it is necessary to note that in all the texts under study the body asserts itself resoundingly as the characters' descent into a state of psychological morbidity, as they suspect that their assumed absolute subject positions are untenable, often coincides with the breakdown of the body: in *Dusklands*, Eugene Dawn's body's steady fall into paranoia and ultimate madness is marked by his body being 'invaded' by the "hideous mongol boy" and Jacobus Coetzee's growing narcissism coincides with the eruption of the boil on his buttocks; in *In the Heart of the Country* Magda's narcissistic injury is dramatised by , among other renditions of bodily invasion, visceral and invasive description of her being raped by Hendrik; in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate's fascination with the torture marks on the barbarian girl's body betrays his sadomasochism; in *The Life & Times of Michael K* Michael K's harelip and self-starvation mark his autism, in *Foe* Friday's mutilated tongue stands for his silence which in turn stands for the perceived hole at Susan Barton's hyperconscious narrative.

In the passages I chose to discuss, Coetzee foregrounds his characters' constructedness while at the same time rendering them as beings who plausibly have lives outside the text. This he does vividly, authentically and credibly, thus creating a strong "reality effect". My thesis is that, through the strong metafictional thrust in his first five novels, Coetzee sustains a tension

between the characters' absolute subject position (self-determined) and relative subject position (determined). I will show that the characters are made to gradually suspect that their assumed self-determined (absolute subject) position is untenable and they as a result descend into an extreme psychological condition. I will also show that this descent into extreme psychological condition often coincides with the breakdown of the body as physical being is privileged over metaphysical identity.

An outline of the chapters indicates the logical progression of my argument. Chapter One shows how two characters, in two different centuries and initially inhabiting the absolute subject position, fail in their efforts to rely on self-assertion through dominance of the other. The subject's dependence on the other is established; the themes of absolute subjectivity as self-authoring and Coetzee's privileging of physical over metaphysical identity are introduced and the two protagonists, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, descend into madness and sadism respectively, as a result of their shift from the absolute to the relative subject position.

Chapter Two illustrates the subject's dependence on language as Magda, a white woman in a patriarchal farming society who is at once a master to her black servants, is shown to be in an ambivalent relationship to language. The self's dependence on the other and language for its identity is further explored as Magda fails to secure recognition by the servants and her attempts, through her relentless present-tense self-narration, to create a private language, in contradistinction to the hegemonic language of domination, proves to be futile as her narcissistic injury persists to the end.

Chapter Three shows subjectivity's dependence on discourse as the Magistrate's attempt to step out of, and protest against, the society in which he is embedded proves futile. The

privileging of the body over metaphysical identity takes a textual turn as the barbarian girl's suffering body is marked with signs of torture and the Magistrate obsessively tries to read self-redemption from her body. The Magistrate's futile quest for at-one-ment, his failed yearning for narcissistic recognition and the transcendence that comes with a reconciliation of self-concept to the lived self , mark a seismic shift from his would-be absolute subjectivity to a necessary relative subject position and coincides with his sadomasochistic preoccupation with the other's body.

In Chapter Four, Coetzee's concern shifts decidedly toward writing as such, as a telling of Michael's life and times stage character construction and the character's attempt to escape the relative subjectivity that comes with being institutionalised and buffeted by bureaucracy, dramatised by the problematisation of the speaking voice, leads to his autism. The theme of the privileging of the physical is linked to representability as Michael K's hunger strike coincides with his insistence to be represented (spoken about) on his own terms.

In Chapter five, we see a culmination and coalescing of the themes from the previous novels. The trope of a character as self-authoring finds its fullest expression as Susan Barton is engaged in a struggle to have her story told — and her character constructed — on her own terms, as she is made to realise the untenability of absolute subjectivity. The idea of the subject's dependence on the other is problematised as Susan Barton, a sexual other, relies somewhat on the tongueless Friday's radical alterity to establish her identity. The theme of the privileging of the physical over the metaphysical view of identity finds climactic expression as Friday's body becomes its own home — and representation, asserting its facticity and telling the story that eluded everyone: the story of the island on which he and Susan Barton were marooned.

Chapter One - *Dusklands*

Convinced of his/her transcendence, a character who inhabits the absolute subject position views him/herself as self-determining, produced independent of forces beyond him/herself. These forces include the other. By inhabiting the absolute subject position, the character arrogates absolute mastery — mastery of its identity, and mastery over others — to itself. Consequently, the character rejects the need to balance the need for self-assertion with the need for recognition of the self by an other. Hegel's Master/Slave is undeniably relevant here. In the two novellas that comprise *Dusklands*, JM Coetzee presents two protagonists, Jacobus Coetzee in the eighteenth century and Eugene Dawn in the twentieth century, whose attempts to assert themselves over the other ultimately falter. Thus, my purpose in this chapter is to show how the two protagonists' initially assumed absolute subject position is increasingly undermined, as they are made to suspect that they might be determined by forces beyond themselves, and are shown to descend into madness, in the case of Eugene Dawn, and sadistic violence, in the case of Jacobus Coetzee. The fact that Eugene Dawn is a mythographer and Jacobus is a chronicler of history, means that both are writers of some sort, and this initiates the thematic portrayal of the protagonists under study as would-be self-authoring. The violation of bodily sovereignty initiates the theme that challenges the presumed view of identity as essentially metaphysical (as opposed to physical). Although there are strong thematic and tonal parallels between the two novellas, I , for the sake of clarity, choose to discuss them in two different parts.

The metafictional preponderance of characters named "Coetzee" in the two novellas is worth noting in advance: In the first novella, Eugene Dawn's supervisor is named "Coetzee"; and the second novella features "Jacobus Coetzee", editor "S.J. Coetzee",

and his son, translator "J.M. Coetzee" (not to be mistaken with J.M. Coetzee, author of *Dusklands*).

Dusklands is made up of "The Vietnam Project", a first-person account by Eugene Dawn, a propagandist and mythographer supervised by a character named "Coetzee" to preside over "The New Life Project", designed by America to defeat the Vietcong; and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee", which in turn comprises three different versions, translated by a character named JM Coetzee, of the historically verifiable journey of one of his ancestors, Jacobus Coetzee, embarked on into the Southern African interior in 1760.

The two pieces were written separately, with "The Vietnam Project", as JM Coetzee tells his biographer, J.C. Kannemeyer , meant as a "companion piece" to "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee", and as J.C. Kannemeyer suspects, might have been put together into one work to expedite publication (236). The somewhat arbitrary stitching together of two stories set in different centuries, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" in the eighteenth and "The Vietnam Project" in the twentieth, has led some critics to question its coherence and its classification as a novel (Kannemeyer, 238).

The two novellas, however, display thematic cohesion as the Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn seek to define them-selves in relation to other people, the Hottentots and the Vietcong respectively. Eugene Dawn's mythography intersects with, and finds action in his personal life where an equivalent drama of self-representation and consciousness is played out, as he turns his destructive drive towards himself and his offspring. He abducts his son and cuts loose from his wife. He is arrested and sent to a

mental institution, where, fearing he is possessed from inside by a "hideous mongol boy", he resists the attentions of the therapists.

The "Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is according to *The Cambridge Introduction to JM Coetzee* (2009) based on a parodic repetition of the adventurer/explorer/anthropologist as it uses actual documents written and/or translated by actual historical people. "The Vietnam Project" on the other hand draws, as Attwell demonstrates, is based on a collection of Hudson Institute reports (40 - 44).

After seeking to assert himself in a preamble wherein he defines the Hottentots and Bushmen as the culturally other, and through his aggressive actions during, "Journey Beyond the Great River" and encounter with the Namaqua, Jacobus Coetzee's foray into the frontier is turned outside in: he is waylaid by a bout of diarrhoea and his journey becomes introspective and meditative (he meditates on several subjects) as he is held captive by the Hottentots whose indifference to him bothers him. To add insult to injury, he is beset by a carbuncle the lancing of which is described in elaborate detail.

He later heads south in the company of his servant, Jan Klawer. When Klawer dies (his death is described twice) he exults in his solitariness only to find his freedom to be a hollow one. Likewise, in "Vietnam Project" Eugene Dawn's public self blends with his private self as he leaves his wife, taking his son with him, Eugene Dawn finds his freedom from his wife to be hollow. Eugene Dawn later stabs his son and is locked up in an institution.

Later, Jacobus Coetzee embarks on a second expedition which is marked by savage violence. In the end he, in a retrospective questioning of his reason to exist, says that whether he "ever lived or never was born, has never been of concern to him" (*Dusklands*, 107).

PART I

Dusklands gets off to a startlingly audacious start, "My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes." (*Dusklands*, 1). Thus Dawn, the self-narrating protagonist resigns himself to the social and linguistic forces that conspire to create him. The three sentences demonstrate in microcosm, the irreducible tension between self-determination and determinism, as Eugene Dawn displays a relative subject position, acknowledging that he is nominatively determined, and by extension, socially and linguistically nominated. But the fact that the words appear before the narration proper, more like an epigraph, causes us to pause and reflect. More so because immediately after Eugene Dawn's introductory declaration, the text plunges headlong into first-person narration, in the present tense.

In the lines that follow almost immediately, the image of Eugene Dawn as a character self-conscious of his status as a construct is ruptured by his image as a self-authoring propagandist complaining bitterly against his supervisor, Coetzee,

> I would have expected more understanding from Coetzee, who would be used to handling creative people. Once upon a time a creative person himself, he is now a failed creative person who lives vicariously off true creative people. He has built a reputation on the work of other people. (*Dusklands*, 1)

The fact that the supervisor is named "Coetzee" is a reminder of the authorial hand of JM Coetzee, the author of *Dusklands* not the translator-character who is featured in the second

novella, and it emphasises that, however much he tries, Eugene Dawn cannot escape an authority, cannot shed his created status. He simply cannot be his own man.

By foregrounding Dawn's writerly activities, this passage also sets in motion the tension between (self-)creating and created subjectivity that characterises both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. As a propagandist Dawn peddles myths, being as he says himself, "the fictions it (a tribe) coins to maintain its powers." (*Dusklands,* 24) and as Coetzee, his supervisor, tells us relate to "how signs are exchanged," (*Dusklands,* 4). We might see Dawn as a semiotician who propagates a code of behaviour in a network of signs meant to sustain and authenticate his self-concept as an autonomous ego.

In their progress meeting, Coetzee, the supervisor, advises Dawn on how to write his report addressed to the American Department of Defense. In what might be regarded as a metafictional commentary on the reflexive and experimental nature of the novel, *Dusklands*, itself Coetzee says, ' "I never imagined that this department would one day be producing work of an *avant-garde* nature" '(*Dusklands* , 2, italics in original), and later, more directly to Eugene Dawn,' "You are working in a novel and contentious field and must expect contention" '(*Dusklands,* 3). He later recommends that Eugene Dawn reads ' "Kidman's little book on Central America" ' (*Dusklands*, 4) as a paradigm case of "self-effacing persuasion" (*Dusklands*, 4). We soon discover, when Eugene Dawn writes a "postscript" to his otherwise self-effacing "Introduction", the self inevitably creeps into a dispassionately professional account, "I am in a bad way as I write these words. My health is poor. I have a treacherous wife" (*Dusklands*,29) thus undermining objective attempts to efface it, with the relative subject position (signalling partial awareness' by the self of its determined status) inexorably

qualifying the absolute subject position (signalling the self's deluded status of self-determined freedom).

After the intense encounter with his supervisor, Eugene Dawn sets out to write his "Introduction", which is followed by his lamentation of the lack of satisfying intimate encounters with his wife, as unhappy public life intersects with a miserable private life,

> Now is also the time to mention the length of gristle that hangs from the end of my iron spine and effects my sad connection with Marilyn. Alas, Marilyn has never succeeded in freeing me from rigors. Though like the diligent partners in the marriage manuals we attend to each other's whispers, moans, and groans, though I plough like the hero and Marilyn froth like the heroine, the truth is that bliss of which the books speak of has deluded us. The fault is not mine. I do my duty. Whereas I cannot escape the suspicion that my wife is disengaged. Before the arrival of my seed her pouch yawns and falls back, leaving my betrayed representative gripped at its base, flailing its head in vain inside an immense cavern, at the very moment when above all else it craves to be rocked through its tantrum in a soft, firm, infinitely trustworthy grip. The word which at such moments flashes its tail across the heavens of my never quite extinguished consciousness is *evacuation*: my seed drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn's reproductive ducts. (*Dusklands*, 7 - 8)

Dawn's graphic description of the marital estrangement that plagues his household reveals a duality that suggests, despite the first-person present tense narration, not an immediate presence but a crafted construct. At the core of the passage is a paradox: the passage is vivid, an effect crucial to what is often referred to as the "realistic", but it is at the same time emotionally detached. This speaks further to the tension between the "realistic" and the metafictional representations of character. The passage is also remarkable for the way it portrays Eugene

Dawn as simultaneously a detached commentator and an estranged husband. He describes his penis as a superfluous piece of cartilage mechanically attached to his spine, and as "my betrayed representative". While the euphemism is becoming of a mythographer steeped in officialese, it also suggests a divided consciousness. This interpretation is reinforced when he later speaks of, "…my never extinguished consciousness…" He describes his wife's sexuality in terms more fitting to the description of plumbing than to what is perhaps the most intimate act a human being can be involved in.

Also notable is Dawn's reference to "marriage manuals" and "…that bliss of which the books speak…". And much later he says, "I was brought up on comic books, I was brought up on books of all kinds." (*Dusklands*, 34). Thus, we see how a man who constantly professes to be "creative", "Allowances must be made for me. I brood. I am a thinker, a creative person, one not without value to the world." (*Dusklands*, 1), is once again shown to be a creation of society, with socially created expectations. Finally, what we see here is the irreducible tension between the process of "realistic" character construction and a plausible "reality effect".

Eugene Dawn's occupation as a mythographer, creating fictions about his American society, is a metaphor for his endeavours to create fictions about himself. Consistent with all other of Coetzee's protagonists in the first five novels, Eugene's acts of self-fictionalisation are rendered complex and problematic. To wit, there simply is no textbook for this sort of undertaking,

> Mythographer, my present specialism, is an open field like philosophy or criticism because it has not yet found a methodology to lose itself forever in the maze of. When McGraw-Hill brings out the first textbook of mythography, I will move on.
>
> (*Dusklands*, 31)

In other words, for as long as mythography is an open and experimental field, Eugene Dawn's "I", his conception of his self, will remain entangled with this "field". Mythography can here be legitimately viewed as a project for self-serving manipulation of reality by the American government, of which Eugene Dawn is a keen functionary, who by temperament, is wont to explore his identity through language — and relation to the other. He proceeds to make a direct link between self-authenticating efforts to psychologically capture the Vietcong with the more blatant material and economic capture of earlier centuries:

> I have an exploring temperament. Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization. In that vertiginous freedom I might have expanded to my true potential. If I feel cramped nowadays it is because I have no space to beat my wings. (*Dusklands*, 31- 2)

We also note here Eugene Dawn's paranoid suspicion that he might not be as self-determining as he deludes himself to be, as he opines that he lacks the "freedom", albeit "vertiginous", to define himself and is deprived of the space to transcend the times.

Eugene Dawn's creeping identity crisis relates to his portrayal as a realistic figure. Realism is based on mimesis which in turn is articulated on truth and, fittingly, the mimetic presentation of character in Coetzee's novels under study is undermined by the consistent demonstration that the quest for the self's truth is futile. Eugene Dawn believes in an objective truth that is discoverable through scientific method. This belief in the truth extends to a belief in the truth of his own self, "Besides, I approve of the enterprise of exploring the self. I am deeply interested in the self." (*Dusklands*, 46). Dawn's quest for an external truth that codifies him as authentic and autonomous is directly related to his search for a truth of the self; "…I discovered this truth, as I discovered all the truths in my Vietnam report, by introspection." (*Dusklands*, 14, my emphasis)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he also believes that this truth of the self can be gotten at by using science, "We are presently investigating the hypothesis that my breakdown was connected with my background in warfare." (*Dusklands*, 46)

> I watch their eyes and think: you want to know what makes me tick, and when you discover it you will rip it out and discard me. My secret is what makes me desirable to you, my secret is what makes me strong. But will you ever win it? When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like, say, the ball in the toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round and will not die. (*Dusklands*, 48)

It is also crucial to note that the two protagonists in *Dusklands* define themselves in contradistinction to the Vietcong, in the case of Eugene Dawn, and the Hottentots and Bushmen, in the case of Jacobus Coetzee. To this end the novel presents the primitive/Western society polarity in terms of the deindividuation/individuation binary according to which identity is a non-issue in primitive society as the individual is guaranteed a place in a group while in western society, by contrast, the thrust toward individual identity is a pressing matter of increasing urgency (Dovey, 86). The distinction between the two societies is rendered poignant as Eugene Dawn explains why, in his opinion, American propaganda campaigns did not succeed in Vietnam,

> It is a mistake to think of the Vietnamese as individuals, for their culture prepares them to subordinate individual interest of family or band or hamlet. The rational promptings of self-interest matter less than the counsel of father and brothers…But the voice which our broadcasting projects into Vietnamese homes is the voice of neither father nor brother. It is the voice of the doubting self, the voice of Rene Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self who contemplates that self. The voices

> of our Chieu Hoi (surrender/reconciliation) programming are wholly Cartesian. Their record is not a happy one … they have failed because they speak out of an alienated *doppelganger* rationality for which there is no precedent in Vietnamese thought. We attempt to embody the ghost inside the villager, but there has never been any ghost there. (*Dusklands*, 20)

To rephrase, in terms of my thesis: Dawn argues that the Vietnamese individuals is absolutely subjectivised as his/her interests are subordinate to familial, kinship and cultural interests. And the propaganda broadcast to these individuals is meant to relativise the Vietnamese's subject position, effect a split between the "self-in-the-world" and "the self who contemplates that self". The Vietcong are thus demonised as communal, as a mob. But again, we see here that the hierarchy self/other is problematised as we are well aware that Eugene Dawn is a product of a specific discourse; that of Western rationality. He deludedly sees himself as a self-determined individual but the myth of individuality gradually comes unstuck in his personal life.

The third section of "The Vietnam Project" marks a worsening in Eugene Dawn's mental condition; he displays sharp signs of paranoia and hypochondria as the tension between his relative and absolute subject positions proves irreducible and gradually manifests in him as a pathological inner fragmentation: madness,

> Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach, that it bleeds slime and despair over the food that should be nourishing me, seeing in little puddles that rot the crooks of my obscurer hooked organs. (*Dusklands*, 32)

This passage's graphically visceral imagery foreshadows Dawn's invasion by the "hideous mongol boy" who "devoured the food that should have nourished me". Dawn's madness is a

psychosomatic manifestation of a tension that bespeaks his existentialist split that reflects his contradictory reaction to the forces that shape his identity.

In the fourth section, he can only save himself from despair by acting desperately: he abducts his son to the tellingly named, Loco Motel. Here Eugene Dawn suffers a writer's block as he hopes that "prolonged intercourse with reality" (*Dusklands,* 36) will improve his health and, perhaps, writing and yearns for his "true ideal…of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity." (*Dusklands,* 38).

Though he writes, "in an exuberant spirit and in the present definite." (*Dusklands,* 35) surrounded by "a bracing air of reality." (*Dusklands,* 35), he suffers acute writerly angst, as artistic collapse sets in. As he looks into "…a mortifying oval mirror…" (*Dusklands,* 36) he dreads the "dwindling subject" (*Dusklands,* 36) that is the reflected image of his self. He yearns for a language that positions him "indubitably" in the midst of "complex natural reality" (*Dusklands,* 37).

> I have *Herzog* and *Voss,* two reputable books, at my elbow, and I spend many analytic hours puzzling out the tricks which their authors perform to give their monologues…the air of the real world through the looking-glass (*Dusklands,* 37).

Eugene Dawn posits a language that is a transparent transmitter of reality as he dreams of a commensurability of word and world. Of course, this account of language is illusory but serves his self-creation project, his illusion of an autonomous subject. His Beckettian "true ideal… of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self in all infinity" (*Dusklands,* 38) sharply contradicts his longing for a grounding mimesis, as we're yet again confronted with the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional representation of character.

