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The Art of Deferral: Ethics and the Other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee

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2021

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Abstract

A literary text, as a work of art, presents itself as an attempt to convey a story based on an author's subjective representation of things and events. It is regarded as a vehicle to arrive at meanings or elicit messages.

This thesis, however, embarks on a deconstructive reading of J. M. Coetzee's texts that seeks to pursue a transgressive vision of the expectation of a literary text by highlighting the self-cancelling nature of Coetzee's literary texts. Drawing on both cognitive theory and Levinasian ethics, this thesis develops the concept of a deferral of meaning that brings the cognitive and the ethical together in the demesne of imaginative art.

Applying some key concepts of Levinasian ethics together with theories of cognitive science, it aims at demonstrating how such an approach effectively destabilises the rigid framework that the relationship between text-meaning, text-reader, text-author and accordingly self-Other, human-animal and body-mind has been built on.

The thesis also challenges conventional perspectives on the concepts of certainty, absolute truth, and closure by reconceptualizing the concepts of uncertainty, the Other, and infinity.

Approaching Coetzee's writing through a framework of Levinasian ethics and contemporary cognitive theory, the thesis explores the capacity of J. M. Coetzee's literary texts in eluding hermeneutics by rejecting the notions of absolute meaning and finite understanding.

Finally, the thesis, in cancelling the concepts of certainty and

absolute meaning, and in demonstrating Coetzee's metareflective performance of such cancellation, seeks a redress for the failed recognition of the possibility of the encounter with the literary text as an encounter with the Other, the infinite.

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Kardeşim İmran'a ve aileme

For my sister İmran and family

Introduction

"The work of art embodies a drama of the intelligence but it proves this only indirectly" (Camus 93).

This study deals with the problematic relationship between literature and ethics by focussing on philosophical and literary representations of intersubjectivity: the complicated relationship of the self and the Other. This focus is intended to open out into a comprehensive examination of the relationship between literature and ethics, not only as addressed in recent literary theory, but also and importantly, through an examination of the writing of J.M Coetzee.

I will examine ongoing debates around the responsibility, role and function of literature with regards to ethics and as addressed by various related fields and disciplines that connect with literary studies, such as cognitive theory and phenomenology.

I am particularly interested in examining relations between reader and text and to raise the question whether there might be ways of reconceiving reception theory that draw on understanding of relations and processes of intersubjectivity as understood within existential philosophies as those between self and Other. The text is not an 'other' in the sense of a human presence, but it mediates presence in complex ways; and the earliest investigations of reading as an experience were developed in the work of the phenomenologist Roman

Ingarden,[1] one of the major aestheticians, who worked closely with Edmund Husserl, a founding figure in phenomenology.

Literature is seen to be an indispensable part of ethics and vice versa. Throughout, this thesis draws particularly on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas who, although consistently wary concerning the role of the aesthetic in ethical thinking, engages the question of the Other in order to interrogate engagements with Otherness in ways that are reciprocally illuminated when set side by side with the literary works of J. M. Coetzee.

The self-Other Relationship

"Do the particular beings yield their truth in a Whole in which their exteriority vanishes? Or, on the contrary, is the ultimate event of being enacted in the outburst of this exteriority?" (26) asks Emmanuel Levinas in his seminal work *Totality and Infinity* [1961]. Levinas's concern here is the way in which the self-Other relationship has been largely conceived as the domination of the self over the Other:

> The Other is acknowledged only in order to be suppressed or possessed; as in the workings of the Hegelian dialectic, the characteristic gesture of philosophy is to acknowledge the Other in order to incorporate it within the expanding circles of the Same. The totality of Being is flawless and all-encompassing; because it incorporates alterity within the empire of sameness, the Other is only other in a restricted sense. Totality has no outside, the subject receives nothing, learns nothing, that it does not or cannot possess or know. (C. Davis 40)

[1] Regarded as the creator of phenomenological aesthetics and a pupil of Karl Jaspers, Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art*— first published in Germany in 1931— has been an instrumental work not only in literary theory but also in aesthetics. This seminal text approaches the work of art as entangled with the positionality of the reader and the literary 'world' as an emergent property of the encounter between reader and work. Ingarden's work became the starting point for both reader response and reception theory in the 1980s.