As I mentioned earlier, Dawn's writing activities (or lack thereof in the final section) stand, in my reading, for his endeavours to present himself as a self-authoring, transcendent subject. This reflexive moment dramatises his inability to reconcile his imagined ideal of a self reading itself to itself in perpetuity with the need to "spin…long, dense paragraphs which would give the reader a clear sense of the complex natural reality in whose midst I now indubitably am" (*Dusklands*, 36 - 7).

Free of attachments, and rid of his wife and his child, Eugene Dawn finds that his freedom is a pyrrhic one as he cannot escape mutual dependence with the other; "I ought to be happy in this place. I have cut my ties. There is no one breathing over my shoulder. My time is my own. Yet I am still unliberated" (*Dusklands*, 38). The subversion of his supposed ontological sovereignty is brought home through a trope of corporeal invasion,

> I call down death upon death upon the men of action. Since February of 1965 their war has been living its life at my expense. I know and know and know what it is that has eaten away my manhood from inside, devoured the food that should have nourished me. It is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead centre of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste, now, 1973, a hideous mongol boy who stretches his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaws my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. I want an end to it! I want my deliverance! (*Dusklands*, 38 - 39).

The invasion is devastating, "…it has eaten away my manhood from inside, devoured the food that should have nourished me…" and total, "…his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaw my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my system, and will not go…" as Eugene Dawn becomes an unwilling host to a fiendish parasite and the invasion is portrayed further as

a defilement of a scared self. Thus, the would-be coloniser's body is colonised, exposing his seeming autonomous ego for the narcissistic illusion that it is.

This invasion of Eugene Dawn's body is a culmination of his chronic war with his body,

> People tell me that I am too intense, people, that is to say, who think they have reached the stage of confidences with me; but if the truth be told I am intense only because my will is concentrated on subduing spasms in the various parts of my body, if spasm is not too dramatic a word. I am vexed by the indiscipline of my body. I have often wished I had another one (*Dusklands*, 5)

and "From head to foot I am the subject of my revolting body. Only the organs of my abdomen keep their blind freedom: the liver, the pancreas, the gut, and of course the heart, squelching against one another like unborn octuplets." (*Dusklands*, 7), and "my life with Marilyn has become a continual battle to keep my poise against her hysterical assaults and the pressure of my enemy body." (*Dusklands*, 8).

Eugene Dawn's madness, I contend, stems from his refusal to acknowledge his dependence on language and the other. Words fail him, not into silence, but into a deep mental disarray that is a pathological manifestation of his split characterisation (split between the "realistic" and metafictional, which plays out as the tension between the absolute and relative subject positions). Accordingly, he is, in his increasingly apparent madness, prodigiously preoccupied with his relation to words as he stabs his son. In other words, his delusion that he can transcend language climactically manifests as madness, a hysterical reaction to the world's refusal to correspond to his fictions of the self. His stabbing of his son can also be seen as a self-violation and therefore foreshadows Jacobus Coetzee's piercing of the carbuncle on his backside.

In the final segment Eugene Dawn is in a mental institution and, significantly, longing for order. This need for a restoration of order, or the establishment of a new order, can be read as the need for closure typical of realist texts and signifies Dawn's desire for transcendent and unified subjectivity. He is instead struck by his dialectical relationship with words, "I live in them and they in me. " (*Dusklands*, 43). He cannot escape his fundamental location in language and his status as a cluster of signs within a text. His abiding entrapment within language is spatially dramatised as he finds himself confined in a small cell in a mental institution, "with my private toilet in the corner" (*Dusklands*, 49). His certainties and his hope for order shattered, the only thing he know for sure is that he is "a fault". Whose fault? That he will only find out at some time beyond the text's end.

PART II

"The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is comprised of four documents: 1) The narrative as such, as Jacobus Coetzee relates his journey and return in the past historic; 2) Jacobus Coetzee gives us an account of a second journey led by Captain Hendrik Hop, featuring a raid on Jacobus Coetzee's servants; 3) An afterword penned by S.J. Coetzee; and (4) An appendix , made up of the "original" deposition or 1760 Relaas of Jacobus Coetzee.

The structure of the "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee", set in colonial South Africa and dated 1760, encourages a rereading of prior events as they are continually reframed by subsequent documents. It is also performative of Jacobus Coetzee's self: not only is his experience in polarities, so is his identity and it is his self-asserted hypothesis of the self that is, despite himself, revealed to be contradictory. This makes him a kindred spirit of Eugene Dawn, who as we have seen has his mask of absolute subject position slip as he himself slips into madness.

More significantly, the documentary nature of this section sets up a tension between a version of truth contained in the "historical" documents and Kossew calls, "the fictive nature of the colonizing self" (47). The structure of the narrative with one journey told in three different versions with the subsequent versions undercutting the veracity of the preceding narration is essentially deconstructive.

Through loaded ethnographic observations, Jacobus Coetzee asserts his self in relation to the Hottentots, defining his difference from them with forceful definitiveness, he asserts a solid border between himself and them, "The one gulf divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity," he says. "We are Christians, a folk with a destiny …The Hottentot is locked into the present. He does not care where he comes from or where he is going." (*Dusklands*, 57). He is even more graphically condemnatory of the Bushmen, "Heartless as baboons, they are, and the only way to treat them is like beasts" (*Dusklands*, 58). Jacobus Coetzee inhabits the relative subject position as he insists on his membership of a purportedly superior race. But given the categorical and essentialist manner in which he does so, there is an ironic absolutism to his betrayal of the relative subject position. Thus, Coetzee ingeniously keeps the two subject positions in play. And when Jacobus Coetzee in the final paragraph of this section talks about the rape of the Bushman girl, "who is tied to nothing" : "You have become Power itself now and she is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away. She is completely disposable." (*Dusklands,* 61), that this tension leads inevitably to sadism, as Jacobus Coetzee's claim to mastery and self-assertion can only be sustained through violence.

In the two narrative segments titled, "Journey Beyond the Great River." (*Dusklands*, 61- 6) and "Sojourn in the land of the Great Namaqua." (*Dusklands*, 66 – 100). Jacobus Coetzee's assertion of the self is undermined: the Namaqua treat him with disrespect and take charge of

his wagon and oxen; his servants defect and he is weakened by dysentery; the Namaqua confine him beyond the boundary of the camp; his condition improves; when he tries to bathe the inflamed eruption on his buttock, a group of Namaqua children mock him; he bites one of the children's ear and he is as a result banished by the Namaqua. Jacobus' insistence on his absolute subject position takes a more violent turn in the "Second Journey to the Land of the Great Namaqua." (*Dusklands*, 100 – 107) as he returns with vengeance, bent on the total destruction of the village. Thus, the language of aggressive self-assertion degenerates into the violent pantomime of the desperately self-assertive, in Jacobus Coetzee's sadistic failure to recognise the need for recognition by the other.

We have seen how in the opening section, by transcribing difference with the notion of "Otherness" and positing his white race as the locus of coherence, Jacobus Coetzee seeks to demonise both the Hottentots and the Bushmen. But this border between self and other that Jacobus Coetzee seeks to maintain is undermined by the self's dependence on the other. It's in the encounter with the Namaquas that we experience the equivocation at the core of Jacobus Coetzee's self-concept. Here the narrative stalls into stylised parody of ethnographic accounts,

> Tranquilly I traced in my heart the forking paths of the endless inner adventure: the order to follow, the inner debate (resist? submit?), underlings rolling their eyeballs,
>
> words of moderation , calm, swift march, the hidden defile, the encampment, the greybeard chieftain, the curious thing, words of greeting, firm tones, Peace! Tobacco! … the order to follow, the inner debate, the casual spear in the vitals (Viscount d' Almeida)…the order to follow, the inner debate, the cowardly blow, the dark hut, bound hands…victory, an amusing but tedious reign as tribal demigod, return to civilization with numerous entourage of cattle…these forking paths across that true wilderness

> without polity called the land of the Great Namaqua where everything, I was to find, was possible (*Dusklands*, 65 - 6)

The equivocation between the absolute subject position and the relative subject position, between the conventional and the self-assertive, the freely determining and the determined, is framed around the notion of division and self-doubt "…the forking paths of the endless inner adventure". The impressionistic nature of the passage and its incantatory cadence marked by a repetition of certain phrases "… the order to follow…the inner debate…" marks the set piece as a stylised construct in sharp contrast to the descriptive narrative that comes before and after it. The stylistic change punctuates Jacobus Coetzee's equivocation between the absolute subject position and the relative subject position.

Here we also see the novel's parodic tendency at work. Margaret A. Rose argues in *Parody/Meta-Fiction* (1979) that parody refunctions the pre-existing texts by complicating, among other things, its mimetic qualities (65 - 9). This somewhat echoes Teresa Dovey's reading of the text as a re-reading and rewriting of a complex genre, "in which anthropological and historical, documentary and fictional intermingle" (68). Broad critical consensus on the operation of parody in the text is reached as David Attwell says about the text, "Parody [of historical documents] is the principal method of critique in both parts" (35).

I want to argue that parody re-positions the subject at the centre of the work. In the case of "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee", the adventurer-explorer who is bold, assertive and heroic and in the case of "The Vietnam Project", the efficient mythographer and propagandist who is intelligent, unflappable and supremely rational. In the parodistic repositioning the would-be transcendent and unitary subject (absolute subject position) is complicated, problematised, exposed as empty, paranoid, narcissistic and ineffective egos (relative subject position).

In the Hottentot language, he barely remembers, and is not sure the Namaquas share, "overburdened with imperative constructions" (*Dusklands*, 66), Jacobus Coetzee opens negotiations with the Namaqua. Negotiation soon gives way to exhortation as he shouts instructions in Dutch. It is in this intersubjective duel that Jacobus attempts to impose his supposed absolute subject position upon those he regards as inferior. His authority, tied as it is to his superior self-concept, is challenged as the locals steal his goods. He returns to the wagon, whip in hand, to assert his authority. But a woman of heft, breasts and buttocks shuddering, an image of unassimilable gendered otherness, taunts him with alien sexuality. Later that night Jacobus feels the onset of a mysterious fever and falls into a meditative delirium.

His meditations, all three of them , are telling. In the first meditation he invokes the Romantic trope of appropriating nature's stability and transcendence as he posits a straight line from the landscape's interior through his interior to the landscape's exterior. This is a primordial expression of transcendental subjectivity, of an absolute subject position. In the second meditation, he meditates on dreams. Asking whether he had become a prisoner of his underworld and why he lacked the conviction of his dreams. He replies,

> Did I fear that not only my sojourn among the Namaqua but all my life might be a dream? But if so, where would the exit from my dream take me? To a universe of which I the Dreamer was sole inhabitant? (*Dusklands*, 78)

The yearning for "a universe of which I the Dreamer was sole inhabitant" is a narcissistic fantasy that represents an extreme form of individuation, the absolute subject position taken to its irrational conclusion. But he then dismisses the dreamlike moment of self-fabulation contained in the last proposition as, "A little fable I had always kept in reserve to solace myself

with on lonely evenings." (*Dusklands*, 78). A fable within a dream within a fiction of the self, as the destructuring tension at the core of my thesis intensifies.

In the third meditation, Jacobus Coetzee's preoccupation is with boundaries and the matter of how the explorer, in seemingly limitless space, separates himself from the world. He imagines himself becoming "a spherical eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it…There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see…What is there that is not me? I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun" (*Dusklands*, 79). The gun becomes the guarantor and enforcer of the boundary between self and other. Mediator, copula with outside world, the gun is the saviour. But to Jacobus, "the need for it is metaphysical rather than physical" (*Dusklands*, 79). It stands for the desire for absolute self-mastery and in the words of Rosemary Jane Jolly, and in anticipation of the gross violence of the final section, "Jacobus receives self-gratification from the destruction of all that he determines to be other" (117).

The absolute mastery over the other that the gun represents can be legitimately explained in terms of the Master/Slave dialectic. The Master/Slave dialectic is founded through the process whereby to attain recognition the subject must force his/her self-concept on the other who also craves recognition. So, the two get engaged in a (symbolic) fight for pure prestige. This is a fight to death because to assert their true humanity the subject and his/her opponent must put their lives on the line.

But for the simple reason that, for it to be of any value recognition must be recognition of/by someone who is alive, neither of the combatants can die. So, one of them must forfeit their desire and surrender to their opponent. The defeated becomes slave to their opponent's mastery

(Evans, 108). This mastery proves hollow because it is based on recognition by a slave thus "the man who behaves as a Master will never be satisfied" (Kojève, 1947:20 cited in Evans 108).

Importantly, the Master/Slave dialectic is founded through the process whereby to attain recognition the subject must force his/her self-concept on the other who also craves recognition. It is in terms of this dialectic that Jacobus Coetzee's third meditation is presented,

> Across this annulus I behold him approach bearing the wilderness in his heart. On the far side he is nothing to me and I probably nothing to him. […] He threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term. Such is the material basis of the malady of the master's soul. (*Dusklands*, 81)

Jacobus's fear is to be a term in the history of a slave, an inessential consciousness and thus not be recognised by him. The attempt to attain the ideal identity; outside language, "beyond words" is shown to be an exercise in futility. The *I* of the explorer/writer dominated the *You* of the savage who is forced to recognise it (Dovey, 95). According to Kojeve:

> He must give up his desire and satisfy the desire of the other: he must 'recognise' the other without being 'recognised' by him. Now, 'to recognise' him thus is 'to recognise' him as his Master and to recognise himself and to be recognised as the Master's slave (Kojéve, p.8)

Jacobus Coetzee falls ill and needs the Hottentots' help to get well and because they do not attend to him in his illness in any systematic fashion, he does not attain "recognition" as a Master;

> What evidence of disdain for life or delight in pain could I point to in their treatment of me? What evidence was there, indeed, that they had a way of life of any coherence? […] To these people to whom life was nothing but a sequence of accidents had I not

> been simply another accident? Was there nothing to be done to make them take me more seriously? (*Dusklands*, 97- 98).

Coetzee presents the absolute subject position in terms of mastery — mastery of the self and mastery over the other, who might be seen as slave/savage. Thus we see how Jacobus Coetzee initially proclaims his absolute subject position in no uncertain terms, commanding what he views as paternal authority over the Hottentots,

> My Hottentots and *my* oxen had given me faithful service, but the success of the expedition had flowed from my own enterprise and exertions. […] It was *I* who, when the men began to murmur on those last terrible days before we reached the Great River, restored order with a firm but fair hand. They saw *me* as their father. They would have died without *me* (*Dusklands*, 64, my emphases)

And we see how he also self-deifies , "Perhaps on my horse I looked like a god, a god of the kind they did not yet have" (*Dusklands*, 71). Later, by contrast Jacobus Coetzee is tragically infantilised, reduced to "infant weakness" (*Dusklands*, 84), as he is waylaid by a bout of diabolical diarrhoea.

After the servants, led by Plaatjie, in an ultimate challenge to his authority, desert, Jacobus Coetzee sits down for the momentous project of milking of the carbuncle on his backside in what David Attwell calls a "narcissistic reverie" (52):

> Around my forearms and neck were rings of demarcation between the rough red-brown skin of myself the invader of the wilderness and slayer of elephants and myself the Hottentot's patient victim. I hugged my white shoulder, I stroked my white buttocks, I longed for a mirror. Perhaps I would find a pool, a small limpid pool with a dark bed, in which I might stand and, framed by the recomposing clouds, see myself as others

> had seen me, making out at last to the lump my fingers had told me so much about, the scar of the violence I had done myself. (*Dusklands*, 97)

There are two key tropes operating in this passage: that of the divided subject, "the invader of the wilderness" and "the Hottentot's patient victim"; and, that of the narcissist. Both tropes are framed by the metaphor of the mirror through which he longs to see himself as others see him. My thesis is that the tension that JM Coetzee sets up between the "realistic" and metafictional representations of character leads to psychic anomalies in the characters. Jacobus Coetzee's obsessional self-love is a pathological expression of the tension at the core of my thesis.

Jacobus Coetzee moves South accompanied only by his servant, Klawer, and carrying very little. Klawer dies. After Klawer's death Jacobus exultingly proclaims his independence:

> I was alone. I had no Klawer to record. I exulted […] Here I was, free to initiate myself into the desert. I yodelled, I growled, I hissed, I roared, I screamed, I clucked, I whistled… (*Dusklands*, 95)

The pronoun *I* becomes a refrain of self-assertiveness, a transcendent ego luxuriating in its supposed — and reaffirmed — autonomy. The passage is a resounding paean to the autonomous ego. But this soon — and inevitably — degenerates into a sequence of conflictedness;

> …I bored a sheath in the earth and would have performed the ur-act had joy and laughter not reduced me to a four-inch dangle and helpless urination. "God", I shouted, "God, God, why do you love me so?" I frothed and dribbled…. "I love you too, God. I love everything….But God, don't them love me. I don't like accomplices, God, I want to be alone"….(*Dusklands*, 95 - 6)

The tension between a transcendent ego and a socially and linguistic determined subject is articulated in sexual terms around the notion of sexual potency, (doing the ur act), as opposed

to hapless impotence, (a four-inch dangle). As his selfhood retreats, Jacobus Coetzee wants to forestall this retreat by invoking the hypothesis of the Zenonian beetle, ‘ “Now I am only half-way dead. Now I am only, three-fourths dead. Now I am only seven-eighths dead” ’ (*Dusklands*, 96). Like Magda in *In the Heart of Darkness*, Jacobus Coetzee wants to prolong himself and narration and wishes that his self can undergo an infinite number of divisions before the end.

Jacobus Coetzee’s violent aggression in the second journey takes the quest for self-mastery to its perverted illogicality. All attempts at self-assertion having failed, and woefully out of step with the other and a viable language based on convention, he is reduced to a language of violence that transgresses convention:

> “Stand up,” I said, “I am not playing, I’ll shoot you right here.” I held the muzzle of my gun against his forehead. “Stand up!” His face was quite empty. As I pressed the trigger he jerked his head and the shot missed. […] I pushed the muzzle against his lips. “Take it, ” I said. He would not take it. I stamped. His lips seeped blood, his jaw relaxed. I pushed the muzzle in till he began to gag. I held his head steady between my ankles. Behind me his sphincter gave way and a rich stench filled the air. “Watch your manners, hotnot ”, I said. I regretted this vulgarity. The shot sounded as minor as a shot fired into the sand. Whatever happened in the pap inside his head left his eyes crossed. Scheffer inspected and laughed. I wished Scheffer away. (*Dusklands*, 104)

His self-fabulation having been exposed as such, his assertion of the absolute subject position having been exposed as a sham, Jacobus Coetzee resorts to an extremely aggressive and cruel assertion of his self. This violence, it is possible to argue, is a tragic form of narcissism, love of the self at the expense of all else. Ironically, by his own definition of a savage as one who

lives "…a life based on disdain for the value of human life and sensual delight in the pain of others" (*Dusklands,* 97), and by his violence, Jacobus Coetzee shows his true colours.

In his somewhat reluctant explanation, what he terms colourfully "expiation explanation palinode" (*Dusklands*, 106), of his violence, Jacobus Coetzee is made to inhabit the relative subject position, acknowledging his status as a construct, "Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality….I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger, performing this sacrifice for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished…I am a tool in the hands of history." (*Dusklands,* 106).

Eugene Dawn exhibits the relative subject position when he says he is "a tool in the hands of history". He then asks apprehensively, "Will I suffer?" "I too am frightened of death". He then allays his fears by reconceptualising them as "a winter story" he uses to make his blankets warmer. In the first half of the passage Jacobus Coetzee inhabits the relative subject position, contemplating the possibility of him "retreating…through the infinite corridors of my self" and, like his servants, becoming superfluous. In the second half of the passage, by contrast, he inhabits an absolute subject position. He defiantly takes a stance of self-assertive certitude, "At present I do not care to inhabit such a view". In what follows, we find Jacobus's metafictional confession to his status as a fictional construct,

> …. But when the day comes you will find that whether I am alive or dead, whether I ever lived or never was born, has never been of real concern to me. I have other things to think about. (*Dusklands,* 114)

Typical of the novel's oscillation between relative subject position and the absolute subject position, as Jacobus exhibits an absolute subject position, "I have other things to think about".

A typically realist text would insist on closure at this juncture, loose ends would be neatly tied and moral lessons would be presented. By contrast, the tension between the relative subject position and the absolute subject position proves to be irreducible. We find parody deployed yet again in "The Afterword", with an absurd and somewhat comic catalogue which is ironic specifically dated in the manner of a factual expedition report,

> At one of their halts (August 18) the expedition left behind: the ashes of the night fire, combustion complete, a feature of dry climates; faeces dotted in a mound over a broad area, (*Dusklands*, 118 – 9)

The "reality effect" as a cumulative record of the plenum of reality is held up here to spoofery. More significantly empiricism, and by extension the self-present subject who mediated the apparently empirical world, is complicated and interrogated. The notes at the end of "The Afterword" further undermines the documentary thrust of the novel. The "Appendix" undermines the concept of "origin" and "truth" adding to the deconstruction of the historical and self-determining colonising figure.

Chapter Two - *In the Heart of the Country*

According to the account of subjectivity on which my thesis is based, subjectivity is bound to both language and ideology. By foregrounding the role language plays in the constitution of a subject, all of Coetzee's novels under study, expose the ideological implications that realist texts do not expressly admit to. *In the Heart of the Country* manifests the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional representation of character, and the consequent oscillation between the absolute and the relative subject positions most intensely, as we are made to witness a subjectivity in linguistic construction, and yet in rebellion against the hegemony of language. This is enacted mainly through a "monologue of the self" (*In the Heart of the Country,* 16) which stages the protagonist's entrapment in language and her quest to establish identity through meaningful dialogue based on recognition by the other.

The novel comprises 266 numbered segments. This reminds us of the fictionality of Magda's monologue and of the fact that her experiences are mediated through language. We're not sure if any of the events she relates happened. In fact, nothing much happens as we seem to be trapped within a cycle of fantasy and actuality: Magda, a socially improbable Afrikaner spinster lives on a farm with her father with their servants — Hendrik and Ou-Anna: A new bride arrives (or is imagined by Magda to arrive), Magda's father seduces the new bride; Magda steps into an empty kitchen demanding an explanation for Ou-Anna's absence; Magda kills her father; Magda asks for Hendrik to help to remove her father's body; Magda tries to bury his father; Magda is raped; Hendrik is captured; alien airmen fly over the farm; Magda tries to commune with the airmen.

Magda is a self-narrating narrator who proves to be unreliable. Given the conventions engendered by a realist text, it is possible to recuperate Magda's unreliability by saying that

she is psychologically deranged. The significant difference here is that we have countless instances when she shows that she is keenly aware of her unreliability as a self-narrating narrator; "more detail I cannot give unless I begin to embroider, for I was not watching" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 1), her discourse is replete with the speculative adverb, "perhaps" and shot through with unanswerable questions. She is, to quip, a reliably unreliable self-narrator. And later in the text her grasp of time is often shown to be erratic,

> A day must have intervened here. Where there is a blank there must have been a day during which my father sickened irrecoverably, and during which Hendrik and Klein-Anna made their peace (*In the Heart of the Country*, 79).

While a "reality effect" is created by the vivid rendition of Magda's derangement, she is at once rendered as acting and acted upon, thus sustaining the wrought tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character. Her tendency to fill in the blanks of her existence, and her oft-repeated statements of her incomplete condition, undermine her purported project to speak herself, to give a truthful account of her life and thoughts.

Magda is often shown to be aware of her literariness, her status as a figure within a mode of writing, "I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 1). In fact, her relative subject position can be, with justification, viewed in specifically literary terms, as Hayes indeed does, "Magda is particularly conscious of the way in which she, and people like her, are socially constructed by patterns of thinking most obviously incarnate in the subgenre of the 'farm novel' " (54). The irony is that, it is by recognising that she is a literary type that she proves to be atypical. And here the tension between a presentation of character based on realist literary convention and a self-conscious problematisation of a self-positing and self-present character manifests itself as an oscillation

between the normative and the interrogative, as Magda seeks to parody the cultural forces that situate her identity in misrecognition.

Thus the text's self-consciousness is often undermined and the lines between reality and fictiveness blur, as towards the end of the text we find that,

> The voices speak…They accuse me, if I understand them, of turning my life into a fiction , out of boredom. They accuse me, however tactfully, of making myself…as though I were reading myself like a book, and found the book dull and put it aside and began to make myself up instead. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 128).

She is a character in a book, speculating about her existence in another book the idea of which she abandons so that she can make herself up. She later points out the implausibility of her existence, "…Which is the more implausible, the *story* of my life as lived by me or the *story* of the good daughter humming the psalms as she bastes the Sunday roast in a Dutch kitchen in the dead centre of a stone desert?" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 129, my emphases). Of course central to the construction of the two implausible stories posed above is the role of language, not only in its creative but also in its identity-establishing role.

Torn between the absolute (self-determined) and relative (determined) subject positions, Magda is on an ongoing quest for a new language, for the reciprocity of dialogue and for an identity. The quest for a new language is marked with ambivalence, as at the beginning she casts herself in the role of a custodian of hegemonic language and its socially legitimising bases. Her conception of language is all-encompassing, including non-verbal signs that regulate the colonial power relations into which she is born:

> I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformation of face and hands, in posture of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune

> and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 7).

Her father's transgression is rendered in terms of the violation of a language, which undergirds formulaic social relations,

> My father is exchanging forbidden words with Klein-Anna…*We*, he is saying, *we two* […] He believes he and she can choose their words and make a private language (*In the Heart of the Country*, 35)

And later she speculates tellingly, "perhaps my rage at my father is simply rage at the violations of the old language, the correct language" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 43). Magda is trapped on a farm, entrapped in language, "Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue" (12). She is constituted by language, but she deludes herself as the custodian of language; language as a social fact, the meanings of which are agreed upon through human exchange.

Later, after she has killed her father for the second time she, Magda and Hendrik get closer as a result of shared knowledge. This shift in relationship is reflected in her language as they conspire to get rid of her dead father's corpse:

> Hendrik shows me how to saw through bricks and mortar. *We* use the ripsaw that hangs in the stable. *Our* arms grow together but we do not pause…*Our* labour brings us together. No longer is labour Hendrik's prerogative. I am his equal though I am the weaker. …*We* crawl under the house to saw through the foundations. Our honest sweat flows together in the dark warmth. *We* are like two termites. In perserverance lies our strength. *We* saw through the roof and through the floor. *We* shove the room off …. *We* stand in the dust and mice droppings…(*In the Heart of the Country*, 82, my emphases)

The distance resulting from discrepancy in social station has disappeared as the two collaborate as conspirators. There is a sense in which Magda feels honoured by this sense of intimacy, as she feels more equal to Hendrik. And this language of shared understanding and common purpose carries on for a while. But it is, sadly, not to last Hendrik and Klein-Anna eventually leave the farm. Having earlier accused her father of illicitly consorting with Klein-Anna, "*We*, he is saying, *we two*; and the world reverberates in the air between them." (*In the Heart of the Country*, 35) the above passage ironically mirrors the earlier passage.

We are clearly concerned here with the dialectic role that language plays in the construction of subjectivity, "I create myself in the words that create me" (*In the Heart of the country*, 8). In other words she is both the subject (self-determining) and object (determined) in the process that is her identity. This is most forcefully staged in Magda's oft-repeated "I am I". In the first "I" she is the subject, inhabiting the absolute (self-determining) subject position and in the second "I" she is the object, inhabiting the relative (determined) subject position. Far from being transcendent, the ego is presented as a process, oscillating between the absolute and relative subject positions. The account of ideology and subject positions underlying my thesis argues that this willingness is imposed by language upon individuals as they are led to "mis-see" themselves, deluding themselves as self-positing and transcendent egos.

The above view seems to be endorsed by Magda herself, when she says,

> The mirror. Inherited from my long-lost mother, whose portrait it must be that hangs on the wall of the dining-room over the heads of my silent father and my silent self, [….] I sometimes leave the light burning and recline abed sustained on my elbow and smile at the image that reclines abed facing me on an elbow, and sometimes even talk to it, or her. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 21).

Note here the rendition of the dialectic between the self and the image as conceptualised in the *Mirror Stage* and Magda's self-conscious reference that she is simultaneously a being and a bunch of words (an *it*, a her). Magda is shown to misrecognise herself in the way the liberal humanist ideology "interpellates" her, that is, calls her by name.

Magda is shown to inhabit the subject positions crucial to her participation in the colonial social formation, marked by rigid master-servant hierarchical arrangements. Note her choice of language when she laments the cheeky manner in which Hendrik demands payment from her after she killed his father, for apparently seducing Hendrik's wife, Klein-Anna,

> I cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective…. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 97)

No sooner had she said that, she disavows this language and the absolute subject position it entails, "I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak…" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 97). In fact, Magda is shown throughout to be aware of the dialectic relationship between her efforts to self-create and language's constitutive powers. She is in an ambivalent position: both the beneficiary and the victim of the colonising power of patriarchal language.

We have seen in the last chapter how the supposedly self-creating Eugene Dawn is exposed as a creation of societal and linguistic forces beyond his control, how he is at once a reflection of a lifelike figure and a textual node. This tension between self-created and created subjectivity, between absolute and relative subject positions, finds further expression in *In the Heart of the Country* and its clearest and most express articulation in the following passages,

> If I were told that I am an idea my father had many years ago and then, bored with it, forgot I would be less incredulous, though still sceptical, I am better explained as an idea I myself had, also many years ago, and have been unable to shake off (*In the Heart of the* Country, 69, my emphasis)

In the last passage the father is cast in the role of the one who conceived and produced Magda; in other words, as her author. She on the other, "I am better explained as an idea I myself had", insists on the idea herself as a self-authoring, self-positing individual.

Without the knowledge of the mother, thus semi-orphaned, Magda is at the same time shut out from the father's world,

> My father creates absence. Wherever he goes he leaves absence behind him. The absence of himself above all — a presence so cold, so dark, so remote as to be itself an absence, a moving shadow casting a blight on the heart. And the absence of my mother. My father is the absence of my mother, her negative, her death. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 37)

The father creates absence through patriarchal erasure , by wilfully withholding his nurturing and creative powers. The result for Magda is, as David Attwell so aptly puts it, "she does not have access to a subject position that is *inside* the history-making self-representations offered by the father" (61). She is thus left little option but make herself up, inhabiting the absolute subject position which ultimately proves to be untenable.

The already ambivalent position of Magda as the supposedly self-authored individual who is shown to be authored by language and patrilineal forces beyond her control, is further complicated throughout the text; most significantly, her position in relation to the servants intensifies the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional representations of her

character. The father is cast in the role of the one who withholds his power to name Magda, who in turn longs to be named and thus have her place in the familial (and by extension social) formation assured. She stands in the position of author in relation to Klein-Anna and Hendrik, the servants. She names Anna as Klein-Anna. She creates an origin for them, thus when Magda's father asks young Hendrik,

> "Where are you from?"
>
> "From Armoede, my baas. But now I come from baas Kobus. Baas Kobus says the baas has work here" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 20)

It is significant that Armoede is Afrikaans for poverty as the South African colonial and oppressive system has resulted in the identification of the dispossessed blacks with poverty. The hegemony of language works on both the "realistic" (with Afrikaans having been the hegemonic language of Apartheid South Africa) and the metafictional (with language creating an identity for both the mistress and the servants) level. Magda also, in a "speculative history", creates historical antecedents of merino breeders for Hendrik, thus positioning them within a historical narrative of her making.

Central to my argument, is the claim that the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional representations of character, underlying the sustained oscillation between the absolute and the relative subject positions, leads to psychological morbidity. Magda's narcissism is the result not only of her psychic injury flowing from the loss of her mother, but also of her being at once an object and subject of language .

Magda dwells on both the loss of her mother and her ambivalent location within language, she takes a lot of time trying to understand how the loss and her ambivalent status within language work and to engage with their entailments. Thus, we find Magda oscillating between

transcendent autonomy (absolute subject position) and constructedness (relative subject position) ,

> Aching to form the words that will translate into the land of myth and hero, here I am still my dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself. What do I lack? I weep and gnash my teeth. Is it mere passion? Is it merely a vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry me from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification? […] Do I feel rich outrage at my spinster fate? Who is behind my oppression? You and you I say, crouching in the cinders, stabbing my finger at father and stepmother. But why have I not run away from them? As long as an elsewhere exists where I can lead a life, there are heavenly fingers pointing at me too. Or am I, hitherto unbeknown to me, but now alas known, reserved for a more complex fate: to be crucified head downward as a warning to those who love their rage and lack all vision of another tale? But what other tale is there for me? Marriage to the neighbour's second son? I am not a happy peasant. I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story, even if it is a dull black stupid miserable story ignorant of its own meanings and of all its many possible untapped happy variants. I am I. Character is fate. History is God. Pique, pique, pique. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 4-5)

Articulated around a cluster of polarities: reality/myth, passion/vision, anger/complacency, mundanity of being/doubleness of signification, automatism/liberation and punctuated by metaphysical questions, "Do I truly wish to get beyond myself ?" and "Do I feel rich outrage at my spinster fate? Who is behind my oppression?", the passage resolves itself somewhat glibly into tautology and cliché. She posits the notion of history not only as truth (reality) but as Providence. This after insisting that "my story is my story", Magda's conflictedness is intense and obsessional, a mark of narcissism. "I am I", she declares, and like Narcissus she identifies strongly with the likeness of herself.

Furthermore, the passage is suggestive of a parodic stance in relation to the realistic text which in turn is based on mimesis, with the reference to automatism seeming to echo Coetzee's criticism of automated literariness typified by one of his literary contemporaries, Yvonne Burgess in *The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess' The Strike* (1975). Magda inadvertently exposes the bad faith of the supposedly autonomous subject, "my story is my story", "I am I. Character is fate". Paradoxically, it is in this moment of prodigious self-awareness as a character that Magda becomes textualised, dissolving into the metafictional text's self-subversive matrix.

In her constant effort to self-fabulate, Magda later contrives of a ""bucolic comedy" in which she features as a wife to a farmer and mother to "a litter of ratlike, runty girls, all the spit image of myself, scowling into the sun, tripping over their own feet, identically dressed in bottle green smocks and snubnosed black shoes" (*In the Heart of the* Country, 42). In a moment of prodigious self-reflexiveness she comments upon this makeshift and temporary self-construction:

> It is the hermit crab, I remember from a book, that as it grows migrates from one empty shell to another […] Whose shell I presently skulk in does not matter, it is the shell of a dead creature. What matters is that my anxious softbodied self should have a refuge from the predators of the deep. (*In the Heart of Country*, 43-4)

This is an essentially deconstructive strategy of occupying a construct in order to dismantle it from within. This speaks to the core of my thesis, as I seek to demonstrate that the wrought tension between the absolute subject position (deludedly self-determining independent of the socio-cultural and linguistic forces that are constitutive of subjectivity) and the relative subject position (partially aware of the socio-cultural and linguistic forces that are constitutive of

subjectivity) is irreducible. A related attempt at self-preservation lies in Magda's efforts to create a story with "a beginning, a middle, and an end" (*In the Heart of Country*, 43).

Magda's position is intersectional and pivotal in relation to her father and her servants; she is as I explained earlier, a creation (relative subject position) in relation to her father and a creator (absolute subject position) in relation to the servants; finding herself at the centre of this master/slave complex. As a white spinster on a Karoo farm she is at once coloniser (white madam) and colonised (oppressed semi-orphaned daughter, and woman in a patriarchal society). Her positioning at the centre of this wrought nexus within the creator/created complex also finds expression in the parallel narrative structure, as the first numbered paragraph is echoed in the thirty-eighth paragraph:

> Today my father brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible. My father wore his black swallowtail coat and stovepipe hat, his bride a wide-brimmed sunhat and a white dress tight at waist and throat. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 1).

> Six months ago Hendrik brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in the donkey-cart, dusty after the long-haul from Armoede. Hendrik wore the black suit passed on to him by my father with an old wide-brimmed felt hat and a shirt buttoned to the throat. His bride sat by his side clutching her shawl, exposed and apprehensive.(*In the Heart of the Country*, 17).

Interestingly, she finds more reason to embroider when she relates her father and her stepmother's story, and less reason to do so when she relates Hendrik's story. This might be

indicative of her increased anxiety to control the narrative perspective of her, and her father's, story, thereby jostling with her contradictory position as created-creator.

The creator-created tension somewhat finds equivalence in the Master-Slave dialectic. That is if we acknowledge the hegemony of language and its serviceability to the Master's endeavour to create the representation and self-mage of the Slave. Importantly, Magda shows direct awareness that her father's and her relationship to Hendrik and Klein-Anna has its roots in the Master/Slave dialectic. She invokes the sky-gods citing Hegel:

> *It is the slave's consciousness that constitutes the master's certainty of his own truth. But the slave's consciousness is a dependent consciousness. So the master is not sure of the truth of his autonomy. His truth lies in an essential consciousness and its inessential acts.* (*In the Heart of the Country*, 130)

She then crucially asks the question, "Was my father crucified on the paradox the voices expound: that from people who bent like reeds to his whims he was asking for an affirmation of his truth in and for himself" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 130). The quotation of Hegel and other philosophers raises questions about the real function of Magda. It might be argued that Magda serves here as proxy for Coetzee. My contention is that Coetzee problematises the issue of subjectivity by intellectualising it. In the words of Dominic Head, this "…lays bare her (Magda's) status as a metafictional device, facilitating Coetzee's exploration of how character is constructed…" (45).

Bodily invasion is used, as it was with the invasion of Eugene Dawn's body by the "hideous mongol boy" and Jacobus Coetzee's backside boil in *Dusklands*, as a metaphor for the violation of the sovereignty of the self and also to express a deep desire for recognition by the other,

> The law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips. How can I say, I say, that these are not the eyes of the law that stare from behind my eyes, or that the mind of the law does not occupy my skull, leaving me only enough intellection to utter these doubting words, if it is uttering them, and see their fallaciousness? How can I say that the law does not stand fullgrown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole…(*In the Heart of the Country*, 84)

The law here refers to the patriarchal imperative and the law of language which is constitutive of subjectivity. This foreshadows devastating takeover of the body by another, a case of corporeal capture foreshadows the violation, nay, usurpation of Magda's body by Hendrik's:

> A body lies on top of a body pushing and pushing, trying to find a way in, motion everywhere […]What deeper invasion and possession does he plot in his sleep? (*In the Heart of the Country*, 108)

By change of perspective, we also see Magda's fantastical desire to invade the father's body in an originary search for an alternative identity,

> Oh father, father, if I could only learn your secrets, creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood, and come at last to the quiet sea where my countless brothers and sisters swim, flicking their tails, smiling, whispering to me of a life to come! (*In the Heart of the Country*, 71)

The message is remarkable with its conceit of spermatozoa as living, smiling, whispering forms of a pre-life. She continues to plead with the father, "Let me annihilate myself in you and come forth a second time clean and new…a happy child, a gay girl, a blushing bride" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 71). Magda sees her identity in purely physical (and biological) terms: a spermatozoon, a happy child, a gay girl, a blushing bride. She seems to be saying, with the

metaphysics and psychic history of my current life shambolic, may I start afresh, resurrect the elemental embodiment of my life within you. We see her then how the (pre-?) embodied life is privileged over theorised identity. And when Magda desires Klein-Anna's body, we see how bodily invasion stands for the attainment of identity (literally) through the other, "I would like to climb into Klein-Anna's body, I would like to climb down her throat while she sleeps and spread gently inside her , my hands in her hands, my feet in her feet, my skull in the benign quite of her skull…"(*In the Heart of the Country*, 108 – 9)

It is toward the end that Magda demonstrates a keen awareness of her complex and splintered role as self-narrating narrator. As narrator she yearns for closure, to "add up one's reckoning, tie up loose ends". As narrated she is anxious about her fate, will she like the heroine of a post-modernist text retain her enigma, or like the protagonist in a realist text yield the secret of her construction, and be reduced to univocal meaning:

> At moments like the present, filled with lugubrious thoughts, one is tempted to add up one's reckoning, tie up loose ends. Will I find the courage to die a crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere, unexplained by and inexplicable to the archaeologists, her tomb full of *naif* whitewash paintings of sky-gods; or am I going to yield to the spectre of reason and explain myself in the only kind of confession we protestants know? To die an enigma with a full soul or to die emptied of my secrets, that is how I picturesquely put the question to myself. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 138)

Should she embrace rational explanation (the "realistic"), which empties her of her secrets or the rich metafictional ambiguity, "an enigma with a full soul" ?. Her conflicted subjectivity is brought to the fore, as she is shown to be aware of her status as both a construct and an autonomous (and constructing) being. Reminiscent of Eugene Dawn she believes that she is a repository of some "truth" and wonders if she will die empty, emptied of her "secrets" or as an

unresolved textualised component. In other words, she wonders whether the end will see her contradictory subject positions neatly resolved as would be the case in a classic realist text or unresolved as in an interrogative.

It is possible to argue that when Magda hauls out her father, now "a mannikin of dry bones held together by cobwebs" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 136), it is not the actual physical figure we should think of, but the fantastical memory of a father figure. This reading is endorsed by her lapse into reminiscence, and points back to the beginning as she made up the memory of a mother she never knew, "From one of the oubliettes of memory I extract a faint grey image, the image of a faint grey frail loving mother huddled on the floor, one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself"(*In the Heart of the* Country, 2). Importantly, nothing that has gone before has alerted us to the possibility of an idealised family romance that Magda recalls; she quotes herself saying,

> Do you remember, how we used to go to the seaside, in the old days? How we packed a basket full of sandwiches and fruit and drove to the station in the trap and caught the evening train? (*In the Heart of the Country*, 136).

The reminiscing carries on for a while in closely observed detail and it is clear that Magda is anxious to fabulate an alternative family life — and an identity, as a beloved if somewhat spoilt daughter to a doting father.

Bill Nichols argues in *Ideology and the Image* (1981) that most classical narratives are based on a pragmatic or existential paradox. According to Nichols, the existential paradox is "experienced in time. It is existential and cannot be resolved by any formal logic that discounts historical context or effect over time" (96) and citing Wilden, "The existential paradox differs from the purely logical paradox in that it involves subjects and is primarily dependent on

communication" (*System and Structure*,103 cited in Nichols, 96). *In the Heart of the Country* shares in the quality of most narratives of juxtaposing and sustaining contraries before resolving them.

According to Nichols the paradox that most characters in classical narrative have to live out has the structure, "If A, then B, but if B, then not-A" (98). The paradoxical injunction at the centre of *In the Heart of the Country* can be expressed in two ways. First, in terms of the Master/Slave dialectic:

> To truly speak myself, I need the recognition of my servants
> but the recognition of my servants, being recognition by an "inessential"
> consciousness, is no recognition at all,
> and I cannot therefore truly speak myself.

We can remain in the grip of paradox by identifying with Magda or by suspending our disbelief. But as we have Magda invites our alienation more than our identification and the text foregrounds language and its unreliability thus making it almost impossible to suspend our disbelief.

The novel typically uses displacement and condensation in an attempt to resolve the paradox. "Condensation creates the laconic expression, the conjunction of several trains of thought in a singular representation" (Nichols, 100) . As in,

> Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart ? The medium , the median, that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled (*In the Heart of the Country*, 133).

The contraries are irreconciliable, the paradox persists and the conflictedness that has characterised Magda throughout, abides. She fails to resolve the ambivalence of her position as both a victim and benefactor of language, with its hierarchical power to manipulate truth and identity.

It is also useful to express the paradoxical injunction at the core of the text, in terms of the thematised contest over language:

> To truly speak myself, I need to defend my "father tongue"
>
> But if I speak my "father tongue"
>
> I cannot speak myself in the "language of the heart"

"Displacement shifts attention away from the central point, it redistributes emphasis or values associated with replaced material" (Nichols 100). Displacement is deployed to invoke the "language of pure meanings" spoken by sky-gods,

> I know no Spanish whatsoever. However, it is characteristic of the Spanish spoken to me out of the flying machines that I find it immediately comprehensible. I have no way of explaining this circumstance save to suggest that while in their externals the words may represent themselves as Spanish, they belong in fact not to a local Spanish of pure meanings as might be dreamed of by the philosophers. (*In the Heart of the Country*, 126).

The belief in a language of "pure meanings", an intuitive language of universals, a transparent medium through which the world can be reflected, is untenable. And yet again the paradox persists and the tension between 'realistic' and metafictional representations of character, between the absolute and the relative subject positions persists to the end.

The need to resolve the paradoxical injunction at the heart of narrative and thus restore order and unity is a realist gesture and a literary convention, as we hear Magda claim that she has escaped from the clutches and clichés of the *plaasroman* ,

> What have I been doing on this barbarous frontier…There are poems, I am sure, about the heart that aches for Verlore Vlakte, about the melancholy of the sunset over the koppies…They are poems I could write myself…I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world. (*In the Heart of the Country,* 138 -9)

We cannot help but be struck by her lyricism as she resorts to an intensely personal register as she at once parodies a brittle literary genre and relates her failure, in the manner spirit of a superior creator (absolute subject position), to mastering the landscape. She is instead , as a put-upon creation (relative subject position), "corrupted to the bone by the beauty of this forsaken world." In a moment of poignant bad faith, she continues,

> I have never felt myself to be another man's creature (here they come, how sweet the closing plangencies) I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout (what a consolation that is) I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near my father's bones, in a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy. (*In the Heart of the Country,*138 - 9)

The ironic self-undercutting observations in the parenthesis are indicative of Magda's on-going self-fictionalising: she steps out of her seeming unified self to comment on it in a manner that suggests the fictionality and divided condition of that self. This also echoes the self-narrating/narrated tension I remarked earlier. The claim that she has chosen her own end is a delusion as transcendent autonomy and ultimate closure prove to be elusive to the end.

To sum up, we have seen how Coetzee foregrounds the role of language and the importance of the other in the subject constitution. We have also seen how Coetzee in his ongoing project to test the limits of "realistic" representation of character, needs realism, in order to invert it. The self-created/created dialectic was also apparent as a variation on the tension between the absolute and the relative subject positions. Also apparent was the metaphor of a body invading another which, I have argued, can be seen to stand for the violation of the supposed integrity of the self.

Chapter Three - *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Just like Jacobus Coetzee, Eugene Dawn and Magda, the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* initially assumes absolute subjectivity, misrecognising himself as a self-positing, self-authoring subject. Illustrative of the structural tension between the "realistic" and metafictional portrayals of character, the Magistrate is at the same time aware of his social constructedness. While, in contrast to the three protagonists in the previous novels, the Magistrate rarely displays the self-reflexive tendency to comment on his status as a fictive construct, he is repeatedly made to confess to his cultural implication and complicity. Importantly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I will argue, Coetzee puts the classical realist notion of character as coherent, unified, and knowing, to the test by showing that the self's attempt to take a position outside of ideology in order to oppose it, is based on a failure to see that the self is constituted by ideology. Yet again the tension between the absolute and relative subject positions plays itself out as the tension between would-be self-creating and created subjectivity. And we also see how the body is foregrounded as a metaphor for the seeming sovereignty of the self. This foregrounding of the body is taken a step further, as it is being simultaneously textualised when the Magistrate becomes obsessed with deciphering the marks of torture the barbarian girl's body bears.

A magistrate on the brink of retirement, is living out his remaining working years in an outpost of Empire. A hardened enforcer of Empire, Colonel Joll, arrives from Empire's Third Bureau "under emergency powers" with a mission to quell a rumoured uprising. The first thing the Magistrate notices about the Colonel is his sunglasses, "I have never seen anything like it: two little disks of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1). As Teresa Dovey has remarked, this immediately introduces the sight/blindness metaphor

dynamic, contrasting the Magistrate's capacity to see, with the military dictator's cynical blindness (219). Charles Haluska echoes this, viewing the opening sentence as setting a contrast between two ways of seeing: one of the Empire characterised by cynical and ethical blindness, and the other personified by the Magistrate characterised by seeming clear-sightedness, coherence and moral clarity (108).

According to Mike Marais, the Magistrate's "cultural embeddedness is evident from the first in his anonymity: the fact that he is known only by the office he bears indicates that he is a functionary of Empire" (Marais, 67). Yet to argue that Coetzee sets up a tension between the absolute and relative subject positions is not to suggest that the subject positions are conflated, something closer to Marais's reading, as he argues, "Importantly, though, he is conscious of his cultural implication and therefore constantly questions his actions and motives." (67). Contrary to Marais' thesis, my argument is that the Magistrate, with his belief in the self-present, transcendental and truth-telling sense of self, exhibits an absolute subject position for the most part of the text but, owing to the first-person present tense narrative mode Coetzee deploys in the novel, he is made to adopt a relative subject position, whereby he acknowledges his status as a fictive and socio-cultural construct as he becomes aware of his proximity to the torturers, from whose crimes he seeks to distance himself.

As an officer of the law and the sole administrator of justice in the outpost he is stationed in, the Magistrate is qualified to administer, and officiate on the truth. Crucially, he deludes himself into thinking that he is capable of being true unto himself. In this regard, the metaphor of sight (and blindness) can be seen as an articulation of the quest for truth. The Magistrate 's devotion to "truth" is apparent when he pleads with the boy held captive with his father as part of Colonel Joll's interrogations of the barbarians to tell the truth. The Magistrate not only posits

"truth" as a key to freedom, "Once he is sure you are telling the truth he will not hurt you" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 7) but puts forward pain as a price worth paying for truth, "if there is pain, do not lose heart". He crystallises Colonel Joll's doctrine into an aphorism, "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.'' (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 5). We also see here how the Magistrate begins, however tentatively, to feel his unsettling proximity to the torturer Colonel, "…this is the most intimate moment we have yet had." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 5).

The metaphor of sight initiated in the first paragraph has an added significance as it serves to emphasise the role perception plays in the construction of subjectivity. *In Ideology and the Image* (1981), Bill Nichols invokes Lacan's Mirror Stage to argue,

> The self-as-subject or ego will be precisely a term in a relationship of opposition to, and identity with, the other (We speak of our own identity but forget to ask identical with what — for Lacan, our identity is identity with the other, the image of perfection apparently denied us.) (31)

The *Mirror Stage* forms the basis for the Lacanian notion of subjectivity and establishes the role of the specular in the structuring of the ego. It also puts the assumed autonomy of the subject into question. As Nichols puts it,

> The ego's articulations of desire always pivot around this moment of formation: the goal of desire is recognition by the other; the very sense of an autonomous ego depends on acknowledgement by the other. Only by being an object of an other's desire can the ego be the subject of the self's desire. (31)

His vile work done, Joll leaves the outpost abruptly, leaving behind the physically and psychologically broken prisoners as the Magistrate's responsibility. Most prisoners are

released, but some are left behind. Of those left behind, one girl in particular piques the Magistrate's interest. She is half-blind, walks painfully using two sticks and begs in the streets. As a vagrant, she is breaking the law, and the Magistrate ultimately persuades to come and stay with him as a live-in cleaner.

The relationship between the girl and the Magistrate is pivotal. We see here how the Magistrate's subjectivity is fundamentally divided between conscious (actions) and unconscious (desire); contrary to his self-concept as a unified subject from whom action and understanding flow, he is a fundamentally split subject. Through his conscious actions, in his absolute subject position and in disregard of the linguistic and ideological forces that subjectify him, the Magistrate is consistent with his character as a just and ethical adjudicator of truth. But unconsciously, his inexplicable fascination with the girl, is indicative of his desire to establish an identity, to find his truth. We also see here an iteration of the self's dependence on the other that we saw demonstrated in the previous two novels.

The tension between the absolute and relative subject positions, which underlies my argument, is most at play here when the Magistrate is made to confess his complicity with the system he purports to be in opposition of. After visiting the prostitute, the desire of whom he doesn't fathom, "…to desire her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic form" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 43), he finds that his fascination with the girl's body is, by contrast, something akin to torture; he is fascinated by the marks of torture she bears, as he is made to ask whether it is "the marks on her which draws me to her" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 64). The marks on her are courtesy of the torturers. They are designed not only to elicit confession of guilt, to mark difference as guilt. The Magistrate's interest in the marks is to find confirmation of his self-concept as saviour.

It is also important to note at this juncture that the Magistrate is made to recognise that his sexualised fascination with the barbarian girl's body is not different from the evil attentions the Empire visits upon her body, "The distance between me and her torturers, I realise, is negligible; I shudder" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 27). This is significant and yet another demonstration that of the Magistrate's delusion that he as a supposedly self-present and transcendent subject can take a position outside the imperial systems of knowledge and ways of seeing to protest against, and comment authoritatively upon them.

While, he recognises as delusion the belief that one can get access to another's interiority, he excuses the delusion as a "natural" mistake. We see here the workings of ideology, seeking to naturalise self-serving perversion. And that when he sees the image of Colonel Joll reflected back at him in the eyes of the girl his reaction is one of existentialist horror, 'I am disquieted. "What do I have to do to move you?" '(*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 44). The somewhat antiquated word "disquieted" suggests that the Magistrate is invoking his social presence as a liberal gentleman. He deludes himself into thinking that his social standing and position as sole administrator of justice, exalted custodian of truth, absolves him from moral fallibility. In a moment of ironic self-consciousness he protests vehemently,

> I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. No! No! No! I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? […] How can I believe that a bed is anything but a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes. (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 44).

The possibility of experiencing anything other than joy from a woman's body, his realisation that his fascination with the girl's body goes beyond joy, the inkling that he might be as much

of a criminal as Colonel Joll is, shocks him to the core. Thus he protests; in fact he protests too much as he strongly feels the need to distance himself from his criminal and dastardly deeds.

Finally, the Magistrate's acknowledgement of his proximity to the girl's torturers is expressed in more explicit term as he opines,

> From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire […] From the very first she knew me for a false seducer (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 135)

The Magistrate who seeks to bear witness to truth and confirm his truth by having the other tell her truth is exposed as close to the torturer, Colonel Joll who seeks to extract truth by violent means. And he is simultaneously revealed to be a sadist who derives sexual pleasure from the recognition of the self.

The Magistrate's proximity to the torturers marks his relative subject position (partial awareness that he is determined by forces beyond his control), his ultimate cultural embeddedness. There is a sense in which we can legitimately see his fascination with the barbarian as fascination with Colonel Joll. And it is in his quest to inhabit the absolute subject position (self-determination) that he seeks identity through recognition by the barbarian girl. It is in this oscillation between the relative and the absolute subject positions that his fascination with the girl's body must be seen. Crucially, for my thesis, we see how this tension between the two subject positions leads to an extreme psychological condition, that of sadomasochism.

Significantly, The Magistrate's interactions with the girl alternate with the recurring dream of the initially hooded girl. "Reality" blurs into dream as when he struggles to remember the image

of the girl as she was before (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 48). The sequence of the dreams, alternating with the Magistrate's actions in relation to the barbarian girl, take a definite trajectory, defining the stages of the writer's quest for identity and self-transcendence. In the first dream, which takes place before the Magistrate meets the girl, the face of the girl working at the castle of snow is not visible: "She does not turn. I try to imagine the face between the petals of her peaked hood but cannot" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 10). In the second dream of the girl the face is "blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 37), and at the peak of the curve is the dream in which the Magistrate sees the girl as "herself". He then decides to take the girl back to her people and before they part they are able to consummate their relationship.

The Magistrate's obsessive ritual of unbinding and washing the girl's feet produces a climactic state of blankness, or oblivion, "…often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body…" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 31). This is an ingenious way of puncturing the Magistrate's delusion that he is a self-present and transcendent subject. Given the novel's first-person present tense mode of narration, the Magistrate's moments of oblivion, "outside time" are tantamount to him saying "I am not here", and given the first-person present-tense mode they are moments outside language. The Magistrate is in effect at odds with the novel's manner of telling. While he insists on his subjectivity as a transcendent and self-present being (thus exhibiting the absolute subject position), the manner of telling exposes him as the exact opposite.

Several critics have remarked the religious significance of the Magistrate's obsessional ministrations on the barbarian girl's body; Penner, for instance, regards it as, "in its outward form sacramental … much as Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed the feet of Jesus (John 12:

1 -8) and as Jesus bathed the disciple' feet (John 13: 4 – 5)" (Penner, 38). Patrick Hayes says that the Magistrate's washing of the girl's feet recalls the biblical episode (John: 13) which sees Jesus washing his disciples' feet to humble himself (68). But there is to be no redemption for the Magistrate, no revelation of the immanence of a deity for us at the end of the narrative.

In the previous two chapters we have seen how the persistent tension between the absolute subject position and the relative subject position manifests itself as a tension between would-be self-creating and created subjectivity. And we have seen how the portrayal of the characters, Jacobus Coetzee, Eugene Dawn and Magda as writers is instrumental in staging the tension between self-written and written. It is in this light that we should see depiction of the Magistrate's convoluted desire as authorial impotence, "…there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 45). And before he embarks on a journey to the barbarians, he struggles to write a document he feels he should write, "What the second document is to be I do not yet know." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 57)

This is reminiscent of Eugene Dawn's writer's block in *Dusklands*. This moment of authorial impotence signifies the complex and complicated nature of the Magistrate's desire for the girl; That is, for his quest for identity, for the "truth" of his self. Later on the journey to take the girl back to her people, he says, "I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever". (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 64). The tension of self-creating and created subjectivity is also apparent here, though it takes a more oblique and intriguing expression. If we accept the reading process as an essentially creative process we can see the Magistrate's reading of the barbarian girl as an attempt to create himself through the other.

This attempt at self-creation through a reading of the signs of suffering on the girl, is in tension to his increasing awareness that he is implicated in the social formation he finds himself in. The individual truth the Magistrate seeks in the girl is in actual fact his own supposed truth; she is the text through the reading of which he seeks to establish his identity. The Magistrate seeks to establish his "truth", the coherence and authenticity of his subjectivity, via the barbarian girl's subjectivity. Seen this way, the Magistrate's ritualistic anointing of the girl's feet can be seen as a quest for at-one-ment, a state in which self-concept will be reconciled with the lived self in a yearning for transcendence. This is at once a vain exercise and an exercise in vanity as subjectivity is always splintered, fundamentally divided against itself.

When later, the Magistrate embarks on a long and hazardous journey to restore the girl to her people he earnestly pleads with her; "Speak to them", I tell her. "Tell them why we are here. Tell them your story. Tell them your truth." (*Waiting for the Barbarians,* 71). Crucially, the Magistrate equates the barbarian girl's story to her truth.. The mimetic (relating to her "truth") is in tension with the semiotic function of her body as a text on which the torturers have left "written" signs of guilt and which the magistrate "reads".

The Magistrate advocates a realist poetics of character based on truth and authenticity, while he is ultimately exposed as a lie as he is made to confess his complicity with Empire in terms of the truth/lie dichotomy,

> For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. (*Waiting for the Barbarians,* 135)

In his existentialist epiphany, the Magistrate gets to see that his cultural embeddedness is an act of bad faith, "the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy", and that it serves to repress the ugly truth. Colonel Joll, on the other hand, may be seen as the inevitable return of the repressed, "the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow". In terms of the Master/Slave dialectic the Magistrate seeks to establish his identity through the barbarian girl's (the other's) recognition. This is narcissistic self-recognition as it suppresses the other's independent existence; he exists only in the service of the Master's identity. In other words, he seeks is his "truth" which he believes pre-exists his embodied being.

The marks on the girl mean nothing by themselves, and the Magistrate's attempt to impose meaning on them is self-serving and bound to fail. And this finds parallel in a later episode when he is forced by Colonel Joll to decode the meaning the slips of poplar wood he has devoted himself to collecting. In his ambiguous reading of the slips they, depending on how they are turned, stand variously for "war", "vengeance" or "justice" point to the view of language as a social fact based not on essential value but on convention; on the grand and legitimising intensions of those in control of language.

I have argued in my Introduction, 'Coetzee's novels set up and sustain a tension between the "realistic" and metafictional modes of literary representation' (6). We see this thesis demonstrated yet again in the figure of the girl as text. She is, on the one hand, sufficiently individuated: half-blind, someone's daughter, has two sisters, forced by circumstances to sleep with various men; and, as the Magistrate discovers to his surprise on the journey to restore her back to her people, self-assured and witty as she converses to the men on the journey in her language. On the other, she is textual matter, a set of signs which the Magistrate finds irresistible. We, the readers, are encouraged to recognise her as human, while she

simultaneously strikes us as non-human. It could also be argued that the Colonel posits an allegory of reading, with the tortured girl as a text that is required to yield a pre-existing truth. According to this essentially psychoanalytic reading, the text's "truth" is to be found in its evasions and silences. Colonel Joll's inquisitorial approach is, by his own account, "tedious", made up of "set procedures". In other words, it is as fixed as the supposed fixity of the "truth" it is meant to reveal.

The trope of the body as text is consistent with one of the themes that are apparent in the last two novels: that of foregrounding the body as a definite (and definitive) sign of subjectivity, as if to say subjectivity amounts to nothing less than being-there and all else is construct, all else is a theoretical scaffolding holding up a necessarily ideological notion of subjectivity. We have seen how Jacobus Coetzee is assailed by a portentous carbuncle and Eugene Dawn's body is invaded by the "hideous mongol boy" as metaphors of how the sovereignty of the self (as represented by the body) is breached, thus rendering the notion of the self as dependent and lacking in autonomy.

Thus we see the body foregrounded and textualised in the Magistrate's obsessional ministrations to the barbarian girl's feet. Coetzee's persistent foregrounding of the body demonstrates why his complex "postmodernism" cannot be reduced to a programmatic antirealism. This textualisation of the body finds echo when the word ENEMY is inscribed on the bodies of a group of barbarians and, in an act of perverse semiotics, the word is beaten off their bodies.

When he comes back from the journey to restore the girl to her people he is accused of, among other things, "consorting treasonously with the enemy". He is elated by the fact that he is accused by the Empire from whose crimes he has been working hard to distance himself, "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man. Who would not smile?" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 78). It is his will to truth and his sense of justice, both of them misguided under the circumstances, that makes him to demand his day in court.

In an episode of immense self-referentiality Mandel asks the Magistrate why he doesn't work for his keep. The Magistrate's answer is consistent with his character as a stickler for the rule of war, ' "I am a prisoner awaiting trial. Prisoners awaiting trial are not are not required to work for their keep. That is the law. They are maintained out of the public coffer." ' (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 125), Mandel retorts, ' "But you are not a prisoner. You are free to go as you please… How can you be a prisoner when we don't have a record of you? Do you think we don't keep records? We have no record of you. So you must be a free man" ' (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 125). The record Mandel is referring to is the historical record. But the novel itself is in a sense the first-person record of the Magistrate, and saying to the Magistrate that there is no record of him amounts to saying that, "This is not a novel." This is a reminder that what we have here is not a transparent reflection of a life, but a fictional representation; in other words, the novel, like Rene Magritte's paining of a pipe, is not what it represents, it is a sign not its referent. In terms of my thesis, we see here how the Magistrate's imprisonment is at once rendered as a plausible reflection and a problematisation of representation.

The Magistrate is not only imprisoned in a physical structure, but by language in a fictional closed system. In one of the novel's rare self-referential moments the Magistrate finds himself

in a frozen moment "locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 40), and soon later he comments sharply' "Never before have I had the feeling of not living on my own terms," I tell the girl, struggling to explain what happened' (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 40). The fact is the novel itself is made up of a series of frozen moments stitched together to create an illusion of temporality. And, as a character within a work of fiction, the Magistrate, despite his delusions of absolute subjectivity, is not living life on his own terms.

Accordingly, the Magistrate also foregrounds his body to present the facticity of his suffering. And we see again putting forward the concept of truth as a sign of the verifiability of his being, a *sine qua non* of his suffering, "So I shouted and screamed and said whatever came into my head." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 129). In other words, the body comes first as it is capable of manifesting the soul.

Convinced from earlier in his interaction Colonel Joll that "Pain is truth" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 5), and in an effort to establish his identity, to find his truth, the Magistrate casts himself in the role of a suffering victim on his return from taking the girl back to her people. But he discovers that pain does not confer self-transcendence and is no proof for essential humanity. Thus he says, "In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 115); "There is no consoling grandeur in any of this" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 117). In prison, cast as a victim, the Magistrate remarks the pettiness of his suffering, as he is made to question what he considers the essence of his being and discovers the freedom to define himself as an autonomous and independent subject, to be true to himself, to be rudimentary.

He is finally confronted with the more than probable notion that his yearning for transcendence is vain and that his sense of self is a mere creation meant to elevate him into more than he is, "I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 85).This notion of a body robbed of the delusional scaffolding of an autonomous self, reaches its apex in a later moment when he Joll and the Warrant Officer goes to his cell to 'show me the meaning of humanity' and he learns that,

> A body …can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, [and] … very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt are poured into it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself … (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 115)

A related idea is that of the body, in its substantiality, as a stand-in for the representability of the self is evident in comments such as when Mandel says to the Magistrate, "Are we feeding you well? …Are you growing fat again?" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 125). And when the Magistrate says, "But above all it is food that I crave, and more intensely with every passing week. I want to be fat again. There is a hunger upon me day and night." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 129). This foreshadows, by contrast, Michael K's refusal of food as a resistance to representation of the self by others. The Magistrate's hunger strike is a metaphor for the need for him to tell or record the story of his self in a world which seeks to obliterate him along with the memory of truth and justice

After being made to stand an informal trial in his former office for slack administration, bad morals and embarking on a trip to "warn the barbarians of the coming campaign" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 83), he is subjected to physical torment. Refused clean clothing and forced to survive on bad food, he is confronted with the fact that he is mere body, "no more than a pile

of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 85). In a later trial and when the prisoners are beaten in front of him, the Magistrate feels that it is his duty as a truth-teller and just witness to stand up for them, "You!" I shout. Let it all be said. Let him be the one on whom the anger breaks. "You are depraving these people!" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 106). It is a moment of poignant bad faith, as the Magistrate erroneously assumes that he is an innocent custodian of the truth. My argument is that the Magistrate fools himself into thinking that truth is an essential part of his identity. By doing so he exhibits the absolute subject position, oblivious to his fundamental embeddedness in language, ideology and culture.

As the novel approaches the end, intimations of winter are everywhere, convoys of Empire's citizens leave town and arrogant soldiers are celebrated and feted as they have their way with the town's girls. The Magistrate daydreams of, "…ends: …not of how to live but of how to die" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 133). And everyone but the children share the dreams of doom. The Magistrate blames Empire, "What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history". (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 133). The Magistrate is faced with Empire's visceral reckoning with its end. After noting that the images of cataclysm and apocalypse we are presented with here are clichéd.

The Magistrate presents Empire's need to prolong its legitimating structures as virulent and insane pathology which infects Colonel Joll as much as him, "One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 133). In the end Empire's troops are forced to withdraw, humiliated by the wily stealth of a ragtag barbarian army and Colonel Joll loses his sunglasses. Instead of exacting vengeance, a thought that occurs to him momentarily, he begins to empathise with

him, recalling an innocent Colonel Joll's memories of, "his mother's soft breast, of the tug in his hand of the first kite he ever flew as well as of those intimate cruelties which I abhor him." (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 146). He essentially sees and feels his younger self in an a younger image of Colonel Joll. But this is not a moment of moral enlightenment, a moment of redemptive closure that a classical realist would call for.

In the last chapter I have expressed the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character as an existentialist paradox that remains unresolved. The paradox at the heart of *Waiting for the Barbarians* may be expressed thus,

To be truly myself, I need to defend the other from Empire

To defend the other from Empire,

I cannot be truly myself

In the end the paradox remains unresolved. Coetzee doesn't resort to condensation or displacement to resolve this paradox, Having begun as a witness, a truthteller , the Magistrate ends as existentially blind, ' "There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it" '(*Waiting for the* Barbarians, 155). The Magistrate's narrative remains unresolved; having failed to profit from in-sights into his condition, he lacks clear-sightedness. In other words, the lack initiated at the beginning of the story is left unfulfilled, his desire conclusively thwarted.

Chapter Four - *The Life & Times of Michael K*

I will begin my discussion of *The Life & Times of Michael K* by summarising the plot. And after analysing the first sentence as a way of introducing the issues relevant to my thesis and, more specifically, as a way of introducing the issue of narrative point of view, I will then link the issue of (shifting) narrative point of view — omniscient third-person narration in sections I and III, and first person narration in section II and free indirect speech (which is used intermittently in the text) — to the tension between "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character, articulated as a tension between a self-creating (speaking for himself / writing himself) and created (spoken for/ written) character. This tension is, I will show, also articulated around the Life/Times, Institutionalisation/Escape binaries. As further illustration of the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional, I argue that it is notable, and worth noting, that the text, unlike the previous texts under study, locates us directly within a South African geography and political milieu while at the same time subverting conventional realistic codes. The consequent portrayal of Michael K as a plausibly real person is undermined by textual reminders that he is a fictional construct, thus reinforcing the tension between the relative and the absolute subject positions. I will also point out instances in the text that, while not openly self-conscious, illustrate Michael K's constructedness. I will then demonstrate that the oscillation between relative subject position (freedom) and the absolute subject position (determinism), which results from the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character, in turn, leads to Michael K's autism.

I will also show how Michael K's autism is interpreted (by the Medical Officer as stand-in for the reader) physically. I also intend to show how the impulse to have Michael K speak himself, evident in Section I, intensifies in Section II as he is pressured to tell his story. I shall also argue that those who pressure Michael to tell his truth (the Medical Officer and the authorities) are

self-serving as they do so to redeem themselves. And I will also show that the theme of fasting in the novel builds on the notion of the body as representable substance, something we noted in the Magistrate's frequently stated need to have his body sated in order to be represented on his own terms. Finally, I seek to demonstrate that the irreducibility of the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character persists to the end as attempts to have Michael K speak for himself lead to abiding ambivalence.

When his mother's health deteriorates rapidly Michael K, leaves his job as a gardener for the Cape Town Council. At his mother's request, he decides to leave his job and take her back to a farm she recalls as a birthplace in the district of Prince Albert. Given the state of emergency, they need a permit to allow them to travel by train outside Cape Town. Continually fobbed off by bureaucratic functionaries, K improvises a cart in which he plans to transport her mother. After his mother dies in Stellenbosch , K spends time in the mountains until he is apprehended at a roadblock and placed on a railway labour gang. He escapes, spends a night at a kind stranger's house, and arrives at the Visagie farm which he takes to be her mother's birthplace. There he buries his mother's ashes and discovers his vocation for gardening as he plants a patch of pumpkins and a patch of mealies. He is arrested on the farm, charged with "leaving his magisterial district without authorization, not being in possession of an identification document, infringing the curfew, and being drunk and disorderly" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 96-7). He is taken to hospital, discharged, and taken to Jakkalsdrif labour camp. He escapes again and returns to the farm. On suspicion of aiding and abetting the revolutionary militia, which in fact he refused to join, he is detained in the Kenilworth Rehabilitation Centre.

In the metafictional Section II, narrated by the Medical Officer who pressures K to "yield" his meaning, K goes on a fast. The section is dominated by the Medical Officer's relenting efforts

to find significance in K's self-starvation and to have him tell his story. The authorities want Michael K to tell his story too, but for a different reason: they suspect that he has supplied food to the guerrillas and that he is an arsonist. This section is remarkably shorter than the first (52 to 171 pages) pointing at a tapering off of the narrative as Michael K physically wastes away. The Medical Officer writes a letter (signed "A Friend") to Michael K in which he seeks to understand his story. Michael escapes from the centre, and the section ends with the Medical Officer claiming that he has come to an understanding of Michael K for what he is, a messianic figure from whom he still craves affirmation.

In the brief Section III we are back to the omniscient third person narration and back to Cape Town. Michael K finds himself living among "skollies", a pimp with his two prostitutes. The section ends with a vision of Michael having returned back to the farm and guaranteeing that life continues by drawing water from the damaged well with a teaspoon.

The novel's first sentence, "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 3), opens up a set of questions and issues that help frame my discussion: Michael K's harelip, a bodily sign of his misfit status and intellectual stuntedness; the resultant world of silence we will see him entrapped in; the tension between the "realistic" and the metafictional, as the real life midwife mirrors the role of the author in helping birth K's story, in a sentence that vividly introduces a plausible character; and crucially, the issue of narrative point of view: who is this person telling us that the first thing to note about "Michael K" is his hare lip? Is it the midwife who presides over Michael K's birth, or a narrator who notes and is aware of everything ?

For the first time in Coetzee's novels we encounter the use of an omniscient third person narrator (in Section I and Section III). In section I, we rarely have direct access to Michael's life, his experience is always mediated by a narrator who betrays a cold official style. Thus when we are told, "Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 4), we, for the first time, get a sense of Michael's inner life. And later when we hear that, "He was easiest when he was by himself" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 5), we get a hint that he preferred his own company, if only because of his physical deformity and imputed slowness of mind. Juxtaposed with that is the narrator's clerical formality as he drily notes Michael's life down, almost as entries into an official register, "At the age of fifteen he passed out of Huis Norenius and joined the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3 (b)" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 4). There is a disjuncture between the tone of the narration and the insights we, from time to time, get into the experiences of Michael K. Illustrative of my thesis, Michael K is often spoken (created) and rarely speaks himself (self-creating), emphasising his constructedness, his continual battle against misrepresentation. But the narrator's role goes beyond the mere officiating over the recording of Michael's life, he occasionally, as the use of free indirect speech demonstrates, usurps Michael's voice.

Free indirect speech allows the narrator to remain in the third person, while giving us a sense of the protagonist's inner consciousness. The result is an indeterminacy of the origin of voice, which, in turn, puts the speaking subject in question. The following passage demonstrates how Michael K's voice is usurped by a more knowing and cerebral voice as passage gradually moves into an elevated register :

> When he heard the rumble of an approaching convoy he would creep away into the bushes, though he wondered whether by now, with his filthy clothes and his air of gaunt

> exhaustion, he would not be passed over as a mere footloose vagrant from the depths of the country, too benighted to know that one needed papers to be on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 54).

While the passage is presented as K's reported thought, it slides into a high register and takes a tightly wrought poetic tone and there is an apparent change in focalisation, "too benighted to know that one needed papers on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm". The judgemental tone of the last sentence confirms the reading of the voice as that of someone outside Michael K's consciousness. The result is an uncertainty as to who is really speaking here and whom benefits from the speech act, and it is further illustration that Michael K is not speaking himself, that he is spoken by a narrator.

I need here to cite one more passage which has the further advantage of pointing out how the novel veers between the realist and the metafictional,

> Parasite was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdrif, a nest of parasites hanging from the sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back […] Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 159 -60).

Do we honestly expect a man who has been consistently portrayed as a slow-witted simpleton to express profound thoughts such as the ones expressed in the passage? And; if so, to what end ? We see here how by fusing the figurality of both character and narrator, free indirect speech intensifies the tension between the referentiality and performativity of character, dramatising the fact that Michael K is at once a plausible member of the Cape "coloured" underclass and a textual enactment of the unmasterable elusiveness of meaning.

The third passage I want to examine demonstrates the tension between K as subjected being and as free agent. After K escapes the Jakkalsdrif camp , "every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 133), a poignant reference to the performatively elusive nature of character as a nexus of coherence and meaning. The sentence that follows is a model of vivid description, "ducking through the fences, he could feel a craftsman's pleasure in wire spanned so taut that it hummed when it was pluck" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 133), imagery so trenchant we cannot help but see and hear the fence. We are made to experience the fence simultaneously as a crafted object and a signifier of exclusion, a marker of separation: connoting as it denotes, a signified that inexorably becomes a signifier. The passage itself is a taut (superbly crafted) expression of the tension between the figural and the referential. The tension is sustained as K rejects the role of both craftsman and enforcer of division, "he could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes in the ground, erecting fences, dividing up land" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 133). But the tension reaches its climax in a sentence that puts into question the issue of who is speaking, is K speaking or is the narrator speaking, or is the writer speaking? "He thought of himself not as something heavy that left the tracks behind it, but as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling dust" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 133).

I want to link the tension between speaking and being spoken, as demonstrated by the three passages I examined above, to the fact that Michael K is a character more acted upon than acting as articulated by the tension between the Life/Times and Institutionalisation/Escape binaries. Michael K's "life" is shown to be inevitably dependent on the "times" in which he lives. We can view K's protracted movement through his "life" , a veritable obstacle course, as

a confrontation with the dialectic between his "life" and "times" , between being and becoming, freedom and determinism, absolute and relative subjectivity.

His story dramatises his efforts to evade the institutionalisation of subjectivity: he is "helped out of his mother's womb" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 3) by a midwife in a hospital, on account of his hare lip he is "taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of Huis Norenius" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 4), after his mother's death at a hospital in Stellenbosch he "found it hard to tear himself from the hospital" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 45). He is later hospitalised himself — twice: first, after he is arrested and taken to Jakkalsdrif labour camp, and secondly, in Section II, when he is pressured to "yield" his meaning in the Kenilworth Rehabilitation Centre from which he escapes. These episodes of institutionalisation are punctuated by moments of escape, dramatising the tension between determinism and freedom and thus underscoring the tension between the relative subject position and the absolute subject position.

Accordingly, we see Michael K constantly trying to navigate repressive bureaucracy. He is required to get a seat reservation and a "permit to leave the proclaimed ….police area" from the police and told that his "mother's health did not constitute special grounds" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 11) , he is tossed from bureaucratic pillar to bureaucratic post , told to fill in the forms and "take them to E-5" and told sternly , "I am telling you for the last time, if the permit is granted the permit will come!" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 26), he is made to contend with army convoys, checkpoints and roadblocks as well as absurd regulations, "…you pull fifty metres off the roadside…Anything nearer, you can get shot, no warning, no questions asked. Understand?" (*Life & Times of Michael K*,30). When his mother is hospitalised in Stellenbosch and having last seen her on a trolley, he can't find her and is told to come back in the morning

and his request to spend the night on one of the benches refused (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 38). After his mother's death at the hospital,

> He sat down on a chair in the corner.
>
> 'Do you want to make a phone call?' said the doctor
>
> This was evidently a code for something, he did not know what. He shook his head. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 41)

Thus we see Michael K befuddled by bureaucratese and he is at a loss as to how to respond. It is in this light that his pursuit of autonomy and meaning must be seen. His quest for self-expression is embattled, having to contend with a code not of his making.

Most fittingly for a verbal construction, K's escapes from the "times" of his "life" are figured forth in terms of silence, which serves as a counter-motif to hegemonic language. The first thing we were told about K is that he was born with a hare lip; in other words, born into silence. And we soon learn that he was from his childhood trained into silence, "Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to quiet" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 4) and at Huis Norenius silence was imposed on him by an oppressive patriarchal authority, "My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in the dormitories at all times.' " (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 143).

The following extract draws a distinction between socially-imposed silence as escape from a social system and silence as a highly priced commodity that can be bequeathed to posterity,

> I could live here forever , he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say…He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles

> and miles of silence; he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity (though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 63 – 64)

K's need to opt out of social arrangements of space, a metaphor for his latitude to opt out of the "times" and thereby self-define, is further constrained by the economic realities of the time. The fact that we might feel strongly tempted at this point to relate this directly to the South African land issue, tying the land issue to identity, is further evidence of how Coetzee grounds his novels in realism only to subvert it and textualise character. Note here the function the significance of fence as a marker of socially cherished silence. The fence also, by contrast, the fence as a marker of exclusion as is the case in the passage I commented on earlier (This chapter, 81).

K is fenced in (and out) within the novel's spatial and temporal configuration — and within a specific geography and socio-political milieu. Significantly, *Life & Times of Michael K* is remarkable for its specific geographical locatednes, which contrasts sharply with the vague and/or ambiguous geographical location which characterise previous novels. The novel practically reverberates with uniquely South African signs and names,

> Danger, Ingozi Gevaar (8) Le Roux & Hattingh - Prokureurs (41) KPA – CPA on the breast of a smock on his mom's corpse (42), a shining metal badge reads, St John Ambulance (44) and idiosyncratically South African names, Paarden Eiland, Black River Parkway (28), Banhoek Road (47), He followed a new route through the centre of the city, along Sir Lowry Road and the suburban Main Road, over the Mowbray Railway bridge, and past the one-time Children's Hospital on to the old Klipfontein

road (31 -2), Elandsrivier (52), Worcester (56),Laignsburg (64, 66) Jakkalsdrif, Seweweekspoort (66), Andringa Street (45), Elandsrivier (52), Touws River, Worcester (56), Kruidfontein, Moordenaarsrivier, (70), Sir Lowry Road, Stellenbosch and Paarl (34), Wynberg Park (92), Volkskas office (96), listed on the charge sheet as 'Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA - Unemployed' (96), Jakkalsdrif Relocation Camp/Bath Times/ Males 6 -7 am/Females 7.30 – 8.30 am / By Order/Save Water/Sparing (103), Brandvlei (107), Jakkalsrivier (108), Klaarstroom, Oudtshoorn (109), Leeu-Gamka (111), Boontjieskraal and the Onderdorp (120), Muldersrus, Papeggai street (144), De Aar (202), Prince Albert, Cape Town, Brandvlei, Vrouevereeniging, Reddersburg, Uitenhage, Eastern Cape, Woltemade, Kenilwoth (208), Moorresburg, Simonstown, Baardskeerdersbos (210) , Gordon's Bay (211) Kimberley (216), Beaufort West (217), Rosmead Avenue (214), the Peninsula, the Karoo, Cape Flats,Swartberg (193), Beach Road (234), Signal Hill (234), Sea Point (238), 1216 Normandie, Clippies Unisex Hairdressers, Stellenbosch, (a man called) December [243], Cote de Azur (245), De Waal Park (245)

This cumulative mimetic accuracy creates a "reality effect" and has implications for representation of Michael K's character. Despite all the distancing signs that mark his representation (his single initial name, use of free indirect speech, his prodigious obscurity, to name a few) we are made to feel that this life represents a particular and historicised existence. But he is not a real person, he is but a potent symbol of the contest over the power of fictionality, and we are constantly made to experience the tension between the mimetic narrative and the text as contrivance.

In fact there are moments in which Michael K is made to do more than hint at his status as a fictional construct. For instance, he talks about his relationship with Robert, who he meets in the Jakkalsdrif camp,

> It seemed more like Robert than like him, as he knew himself, to think that. Would he have to say that he thought was Robert's and had merely found a home in him, or could he say that though the seed had come from Robert, the thought, having grown up inside him, was now his own? He did not know (*Life &Times of Michael K*, 130).

He presents himself as puppet to the writer as ventriloquist. This yet again demonstrates the tension between speaking and being spoken. Note how he deploys images of cultivation, invoking the idea of cultivation as creation and foreshadowing his soon to be declared vocation as a cultivator, deludedly transcendent and autonomous.

The specific context in which Michael's life is told is a larger referent to the text and can legitimately be viewed as a plausible historical projection of a possible (even imminent) South Africa, marked by armed insurrection, the state of emergency and restricted movement. The "reality effect" thus created through plausibility is reinforced by direct references to a specific political milieu: we are told that the Visagie boy is a deserter from the army, and in the passage below we come face to face with an apartheid flag-raising ceremony,

> When we emerged from his (Noel's) office it was to behold a corporal raising the orange, white and blue on a flagpole in the middle of the track, a five-piece band playing "*Uit die blou*" , the cornet out of key, and six hundred sullen men standing to attention, barefoot, in their tenth-hand khakis, having their thinking set right (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 181).

When the Medical Officer asks his Major Noel van Rensburg, "can you remind me why we are fighting this war?" Noel replies, "so that minorities will have a say in their destinies" (*Life*

& Times of Michael K, 215), an apparently direct reference to the National Party's supposedly reformative "tricameral" politics of 1983, the year in which the text was first published.

The above is in tension with moments in which Michael K seems aware of his status as a fictional construct. While not as self-conscious as Eugene Dawn or Magda, for instance, these moments in which Michael K is shown to be aware of his status as authorially determined are striking. After his mother's death in Stellenbosch Michael K is made to reflect,

> It appeared that he had to stay in Stellenbosch for a certain length of time. There was no shortening the time. He stumbled through the days, losing his way (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 47)
>
> ……..
>
> He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 92)

Unlike Eugene Dawn before him Michael K does not react to this awareness with paranoia but with a resignation tinged with apprehension,

> It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing, that he might lie here till the moss on the roof grew dark before his eyes, that his story might end with his bones growing white in this faroff place. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 95)

And while detained in hospital an orderly tells him "Eat while you can…the great hunger is still to come" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 98). This foreshadows his refusal to eat , a major point of the plot in Section II. More significantly, it is a self-conscious moment in the text which reminds us of that Michael K is a fictional construct, at the mercy of the author. He will be starved not out of volition but to serve the author's purpose. "It seemed a strange thing to

say" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 99) while this is not expressly signalled as Michael K's thought it is plausible to deduce this is how he feels about the orderly's statement.

To further reinforce Michael K's status as fictional character, I refer to the fact that he is named K by the narrator, while he thinks of himself as Michael. He is not only named "K" by the narrator he is often misnamed by others: the police captain Oosthuizen names him Michaels despite K's protestations that his name is Michael and the Medical Officer similarly persists misnaming him Michaels, "They have mixed him up with some other Michaels" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 180), again despite Michael's protestations. Thus we see how K is designated and not self-designating. One may argue that this is not unique to K, all characters in novels are not self-designating as their names are given to them by the author thus inserting them within a particular chain of signification. But we see here how Coetzee systematically and self-consciously lays bare and subverts this realist code. Thus Michael continues to battle against efforts to misrepresent him as the tension between created (spoken) and self-created (speaking himself) intensify.

On a somewhat lighter note, we also note how Michael K is inadvertently misidentified through the uniforms and clothes he is made to wear throughout. After his mother's death he is given a parcel which contains among other things, "A white jacket with maroon flashes on the shoulders, a pair of black trousers, and a black beret with a shiny metal badge reading St John's ambulance" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 44). He wears the uniform and the beret for the most part of the story and is a soldier asks him if he works for the ambulance (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 51) and someone accuses him of stealing the uniform (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 101). When he escapes from Kenilworth Rehabilitation Centre he leaves behind the camp-issue khaki pyjamas and steals the royal blue TREEFELLERS overall. One of the prostitutes in

Section III refers to him as "Mr Treefellers". The borrowed, and stolen, uniforms serve to further mistake his identity and are yet another symbol of the continual efforts by others to impose an identity on Michael K.

So we see how Michael K's autonomy is consistently undermined. He, on the other hand articulates his autonomy, his supposedly transcendent assertive creative power, around the notion of cultivation. But even here we will see how his view of himself as a creator is subverted. It is after he dutifully performs the ritual of consigning his mother's remains to earth that he feels, "This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator…Then he planted a small patch of pumpkins and a small patch of mealies…" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 81).

But note his absolute subject position, deluding himself that his contingent role is ordained by Nature: "It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature". (*Life & Times of Michael*, 81). This is of course the ultimate effect of ideology: to naturalise what is in effect a construct, as in "human nature". K is a created character who deludedly believes he is a creator by nature. This analysis has implications for the view of character, emphasising yet again that character cannot be legitimately seen as independent from the social, cultural and linguistic forces that create it.

And it is just before this pivotal moment in his journey of self-definition that he has misgivings about his autonomy, and he exhibits the relative subject position:

> He closed his eyes and concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what he was doing is right — his mother's voice, if she still had a voice, or a voice belonging to no one in particular, or even his own voice as it sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 80)

It is, significantly, while he is at the farm, when he consigns his mother's remains to the earth, at the time of his most acute existentialist crisis and when the tension between the absolute and relative subject position is at its most intense, that Michael K exhibits autism, "He felt the old hopeless stupidity invading him, which he tried to beat back" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 83) as he meets the Visagie scion and later in conversation with the boy, "he felt stupidity creep over him like a fog again" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 88). It is my contention that the autism is a result of the crisis of voice as he feels deserted by the voice of authority, and he is deprived of the narrator's voice (belonging to no one in particular) or even an inner voice. He has been from the outset defined, largely through free indirect speech, as slow of mind, and it is this tension between self-defining (absolute subject position) and being defined (relative subject position) that leads to his awareness of an extreme subject position: autism.

Michael K's autism, later, assumes a psychosomatic dimension as the Medical Officer reads K's body for stigmata of a specific ontological sickness, a sickness marked by a congenital stupidity and an innate inability to cope in the world: autism,

> "I am not sure he is wholly of our world" (178 – 9), "…too stupid or too innocent …, (He is) locked up as an insurgent, but he barely knows there is a war on" (179), "(He) couldn't run a darts game, much less a staging post" (179), "(He) is a person of feeble mind who drifted by chance into a war zone and didn't have the sense to get out. (He) ought to be in a protected environment weaving baskets or stringing beads, not in a rehabilitation camp" (179), "(This Michaels is) an idiot. (This Michaels) doesn't know how to strike a match" (180), "(He is) like one of those toys made of sticks held together with rubber bands (182), (He is) like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped

in itself and its interior life. …An unbearing, unborn creature. (I) cannot think of him as a man…" (185), "A mouse who quit an overcrowded, foundering ship' (187), "…not responsible for himself" (188), "Noel: like a squirrel or an ant or a bee" (188), "(He) is a simpleton, and not even an interesting simpleton. (He) is a poor helpless soul…" (193), "No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy " (195), "(He's) not right in the head…he can't speak properly (198)", "You can't take care of yourself, you don't know how" (199), "(You are) no soldier, Michaels, (you are) a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man" (204), "(You are) like a stick figure…whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape" (204), (He is a) "spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the laws of nations", one of the "universal souls" (207), "…too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history" (217).

This is an act of interpretation on the Medical Officer's part: he reads K's body within a discourse that marginalises "abnormality" and enjoins all of us to conform to a particular view of being. We, as readers, are implicated here as our interpretation is necessarily diagnostic, we read the body of the text for a sign or signs that we then interpret as signifiers of a particular condition or conditions. We see yet again that, Coetzee's novels under study, the body — flesh and blood — is represented with such significatory force as to suggest that, the self beyond flesh is nothing more than fiction.

The tension between self-creating and created tension also finds expression in the Medical Officer's insistence that K tell his story. This has three implications: first, the insistence is based on the liberal-humanist fallacy that an individual life can be articulated within the discourse. Second, the Medical Officer asks to tell his story, in other words, to narrativise his

life story. Third, the Medical Officer's motivation is self-serving, he needs to fortify his status as an apparent saviour,

> You've got a story to tell and we want to hear it. Start anywhere. Tell us about your mother. Tell us about your father. Tell us your view of life. Or if you don't want to tell us about your mother and your father and your view on life, tell us about recent agricultural enterprise and the friends from the mountains who drop in for a visit and a meal every now and again. Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 191 - 2, my emphasis)

What the Medical Officer is asking Michael K to reveal is his life story, but he also wants him to confirm his suspected role as an accomplice to freedom fighters who represent a violent and blunt alternative to the liberal stance — and its insistence on individual freedom and abhorrence of violence — which the Medical Officer represents. The Medical Officer is desperate from this specific version of K's life story, "Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone". He needs Michael K's story for his own psychic sustenance, to prop up a particular self-concept. The following exchange makes it clear that the medical officer is looking for the "truth",

> '…Don't try twisting a story out of him, because truly there is no story to be had. In the profoundest sense he does not know what he is doing: I have watched him for days and I am sure of it. *Make something up for the report*. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 193)
>
> ……
>
> 'So you want me to make up a lie and sign my name to it'
>
> 'It's not a lie, Noel. There is probably more truth in the story I told you than you would ever get out of Michaels if you used thumbscrew on him' (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 194)

The Medical Officer's argument that there would be more truth in the lie is telling, unwittingly confessing to the constructedness of subjectivity and its dependence on the other.

As I have shown in the previous chapters, Coetzee foregrounds the body, as corporeal fact, to shock the characters — and us — into the realisation that selfhood is a construct, a fiction made up to sustain the fiction of subject's autonomy. In *Life & Times of Michael K* the body's primary organic need, its primal lack, is narrativised with K's hunger a stand-in for the narrative's founding lack. An extra dimension is added to the theme of the body as undeniable being, that of the body as representable substance. This comes to the fore sharply in Section II as we see K's hunger escalate into fasting. K's fasting can plausibly be seen as an escape from the clutches of realistic representation. I argued earlier that the need to represent K is based on the fallacy that one's truth can be validated through the revelation of that truth,

> Michaels, there is something I want to tell you. If you don't eat, you are truly going to die. It will take time, it will not be pleasant, but in the end you will certainly die [...] I am going to treat you like a free man, not a child or an animal. If you want to throw your life away, so be it, it is your life, not mine (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 201)

This is reminiscent of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* after taking the barbarian girl to her people and inviting her to back with her out of her own free will and is evidence of the liberal belief in individual freedom.

We have seen how the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* reads the barbarian girl's body as text. And I have argued that this is evidence of my thesis that Coetzee puts up and sustains a tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character, with the body representative of the objective (the real) and the reading of the body standing in for the reading

of/for signs. In a symptomatic reading, the medical officer records K's bodily and physiological fluctuations,

> There is a new patient in the ward, a little old man who collapsed during physical training and was brought in with very low respiration and heartbeat. There is every evidence of prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 177)
>
> ……
>
> Have been struggling with the new patient Michaels. He insists there is nothing wrong with him, he only wants something for his headache. Says he is not hungry. In fact he cannot hold his food down. Am keeping him on a drip, which he fights against feebly. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 178)

This reading is recorded in a journal and in that way points to itself as a form of writing. The Medical Officer's diagnosis points to an external aetiology, a hunger induced by a willed refusal of food.

It is significant that it is only when K is fed a substitute, squash, he prefers to his first choice, pumpkin that the Medical Officer changes his view of K. As I argued earlier K's insistence for his kind of food is symbolic of his need to be represented on his own terms. K needs to fast i.e. deprive himself of sustenance in order to escape the stultifying effects of classically realistic representation. Narrative is here equated to a sustaining (prolonging) process. He would rather risk death than have meaning imposed upon him as he is determined to be self-defining.

Life & Times of Michael K, like the previous three novels, is articulated in play. To be more specific, the novel is based on the play of, and on, narrating voices and in that way conveys the

unreliability of narration. The novel's reliance on play, which in turn is based on indeterminacy, is bound to make the end problematic. Play is never-ending as it leads to more and more possibilities. That's why we are meant to feel that the novel is hurtling somewhat tentatively toward the end. Put differently, the novel is caught between closure and the open-ended play of textuality. Michael K remains caught on the horns of the dilemma of speaking himself and being spoken.

Thus, we see Section III somewhat jarringly revert to the third person omniscient narrator. K reverts to the put-upon and passive position of Section I but this time there is a sordid edge to the events he is made victim of. Still he resists to be the story. He does so self-consciously in the following extracts:

> It struck him too that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bride. Or else, he simply do not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive. (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 240)
>
> ……
>
> They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenius instead of potato-peeling and suns, if they had me practise the story of my life every day, standing over me with a cane till I could perform without stumbling, I might have known how to please them (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 247).

In other words he can neither speak himself or be spoken, he is unskilled at storytelling and unpractised at playing a character. He was too busy being, learning "potato-peeling and sums" at Huis Norenius, to avail himself to the exacting discipline of being trained as a story-teller.

And, at the end, his "truth" eludes him but he continues to delude himself that he has found it. He says that "(Whereas) the truth is, I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 247). He was first a gardener out of economic necessity working for the Council and later out of filial piety and as part of what he called his "Nature" after he consigned his mother's remains to the ground and felt that his mother was created to keep the plants growing. He then says excitedly and recklessly, "…*the truth, the truth about me. I am a gardener*, he said again, aloud" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 247 -8). Why the excitement and the "recklessness" and why does he say it again? Because he is reckless of (indifferent to) the truth. And then he feels the need to qualify the newfound and loudly-proclaimed "truth", "I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 248) As I argued in the last chapter, being true to the self proves to be an illusion.

K has a vision of returning to the farm in the presence of an old man. The water pump has been blown up by the soldiers, and there is a question as to what will sustain life. He conjures up a solution that, while it alludes back to the beginning with the teaspoon reminding us of the teaspoon that the mother was forced to feed baby K with, sounds too elaborate and contrived for such a fundamental problem:

> …he Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 250)

As the textual play ends, it is not clear whether the “life” in the story will be sustained, given the “times”. The paradox of speaking the self while being spoken, of a life independent of the “times”, remains unresolved, the tension between a life that refers to a specific South African socio-political milieu and a textual figure that continually eludes meaning, irreducible.

Chapter Five - *Foe*

My task in this chapter is to show how in *Foe*, Coetzee's fifth novel, the tension between the absolute (self-determination) and the relative (determination) subject positions, an outcome of the tension wrought by the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character typical of the Coetzee's novels under study, leads to a peculiarly literary psychological condition, hyperconsciousness: Susan Barton's awareness of her awareness that she is a fictive construct whose ultimate "reality" depends on how she/it is read. I will do this by making a connection between Susan Barton's castaway need to be saved and her need to be inscribed within a realist story, and I will demonstrate that her need to be saved cannot be disentangled from her desire to save the other, the silent Friday. In a futile attempt at at-one-ment, a state in which self-concept reconciles with the lived self in a yearning for transcendence, she insists on saving Friday from his silence, his subjection to forces beyond him, by having him inscribed as a subject within the realist novel . Thus, she links the substantial truth of her story to her supposed autonomy, her physical presence and Friday's inability to self-present. Her need to be substantiated, I will further argue, is tied to the notion of the representable body. Finally, I will show, how the ending in its open-endedness marks, the return of the repressed as the story of the island is made to emerge from Friday's body which is the only one to have survived.

Foe tells the story of Susan Barton, cast off a ship on an island after a mutiny, on her way back from a failed two-year search for her lost daughter who is thought to have been abducted in Bahia. There are only two other people on the island, Cruso and his slave, Friday, whose tongue has been cut out. Friday and Cruso have also been washed ashore from a shipwreck some fifteen years earlier. Susan Barton waits on the island for rescue until a ship drops anchor off the island, on its way to England. At Susan Barton's request, the ailing Cruso and Friday, are brought onto the ship against their wills. Cruso dies on board the ship.

Foe is made up of four sections. Section I is set on an island and bears the marks of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, while at the same time it departs from the prior text, most notably in its introduction of a female narrator, the portrayal of Friday as an African and Cruso as apathetic and unenterprising. Susan Barton, the castaway, rescued by Friday, the slave condemned to silence, spends most of her time trying to make sense of Cruso's life on the island and the lack of tools; baffled by Cruso's building of terraces, bemused by Friday scattering petals on the sea; and tormented by the unending wind. That is until they are rescued and she, at the suggestion of the captain of the ship, is seized by the idea of telling her unique story. The need to have her story told truthfully — and the later realisation that she cannot do this without making Friday's silence speak — becomes her motivating force for the rest of the text.

In Section II Susan, is kept in lodgings in England with Friday, by Foe, a writer commissioned to write her story into a book, and who is on the run from debtors. It now becomes clear that Section I is the memoir that Susan Barton has prepared for Foe. One of the letters is returned to her unopened and she thus becomes aware of Foe's disappearance, but she does not stop sending the letters. She tries all manner of means to draw Friday's story out of him, without any success. A girl who claims to be Susan Barton's lost daughter, bearing the same name as her, appears on the scene. Susan Barton becomes suspicious that the woman has been sent by Foe when the woman who claims to be her lost daughter reveals that she knows of the island of Bahia. Subsequently, she leads the woman into the forest, abandoning her there. Susan Barton and Friday leave for Bristol, hoping to find a ship to take Friday back to Africa. She is forced to return to England, when she cannot find a ship to take Friday to Africa.

In Section III Susan has found Foe and they spend a great deal of time debating how her story must be told. Their debates centre around writing, freedom and the meaning of Friday's silence. They both identify the silence as a hole in the narrative. Susan tries to teach Friday to write, presumably the better for Friday to tell his story.

The final Section is in two parts and marks a dramatic shift in narrative gear as the story is taken over by an unidentified narrator. In the first part, the narrator enters Daniel Defoe's house wherein s/he finds the dead bodies of a woman or a girl and a couple and, in a corner alcove, the still-alive body of Friday. In the second part, the narrator enters the house, wherein she finds the same bodies, but this time the man and woman are facing each other and we, for the first time, notice a scar on Friday's neck. The narrator finds a yellowing manuscript directly addressed to " 'Dear, Mr Foe' " and echoing the first sentence of the first section, " 'At last I could row no further' " (*Foe*, 5 & 155), and the narrator's actions mimic those of Susan Barton the castaway we first met in the Section I, "with a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (*Foe*, 5 & 155). The narrator descends into the shipwreck, finding Susan Barton and her captain dead there, and Friday in another corner. The narrator tries to ask Friday, "what is this ship?" (*Foe*, 157). "But this is not a place of words…This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday." (*Foe*, 157). Now lying face to face with the narrator, Friday emits a slow stream. "Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face." (*Foe*, 157).

In *Foe*, Coetzee sustains the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character by problematising the complex interrelationship between individual autonomy and constructedness, referentiality and reflexivity. This he primarily achieves by making the novel a re-reading and re-writing of a classical realist text, *Robinson Crusoe*. *Foe* is presented as pre-

text to the prior text. This serves to complicate the notion of subjectivity by textualising, gendering and racialising it. That Friday is portrayed as, " a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers…flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust…he was a slight fellow, shorter than I" (*Foe*, 5 - 6). This contrasts with Defoe's portrayal of Friday as having long, black hair, "not curled like wool" and his skin "dun olive colour" (*Robinson Crusoe*, 202). The second significant contrast between the two texts, is that in *Foe* the narrator, Susan Barton, is female. The final significant departure from the prior text, is *Foe*'s location of Susan Barton within the establishment society itself, with her efforts at self-representation having to take place after she has left the island. Consequently, we note, that the novel is in parodic relation to the canonical *Robinson Crusoe*. To the extent that the classically realist literary canon, of which Defoe's text is exemplar, makes the notion of unitary and autonomous character warrantable, Susan Barton's quest for individual self-determination within a patriarchal discourse, can be seen as problematic. The need to belong is in constant tension to the need to be different, and this tension between the absolute (self-determined) and the relative (determined) subject positions, speaks to the tension between the referential ("realistic") and the reflexive (metafictional) renditions of character which I argue characterises Coetzee's novels under study.

Put differently, Foe's yearning for a place in the literary canon, while at the same time demonstrating the canon's rootedness in culture and history, is reflective of the dialectic of the character's need to at once belong and be distinctive. Exhibiting the absolute subject position, Susan Barton is initially determined to be installed as a subject within a decidedly realistic novel but is gradually made to inhabit a relative subject position as her self-determination is replaced with self-doubt. For the interest of my argument, Coetzee strategically inhabits the

transcendental view of character that typifies most realist texts, and in that way sets and sustains a tension between the "realistic" and the metafictional renditions of character. Susan Barton's prodigious awareness of and anxiety about how she is presented, her hyperconsciousness, is an outcome of this tension.

The tension at the core of Coetzee's problematisation of subjectivity finds expression in the trope of the castaway. When at the beginning of the novel Susan says, "I am castaway…I am alone" (*Foe*, 5) she initiates the notion of the castaway while at the same time she recalls Magda's comment, "We are all castaways of God as we are the castaways of history" (*In the Heart of Darkness*, 135). Her existentialist homelessness initiates her need for a narrative home built on verisimilitude. Her desire is to be saved, she craves at-one-ment, driven by the need to have her ideal self reconciled to her narrated self in pursuit of transcendence.

She is "grateful, like all the saved" (*Foe*, 5). Her hopes of being saved by Providence are kept alive, as "A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him" (*Foe*, 5). She identifies herself "I am a castaway. I am all alone." (*Foe*, 5). Her hopes are soon thwarted as she realises that this "Negro with a head of fuzzy hair" (*Foe*, 5) is not Providence personified, his halo a dazzling optical illusion. This initiates a crucial dynamic of Susan, the deject, the homeless — perennially torn between freedom and determinism, the absolute and relative subject positions. Her reaching out for salvation, for assurance of her identity in philosophical moorings of realism, will ultimately be exposed as futile. In terms of my thesis, we see early on here how the questions about character as reflective of the real world, and character as a set of words, are brought into play. It is my argument that Coetzee keeps these questions in play throughout the novel.

Providence is often appropriated to the service of ideology. Thus, to Susan's question, "where is the justice in it ? First a slave and now a castaway too. Robbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence. Was Providence sleeping ?" (*Foe*, 23), Cruso poses a rhetorical question, "If Providence were to watch over all of us…who would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar cane ?" (*Foe*, 23). Providence is shown here as productive in the reproduction of social and power relations.

If Susan Barton is not to be saved by Providence, who or what will save her instead ? Susan Barton's subsequent obsession with realistic self-inscription suggests that her need to be saved is a metaphor for self-definition. Her stay on the island is marked by her remarkable need to be saved, ' " I have a desire to be saved which I must call immoderate," I said. "It burns in me night and day, I can think of nothing else" ' (*Foe* , 36). And, more significantly, she is appalled by the fact that Cruso seems to have "no stories to tell of the life he had lived" (*Foe* , 36) and the fact that he does not keep a journal. And later she laments the fact that the first piece of furniture Cruso made was a bed and not a writing-table and ink.

It is in the light of Susan Barton's obsessive desire for salvation through self-representation that we need to see her efforts at saving Friday from her silence and get him back to Africa. Her efforts to save Friday are self-serving and cast around narration and authority. She believes that turning her and Friday into novelistic subjects will not only enrich them materially and bring them fame, but, most crucially, will save — and immortalise — them,

> "This is a book, Friday," I say. "in it is a story written by the renowned Mr Foe. You do not know the gentleman, but at this which is your story, and your master's, and mine. Mr Foe has not met you, but he knows of you, from what I have told him, using words. That is part of the magic of words. Through the medium of words I have given Mr Foe

> the particulars of you and Mr Cruso and of my year on the island and the years you and Mr Cruso spent there alone, as far as I can supply them; and all these particulars Mr Foe is weaving into a story which will make us famous throughout the land, and rich too. There will be no more need for you to live in a cellar. You will have money with which to buy your way to Africa or Brazil, as the desire moves you, bearing the fine gifts, and be reunited with your parents, if they remember you, and marry at last and have children, sons and daughters. And I will give you your own copy of our book, bound in leather, to take with you. I will show you how to trace your name in it, page after page, so that your children may see that their father is known in all parts of the world where books are read. Is writing not a fine thing, Friday? Are you not filled with joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner?" (*Foe*, 58)

Susan Barton posits language as conjuration, "the magic of words", and emphasises the role it plays as a transparent medium through which reality can be communicated. Her painfully patronising tone betrays the fact that she sees language, and narrative as a tool in her liberal delusion to speak on behalf of the other, and in that way liberate them — from poverty — and bestow them a grand dignity. And oh, not to mention the promise of immortality, "you will live forever, after a manner." She conveniently forgets that Friday's name which she will show him how to trace, is not his real name. She not only emphasises the primacy, but also the permanence, of art as she did when she noted that all else on the island will ultimately disappear and only the walls and terraces will remain, and they will be misunderstood by later visitors: "they will say, 'these are cannibal walls, the ruins of a cannibal city, from the golden age of cannibals' " (*Foe*, 54 - 5).

It is when Foe associates the idea of God, would-be ultimate author-ity and epitome of Providence, with writing, that we are made to realise the conceptual proximity that salvation is made to have to writing. Arguing that "we must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday" (*Foe*, 142) and in response to Susan Barton's assertion that "…our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves" (*Foe,* 142), Foe asserts, " '…We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the Word; but I ask, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world and all that's in it?' " (*Foe,* 143). We are tempted here to acknowledge the novel's textuality, its fictionalisation of aspects of deconstruction; specifically, the dismantling of the Speech/Writing hierarchy that Derrida argues underlies Western thinking. Foe expands on the tension between self-determination and determination, in these terms, " 'We cannot read it, I agree […] it is possible that some of us are not written, but merely are; or else (I think principally of Friday) are written by another and darker author. Nevertheless, God's writing stands as an instance of a writing without speech.' " (*Foe*,143)

Foe, in effect, drives a wedge between Word and World; thus, giving the lie to the notion of language as a transparent medium through which we can refer to a real world peopled by real characters. His words are subversive as he displays a self-consciousness that reveals his status as a construct. Foe's speculation that "some of us are not written, but merely are" is misguided as all of us are — in a manner of speaking — written, installed as subjects by social and linguistic forces beyond our control. We are all, coloniser and colonised alike, writer and written alike, subjects, created by forces beyond our control.

> 'I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of the darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the

> shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner' (*Foe*, 60 – 61).

What we're witnessing here is language's power to create a subject and its utility as a colonising force. The coloniser, in the absolute subject position, deludes him/herself that he is self-written, self-created and in total control of language, unaware that s/he is also subject to the power of language to subjectivity.

Part of my argument is that Coetzee's characters, in their absolute subject position, for the most delude themselves that they are autonomous, independent of language, the other and societal forces. In *Foe* Coetzee not only makes Susan Barton to admit to her dependence on Friday, the colonised other, but complicates this dependence considerably. Like Magda before her, Susan Barton is a colonising woman; Master to Friday and at the same time slave to Foe.

Susan initially displays confidence in her power as arbiter of the truth of her story, "if I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it" (*Foe*, 40). Towards the end, her confidence gives way to uncertainty, as the lines between, "reality" and "fiction", "self" and "character' blur. She says to Foe,

> In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself […] but now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? (*Foe*, 133)

To put it differently, Susan's initial absolute subject position is replaced by her relative subject position, as she recognises that, as a product of social, linguistic and historical forces beyond her control, she is not the author of her own story and cannot guarantee its "truth".

We have seen how in previous novels, in the mistaken belief that they are autonomous, the characters set out to assert and prove that they are true to themselves. This theme finds its fullest and narrativised expression in *Foe*. At the outset, Susan sees herself as an embodiment of truth, and thus displays a deep-seated belief in mimetic accuracy when she insists that her story be rooted in empirically verifiable events. In this regard we need to note the reciprocal relationship between character and event. As Henry James remarked in *The Art of Fiction*, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character" (cited in Davis, 196). Susan's insistence on mimetic accuracy speaks to her belief in the transcendental and unitary account of individuality, and by extension, selfhood.

At the suggestion of Captain Smith who she encounters aboard the Jon Hobart Susan embraces the uniqueness of her story, " 'It is a story you should set down in writing and offer to the booksellers," he (Captain Smith) urged, " 'There has never before, to my knowledge, been a female castaway of our nation. It will cause a great stir.' " (*Foe*, 40). It is the story's novelty that Captain Smith is convinced will make it cause "a great stir", and by implication, be a bestseller. The novelty is directly related to Susan's assumed individuality, and autonomy. She is posited here, in the spirit of classical realism, as the chief signifying agent of the proposed story. Significantly, Susan is anxious to preserve her story's truth as she makes a distinction between truth and art,

> I shook my head sadly. "As I relate it to you, my story passes the time well enough," I replied; "but what little I know of book-writing tells me its charm will quite vanish when it is set down baldly in print. A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied, and I have no art "… (*Foe*, 40)

She insists on the truth of the story, which she seems to equate with the vividness and immediacy of a story experienced in real time. Truth is initially contrasted with art (or artfulness) and ultimately with books as commodity.

> "I will not have any lies told, " said I . the captain smiled. "there I cannot vouch for them," he said: "their trade is in books, not in truth". I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me," I persisted – "if I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it ? "(*Foe*, 40)

The captain is shown here to expose Susan's self-deception that by sticking to a faithful representation of the story Cruso "bequeaths" her she is staying true to herself. Furthermore, Susan's truth, her authenticity, is cast in explicitly narrative terms.

> "You are mistaken!" I cried. "I do not wish to dispute, but you have forgotten much, and with every day that passes you forget more! There is no shame in forgetting: it is our nature to forget as it our nature to grow and pass away. But seen from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity. (Foe,17-18)

To her what makes a story, a story is not its abstract and generalisable meaning but the cumulation of meticulously and faithfully observed detail. The uniquely detailed story, in Susan's opinion, is a particular version of the abstract and universal form of Platonic "Truth". Thus, the individual "truth", in an echo of the metaphysical underpinnings of realism, is viewed as demonstrative proof of the universal "Truth".

> All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway, sunburnt, lonely, clad in the skins of the beasts he has slain. The truth that makes your story yours alone, …, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance …touches like these will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, (*Foe*,18)

So, the truth here is presented as a construct, the cumulative effect of an extraordinary number of realistic minutiae; in other words, a "particularization" and an "effect". The question here

is whether the truth is a matter of content or style or both. Susan seems to suggest at this stage that the truth is a matter of style, "a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance".

Susan's initial stance is clearly deluded as her belief in verisimilitude is implicitly a belief in the truth, the likeness of which she insists should and ought to be depicted in the telling of Cruso and her story. My argument throughout has been that realism's insistence on the truth (a truth that can be transparently reflected through language) is exposed for the lie it is in Coetzee's novels under study, and that this essentially deconstructive gesture is reflected in the abiding tension between the "realistic" and metafictional.

We see also how truth, and by extension the self, is commodified. At Captain Smith's suggestion Susan pretends that she was married to Cruso that she can be heiress to his story and have "disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of the island" (*Foe*, 45). She later says to Foe in an effort to have him turn her into a novelistic subject, "You have not heard a story before like mine….I am new-returned from far-off parts. I have been a castaway on a desert island. And there I as the companion of a singular man.… I am a figure of fortune, Mr Foe. I am the good fortune we are always hoping for. " (*Foe*, 48). Like Captain Smith, Susan emphasises her story's apparent uniqueness, its novelty. And it is obvious that she hopes that her story, her identity, will be validated by popular acclaim. She sells herself as "a figure of fortune" with the meanings of fortune as "luck" and "wealth or riches" equally at play; in other words, she believes that she is an object of happy happenstance and deserves to be materially rewarded. She is, at this stage, convinced that her reality, faithfully told, is worth a fortune and believes that her truth inheres exclusively in her self.

Later, in an attempt to fill up Friday's silence and get him to tell the story of how he lost his tongue, Susan — in the belief that there is a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified — shows Friday a series of pictures, "Consider these pictures, Friday," I said, "then tell me: what is the truth?" I held up the first. She nevertheless realises that the concept of truth is fundamentally linked to language, " '(Friday might not know the meaning of the word *truth*, I reasoned; nevertheless, if my picture stirred some recollection of the truth, surely a cloud would pass over his gaze; for are the eyes not rightly called the mirrors of the soul?)' " (*Foe*, 68) ' "Is this a faithful representation of the man who cut your tongue? " ' (*Foe,* 70) having asked Foe earlier, " 'Does it surprise you as much as it does me, this correspondence between things as they are and the pictures we have of them in our minds?' " (*Foe*, 65).

Later still we see that Susan believes in true identity , in "our true names, our veritable names" and cannot bring herself to admitting that the woman who claims to be her daughter, bears an identical name to hers. Names as markers of individual identity and a gesture of essentialising character in realism, are invoked in the name of "truth",

> 'Sweetly she shakes her head and begins the second time the story of the brewer George Lewes my husband. "Then your name is Lewes, if that is the name of your father," I interrupt. "It may be my name in law but it is not my name in truth," say I, "my name would not be Barton." "That is not what I mean," says she. "Then what do you mean?" say I. "I am speaking of our true names, our veritable names," says she' (*Foe*, 75 - 6)

Of course, Friday's true name is unknown — to her and to us. Her desperate efforts to have Friday restored to his origins, to search for the antecedents of his self, is based on the belief that there is an original template of the self to which all of us can be restored.

It is clear from the foregoing that the tension between created and would be self-creating tension, often conveyed through the metaphor of writing, a theme that has been more than apparent in the previous chapters, finds a more poignant expression in *Foe*. Asked whether, given its setting in eighteenth-century England, Foe was a retreat from the South African situation, Coetzee replied,

> It is not a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from questions of power. What you call "the nature and processes of fiction" may also be called the question of who writes? Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand? (Morphet 1987: 462 cited in Kossew, 161).

Given my thesis, we can add to this the question, who writes whom ? Susan Barton is eager to have her story on the island written accurately by Foe in expectation of fame and money, while at the same time she seeks to fill the gap caused by Friday's silence. Thus, we see how writing reaches a climax as a metaphor for self-creation. The fact that Susan Barton is a character within a novel, seeking to be installed as a character within a truthful story, points to her textual function as a figure created to explore the concept of subjectivity, and the broader notion of writing.

Susan Barton's need for dialogue with Friday, as opposed to the "long, issueless colloquies I conduct with him" (*Foe*, 78), dramatises her need to set herself up as a subject. The Master/Slave dialectic is useful here. Susan Barton's desire for dialogue is essentially a desire for recognition. According to the Master/Slave dialectic two combatants engage in a symbolic fight to the death, wherein one seeks to force the other to recognise him or her and thereby take up a position of mastery, the other servitude. The other cannot die as she has to give up her desire and recognise the would-be Master. By giving up her/his desire the other is recognised as the Master's Slave. The result is that there can be no real "recognition" as the Master "is

recognised by someone he does not recognise" (Kojeve, 19 cited in Dovey 23). The Master/Slave dialectic finds startlingly direct expression in Foe's account of what might as well be the true nature of the relationship between Susan and Friday,

> 'Though you say you are the ass and the Friday the rider, you may be sure that if Friday had his tongue back he would claim the contrary. We deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed him, yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish' (*Foe*, 148)

In other words, in contrast to Susan's insistence on her autonomy and self-determination, her identity depends on the other. Earlier in the novel we are told how Friday rescues Susan and carries her on his back, in what Susan calls "a backward embrace" (*Foe*, 6). Friday saves the castaway Susan as she becomes his burden. For much of the novel, Friday is dependent on Susan while at the same time he serves him, as by her own admission, she uses him as she wishes. It has been my argument throughout that Coetzee's characters in the novels under study delude themselves that they are self-determined, independent from language, culture and the other.

Susan Barton's identity is shown to be dependent, not only on the other, but it is also revealed to be a fictive construct. The complication here is that in her hyperconsciousness she reflexively identifies her "reality" with her status as a fictive construct, a novelistic subject within a realist novel. Thus, with Foe on the run from his creditors, Susan waits for him and finds her life "drearily suspended till your writing is done" (*Foe*, 63). This recalls Michael K's existentialist despair at having no one to tell him what to do after his mother's death, "now there was no one (to tell him what to do next), and the best thing seemed to be to wait" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 92). Later Susan, displaying the relative subject position, becomes aware that her identity is

dependent on a writing process, that she is a fictive construct, a story, "In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me" (*Foe*, 133). She had initially thought that the truthful telling of the island story would establish her identity, but now realises the telling of the story doesn't necessarily translate into the portrayal of her truthful ideal self. Her hyperconsciousness, here poignantly expressed, and tinged with a sense of loss — loss of a sense of authentic ("ownable") self. Barton is enslaved not just physically, but she is also entrapped within the prisonhouse of language, and by the very idea of narrative. In that sense she is not different from Friday, or any of the other of the characters for that matter. They are both slaves to language and narrative, they only differ in the depiction of their manner of entrapment.

Friday's entrapment in silence — he is tongueless and we are not told how, and at whose hands he lost his tongue — is direct and dramatic. Both Susan and Foe are alive to the significance of Friday's silence, and they relate this significance to the notion of author-ity. They are both unsettled by Friday's silence and try to fill it. At pains to impress on Captain Smith the need to have Friday saved, Susan tells him on the John Hobart, "inasmuch as Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death" (*Foe*, 39). There is a sense in which we are encouraged to see both Susan and Foe as the would-be authors of Friday.

Friday's silence resounds across the novel, from part one, through the letters Susan pen to Foe to the end in part three. It is a significant — and signifying — presence. This analysis is echoed by Susan's remarkably corporeal description of Friday's silence,

> ‘When I lived in your house I would sometimes lie awake upstairs listening to the pulse in my ears and to the silence from Friday below, a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke’ (*Foe*, 118)

She depicts Friday’s silence as having an overwhelming presence, and almost autonomous in its agency. The silence is “from Friday”, but seems to have its own independent power of agency, especially if we consider the fact that Friday is portrayed barely as a consciousness. The silence is, of course, the result of a corporeal mutilation — the sign of a bodily lack.

In its impenetrability, K’s silence represents the radical alterity of the other. We’ve seen how unassimilable the other, the Hottentots and the Vietcong, Hendrik and Klein Anna, the barbarian girl and Michael K in the previous novels are. This impenetrability is narrativised as we see Friday’s habit of scattering petals on the sea’s surface, the enigmatic marks he makes on Susan Barton’s slate, his mutilation, his submission Cruso, his and Cruso’s lack of desire for her — all resist Susan Barton’s attempt to impose meaning on them.

Susan differentiates her purposeful silence from Friday’s imposed silence. She portrays Friday as written. But here again we experience her delusion, she is as much written as Friday is. She is written chiefly by language and through narrative and, as a subject, she is not self-determined, but determined by social and cultural forces beyond her control.

> ‘Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal […] what is the truth of Friday ? You will respond: …, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday…But that is not so… [What] he is to

> the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is a child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence.' (*Foe*, 121 - 2).

Though she reflects an absolute subject position, her position is nevertheless nuanced. She recognises that as a white woman, she is not as onerously subjectivised — and brutalised — as a physically mutilated black man. This passage also serves to introduce the notion of the representable body as Barton argues that being a corporeal ("substantial") body is not enough for Friday. For as long as he is entrapped in silence he is subject to the identity imposed on him.

We have seen in *Life & Times of Michael K* how Coetzee links the physical body (as opposed to the social and psychological bodies) to representation and representability, as the Medical Officer is equally keen to feed K and to have him tell his story, "give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to go through life unnoticed" (*Life & Times of Michael K*, 192, my emphasis) the Medical Officer says to K. The notion of substance or substantiality returns in *Foe*. It is in search of substantiality, that Susan first approaches author Foe: "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of truth" (*Foe*, 51). Substance is here linked to essence, or authenticity of representation.

This tension between substantiality as physicality and substantiality as material representation speaks to the tension between the "realistic" and metafictional renditions of character. When Foe proposes to provide the substance and variety he feels her story lacks, she argues that the substance she cherishes would be annulled were the writer to be free to invent whatever

material , ‘ If I were a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed in me, surely you would say to yourself, “This is no woman but a house of words, hollow, without substance” ’(*Foe*, 130-1). She makes a distinction between a real (physical) woman and a “house of words”, between a “realistic” portrayal of character and a metafictional one. Later, like Jacobus Coetzee, Eugene Dawn, Magda, the Magistrate and the Medical Officer, Susan Barton, in her absolute subject position, deludes herself that she is self-defining, transcendent and yearning for a self-sufficient presence, “to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world” (*Foe*, 131).

I have argued in previous chapters that Coetzee insists on the self as physical facticity or as a substantial body, giving the lie to the self-fictionalising tendency of insisting that the self is much more and to expose “autonomous and transcendent selfhood” as a mere construct. Delusional in her seeming autonomy, Susan complains to Foe, “ ‘I could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body.’ ” (*Foe*, 125-6). She yearns for more than corporeality, “the true story of that year, the story as it should be seen in God’s great scheme of things” (*Foe*, 126)

As the tension between her absolute and relative subject positions intensifies, Susan’s hyperconsciousness is depicted startlingly. Finding herself in the presence of the woman who claims to be her daughter and her Amy, her nurse, at Foe’s house, she claims that they are actors who will claim that she too is an actor in their stories. She continues, tellingly, “ ‘What can I do but protest is not true. I am as familiar as you with the many, many ways in which we can deceive ourselves. But how can we live if we do not believe we know who we are, and who we have been?’ ” (*Foe*, 130). Her comments echo the gestures of recuperation we often

resort, and are accustomed, to by conventions of realism when we are reading novels in which the characters self-consciously betray their status as fabricated constructs.

Susan seems to be aware of narrative's power to create character and identity and yet she seems opposed to the cultural canon's legitimising role of grounding subjectivity and substantiality in narrative conventions. She says to Foe,

> 'I could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body. The waves picked me up and cast ashore on an island, and a year later the same waves brought a ship to rescue me, and of the true story of that year, the story as it should be seen in God's great scheme of things, I remain as ignorant as a newborn babe. That is why I cannot rest, that is why I follow you to your hiding-place like a bad penny.' (*Foe*, 125 - 6).

Apparently mortified at the thought that her identity is a cultural construction, she shifts from what is essentially a relative subject position to an absolute subject position. She deludedly asserts that she is self-sufficiently present and putting forward a mimetic view of character she insists that she is not story merely, that " 'her life did not begin in the waves ' ", she declares, " 'I choose not to tell it because no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world…. for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire'. " (*Foe* , 131). Later she seems to believe that, in apparent agreement with Foe's view, that there is no difference between characters fabricated by a writer and real beings with an independent existence.

When Foe asks her about the substantiality of the girl claiming to be her daughter, the girl from the pages of Roxana, she admits, " 'No, she is substantial, as my daughter is substantial,

and I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are substantial, we are all in the same world' " (*Foe*,152). Foe points out to her that she has left Friday who, significantly, is busy with his newly learned "writing" out of the list of the purportedly substantial. Susan, it would seem, is not talking here about corporeality; but rather, the materiality of linguistic representations. Friday is not substantial because he does not have the power to represent himself within the same signifying system.

The tension at the core of my thesis finds structural articulation in the manner Coetzee's novels end. In contrast to the neat resolution, often accompanied by climactic moment of insight, that typifies the ending of most realistic texts, the novel edges somewhat tentatively toward the end, still in tension and with no prospect for resolution,

> In the last corner […] I come to Friday. I tug his woolly hair, finger the chain about this throat. 'Friday,' I say, I try to say […] 'what is this ship?'
>
> But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.
>
> He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face […] I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in.
>
> His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (*Foe*,157)

Friday is presented here both as a slave, whose silence symbolises his oppression, and as a corporeal sign that renders words superfluous. He is the only one alive and, in a monumentally

symbolic reversal, the only one able to verbalise the island. But indeterminacy lies below the surface as we cannot be sure that the stream issues from him against or as a result of his will.

Throughout the novel we are given little idea of Friday's consciousness and subjectivity. That's why we might be tempted to view him as a symbol, a plenum of immanent meaning, rather than a character, a free agent with crucial signifying powers, in the words of Jonathan Culler who argues that the subject is defined in relation to consciousness, "The 'I' [is that] which thinks, perceives and feels" (161). I want to argue that Friday is the text's decentering unconscious. Susan says to Foe "I told you of my conviction that, if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly hold its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (*Foe*, 117). And in a spatial figuring forth of the Unconscious, Friday is made to live in Foe's basement from which his silence comes as a black smoke that stifles and overwhelms Susan.

It is in light of this analysis of Friday as the decentering unconscious (as opposed to a centering consciousness through which the story is focalised) of the novel that we can see the end as the return of the repressed, the undoing and reinscription of the founding hierarchy Conscious/Unconscious, and thus explain the extraordinary expressive power Friday exhibits in the end. Foe says, "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (*Foe*, 141). But this is not the return of a hidden reality, but a reconstitution of a repressed voice, with the evoked palpability of Friday's voice, "It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth." (*Foe*, 157), representing a reconstruction of the text's structural repression, Friday's silence, " 'a silence that rose up the

stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke' " (*Foe*, 118). Thus Friday succeeds where Susan has failed. He expresses the island, not with words, but sound. Like the black smoke that was Friday's silence, the sounds "flows up through his body" this time, not upon Susan, but upon the unnamed narrator.

With its focus on writing as such, *Foe* brings my thesis's themes into focus, the elusive search for the true self, the self-created/created tension, the foregrounding of the body in representation and, of course, the consequent tension between the "realistic" and the metafictional renditions of character. Susan Barton's resultant hyperconsciousness is a climactic rendition of the crisis of identity that all of Coetzee's protagonists in the novels under study, suffer, presenting an unbridgeable divergence between their imagined "reality" and their inescapable fictive status, their absolute and relative subject positions.

Chapter Six - *Conclusion*

We are now, at the end, able to ask the question at the core of this study with some precision: What happens when fictional characters are made to mis-see themselves as self-determined (absolute subject position), and when they are made to self-reflexively see themselves as produced by forces beyond themselves (relative subject position)? This question is discussed in terms of Antony Easthope's account of the absolute and relative subject positions. The absolute subject position speaks to the character's assumed autonomy, its independence, its self-assertion, its transcendence, its presence to itself. Thus most of Coetzee's characters are shown to be self-presenting, initially asserting themselves as autonomous. It is only later that they are made to self-reflexively suspect that they as a matter of necessity inhabit the relative subject position, as they begin to see themselves as produced by forces beyond themselves. This realisation coincides with a psychological dis-ease, and dis-ease of the body. We later see how in the last three novels, the body is tied to representability. I wish to show in my conclusion that the themes of would-be self-authoring characters, authenticity, bodily breakdown invasion as well as extreme psychological condition find the most forceful and climactic expression in the fifth and last novel, *Foe*.

What we see in Coetzee is that the characters are, above all, produced by narrative discourse and it is squarely within narrative that they are positioned as subjects. In "The Vietnam Project", the first part of *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country* and in *Waiting for the Barbarians* we find the use of the first-person present tense as Eugene Dawn, Magda and the Magistrate, in an act of self-assertion, present themselves in the present tense. But we see how this characters' attempts to portray themselves as self-determining subjects come to naught. In *The Life & Times of Michael K* we experience

the use of free indirect speech which complicates the issue of who is speaking in the novel. And finally, in *Foe* Susan Barton insists on having her story told in a manner that respects her supposed authenticity.

Keeping within the narrative discourse, the major protagonists in four of the five novels under study are presented as writers of some sort or another. Michael K is, by crucial exception, not a writer but, significantly, he is "written" about within the story itself as the Medical Officer meditates on his elusiveness as a character. Eugene Dawn is a mythographer who is supervised by a man called "Coetzee" to write a strategy to effect the cultural capture of the Vietcong. Jacobus Coetzee is a chronicler of history, an explorer who is also a writer. Significantly, Dawn's psychological breakdown in the latter part of the text is signalled through a writer's block. Similarly, the Magistrate, just before he embarks on a journey to the barbarians is uncertain as to what form the document he wants to write should take,

> What the second document is to be I do not yet know. A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years in the frontier? All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper…On the third day I surrender, put the paper back in the drawer, and make preparations to leave. (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 58)

As Teresa Dovey demonstrates in *The Novels of JM Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), *Waiting for the Barbarians*' narrative mode — first-person present tense throughout, punctuated with moments of speechlessness, and an unusual use of deictics — is instrumental in the deconstruction of the Magistrate's seemingly transcendent and self-present subjectivity.

One of my central claims has been that the well-wrought and persistent tension between the absolute subject position (self-determined) and the relative subject position (determined) leads to the display of an extreme psychological condition. In other words, the tension between

absolute and relative subject positions leads to ontological dis-ease. This dis-ease also manifests in a physical manner. The protagonists are often shown to be aware of both their being written and read. Eugene Dawn articulates this best, as he self-reflexively expresses the pit-falls of (self) diagnosis,

> Toward these doctors whose task it is, with the scantiest of documentation to explicate me, I feel nothing but sympathy. I do my best to help them; but I do not forget that I am a patient, for whom it is presumptuous to take too active a part in the diagnosis of his condition. (*Dusklands*, 47)

We often find how Coetzee's characters in the novels under study are shown to be presumptuous patients who are all too aware of their condition. Thus we find Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* constantly commenting on her (perceived?) incompleteness, "I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 9); "I am a hole crying out to be hole" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 41).

Likewise, the Magistrate's climactic confession can be seen as an instance of self-psychoanalysis,

> For I was not, as I linked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 135)

In his absolute subject position, he saw himself as embodying the truth; disabused of his pretence to absolute subjectivity, he confesses to his complicity with Empire. He is confronted with the undeniable culpable embeddedness within a corrupt regime, as he comes face to face with his relative subject position. And later his self-diagnosis clinically drives a wedge between the physical and the metaphysical, "If I was the object of an injustice, when they locked me in

here, I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy" (*Waiting for the Barbarians,* 85).

Thus we see from the above passage how the body is insisted upon as the locus of the self. Unlike Beckett whose " 'characters' have renounced their concern with embodied life…in favour of solipsism" (Hayes, 35), Coetzee eagerly embraces his characters' embodied lives. Physical by definition, bounded by space and living inevitably among other bodied lives, an embodied life necessarily inhabits relative subject position. The metaphysical, on the other hand, arrogates to itself the absolute subject position, it deigns to stay above the mundane fray of physical (and visceral) life. Part of my argument is that Coetzee keeps the tension between the absolute and the relative subject positions in play by, firstly, problematising unitary and transcendental account of identity while simultaneously insisting on the visceral facticity of the physical.

Illustrative of this focus on the physical we see in "The Vietnam Project", the first part of *Dusklands,* how Eugene Dawn feels invaded by the "hideous mongol boy", and at the peak of his mental breakdown he stabs his child, to keep him away from his mother; the portentous eruption on Jacobus Coetzee's buttock marks his narcissism and dramatises his conflictedness; In *In the Heart of the Country* speaks of his (imagined) rape by Hendrick in unsettlingly physical terms,

> A body lies on top of a body pushing and pushing, trying to find a way in, motion everywhere. But what does this body want inside me? What is this man trying to find in me ? Will he try again as he wakes up? What deeper invasion and possession plot in his sleep? That one day all his bony frame shall lie packed inside me, his skull inside

> my skull, his limbs along my limbs, the rest of him crammed inside my belly? What will he leave me of myself ? (*In the Heart of the Country*,107)

The passage starts off urgently, unbridled desire propelled into demand, "pushing and pushing…motion everywhere". It then slows down into a series of questions, "this body" in the first question becomes the more specific "this man" of the second question, and the proxemics of the scene change as we are made to suspect that the man is no longer physically there as he plots "in his sleep" some distance away from the fantasised scene. At the end of the passage, we come full circle as the immediacy and urgency of bodily invasion becomes the unsettling shock of total and surreal physical capture, "skull inside my skull, his limbs along my limbs…".

The above passage is remarkable in how poignantly it stages identity as physical facticity and functionality. The irony is, the rape (imagined or not) somewhat loses its moral outrage, as we are made to confront its violence as a textual set piece. The subject is positioned forcibly within a space and that space is forcefully invaded. We are confronted with a relative subjectivity, and impelled to ponder the impossibility of an absolute subject position.

The body — in the form of the barbarian girl's body — is foregrounded to different effect in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The girl's body becomes a text on which the torturers write marks of guilt, and from which the Magistrate seeks to read his redemption, possibly, and any other meaning that the body can yield. Thus we see the barbarian girl dissolve into the broader text: *turned into a text* , to be read and analysed,

> Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case (I am stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but

> which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough. Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (*Waiting for the Barbarians,* 64)

This textualisation of character is tied, in *Waiting for the Barbarians,* with identity: the barbarian girl, as the other, is the source of identity for the Magistrate. His would-be absolute subject position is rendered relative as he has to confront the need for mutual independence, that his self relies on recognition by the other.

As Coetzee's writing becomes more and more focused on writing, we see how in *The Life & Times of Michael K,* Michael K's body, as the locus of meaning, is associated with representability: the Medical Officer urges Michael K to yield his meaning and he goes on a hunger strike, demanding to be fed food of his choosing, as a way of insisting on being spoken and written about on his own terms.

It is in *Foe* that the body asserts itself most resoundingly. Friday, the figure of radical alterity in the text, has had his tongue mutilated. He is mute. As I have noted elsewhere in the study Friday's silence is rendered palpably, in virtually physical terms. It is a presence in the form of an absence. In response to a question by David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee says,

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

Coetzee emphasises the body's facticity as the locus — and delimitation — of the self. The body is the ultimate antidote to the "endless discourse of character, the self reading the self in all infinity" which Eugene Dawn identifies as his "true ideal" (*Dusklands,* 38). My argument

is that the body, bound in and by space and living among other embodied lives, always necessarily inhabits the relative subject position. And, as we have often seen in the study, the absolute subject position in its metaphysical pretensions to transcendent autonomy, is in tension with the relative subject positions and this tension plays out in extreme psychological conditions which often manifest in the body.

It is in the character of Susan Barton that we find a culmination of many of the symptoms we have noted in the other characters: she is hyperconscious of her being written; she, in her absolute subject position tries to be written on her own terms; she is obsessed with finding an authorial cure for Friday's silence; and her need to be substantiated is tied to the idea of the representable body (in the end the text provides a powerful image of Friday's body as potent representation). It is thus fitting that in *Foe* the tension between absolute and the relative subject position coincides with Susan Barton's hyperconsciousness, her awareness of her awareness that she is a fictive construct whose ultimate 'reality' depends on how she/it is read.

Given that a great deal of the novel is spent on the struggle over the narrative staged between Foe and Susan Barton, it is significant that the story of the island is told by Friday, sole survivor among a heap of dead bodies. We have seen in JM Coetzee's words I have cited earlier in this chapter that Friday's body is the key to the text's closure. When the unnamed narrator in the second sequence of the text's ending, descends into the wreck s/he finds the bodies of Susan Barton and the captain's ship. It's only later that the narrator finds Friday. It is here that there is unity between body and meaning as Friday finds his voice.

To sum up, the notion of character as patient to be diagnosed pre-empts a symptomatic reading that seeks to identify the aetiology and symptoms of a character's psychological dis-ease, the

breakdown of the character's self-concept which often coincides with a manifestation of a physical breakdown. What is necessarily implicated in this diagnostic exercise is a framework within we determine what it means to be at ease or di-ease(d).

Bibliography

Coetzee, J.M. *Dusklands.* Ravan Press, 1974; London: Secker & Warburg, 1982: New York: Viking 1985

_____*Foe*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1986; Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986; New York: Viking, 1987.

_____*In the Heart of the Country.* (South African edition). Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978.

_____*Life & Times of Michael K.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1983; Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983; New York: Viking, 1984.

_____*Waiting for the Barbarians.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1980; New York: Viking, 1980; Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981.

Reference Texts

Attwell, David. *JM Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing.* Berkeley and Los Aneles: University of California Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 199

Davis, Lennard J. *Resisting Novels: Ideology & Fiction.* New York and London: Methuen, 1987

Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories.* Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1988.

Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An introduction.* Oxford, 1983

Haluiska, Jan Charles, *Master and slave in the first four novels of J.M. Coetzee*, The University of Tennessee, 1987 copyright 1987 by Haluska, Jan Charles. All rights reserved.

Harland, Richard, *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism*. London and New York, 1987

Head, Dominic, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee.* Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009

Kannemeyer. JC. *JM Coetzee: A Life in Writing* Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2012

Muecke, D.C. *Irony and the Ironic.* London and New York, 1970

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.* London and New York, 1983

Salusinszky, Imre. *Criticism in Society*. New York and London: Methuen, 1987

____*White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Zimbler, J. *JM Coetzee and the Politics of Style*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014

Dovey, Teresa. "Allegory vs. Allegory: The Divorce of Different Modes of Allegorical Perception in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians.*" *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Lieratuurwetenskap* 4, no.2 (June 1988): 133 – 43

_____*Doubling the Point: J.M. Coetzee, Essays and Interviews.* Edited by David Attwell. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992

_____ "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" *Diacritics* 2, no. 2 (2002)

Head, Dominic *J.M. Coetzee.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* London: Routledge, 1988.

Jolly, Rosemary Jane. *Colonisation, Violence, and Narrative in White South African Writing: Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J.M. Coetzee.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986.

Kossew, Sue. *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1998.

____*Pen and Power: A Post-colonial Reading J.M. Coetzee and André Brink.* Amsterdam: Rodopi 1996.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999

_____ "*Waiting for the Barbarians:* Allegories of Allegories". In Huggan and Watson, *Critical Perspectives,* 138 -51