The point stressed is the 'all-encompassing' attitude of the Hegelian dialectic. In reference to the concept of recognition introduced by G.W.F. Hegel, this approach places the Other in a precarious situation. The expectation of being recognized carries the risk of frustration if that recognition is not granted. The expectation of being recognized may also involve coercion or force that seeks to fit the Other into the desired shape of the widely accepted.

In this context, for a comprehensive understanding of this relationship, it is beneficial to explore how the concept of groundlessness, rooted in Buddhist teachings and discussed in the influential work *The Embodied Mind* [1991], addresses how "The possibility for compassionate concern for others, which is present in all humans, is usually mixed with the sense of ego and so becomes confused with the need to satisfy one's own cravings for recognition and self-evaluation" (Varela et al. 247). It follows that "The spontaneous compassion that arises when one is not caught in the habitual patterns—when one is not performing volitional actions out of karmic cause and effect—is not done with a sense of need for feedback from its recipient" (247). It becomes obvious that it is "the anxiety about feedback—the response of the other—that causes us tension and inhibition in our action" (247). As clearly evident from this, the "anxiety about feedback" and the need to be recognised by the Other brings us to a point that puts the concept of mutual recognition in question as its working can generate violence.

In this sense, minorities are positioned in situations of jeopardy through invalidation of qualities which resist absorption into the consensual or the majority view. In effect, therefore, it is the idea of recognition that might also

bring about expectations that can turn into the burden of forcible conformism to the widely recognized and accepted.

In *Boyhood*, Coetzee's semi-autobiographical account of his childhood in South Africa during the apartheid era, for example, John faces a situation that echoes the pressures of conformity. When his teacher questions him about his religious beliefs, he is overwhelmed by the weight of the moment. He does not want to be seen as an outsider, so he tries to ascertain the 'right' answer. Faced with the query, "What is your religion?", John hesitates, unsure of the options available and feeling the pressure. His teacher probes further: "'Are you a Christian, Roman Catholic, or a Jew?'" He does not know what to say. He says 'Roman Catholic,'" (18-19).

In Hegelian philosophy, a key theme is the dynamic and sometimes problematic relationship between the self and the Other. This relationship is tied to his concept of the 'Spirit.' Specifically, Hegel suggests a process of 'self overcoming,' where the individual self transcends its distinctiveness from the Other to merge with the universal Spirit. Hegel establishes a concept of an "I" that is universal. He claims, "If we consider mind more closely, we find that its primary and simplest determination is the 'I'. The 'I' is something perfectly simple, universal. When we say 'I', we mean, to be sure, an individual; but since everyone is 'I', when we say 'I', we only say something quite universal. The universality of the 'I' enables it to abstract from everything, even from its life" (*Philosophy of Mind* 12). However, for Levinas, the relationship is not founded on the notion of an identical and universal 'I'. Instead, it's based on welcoming the Other. This is a "mode of thought that cannot be reduced to an

act of knowing in which truths are constituted—in which this or that thing, showing itself within the consciousness of an I, presents or maintains its being in the objectivity or exteriority of appearance, borne by the impassive identity of this I" (Levinas, *Outside* 1). In other words, Levinas critiques traditional epistemological frameworks that center the subject as a detached observer, reducing the world and others to objects of knowledge. Instead, he proposes a relational ethics where the Other is encountered as irreducibly different, transcending objectification and challenging the primacy of the self. This shift from knowing to welcoming emphasizes responsibility over comprehension, grounding ethical engagement in the vulnerability and singularity of the Other's presence.

For Hegel, there are self-conscious 'I's and in actuality they are identical. The confrontation that takes place between the 'I' and the Other ends up with the 'I' realizing the Other as identical with her/himself, thus forming a universal self-consciousness. He goes on to exemplify the self-Other relationship with his widely known master-slave dialectic. He argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] that the confrontation of the various selves includes the risking of one's life and which sets up the working of 'being-for-self':

> …the relation of the two self–conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life–and–death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self–consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being–for–self*. (113-114; italics in original)

In this passage, Hegel highlights the inherently conflictual nature of self-consciousness, which emerges not in isolation but through a struggle for recognition. This 'life-and-death struggle' is essential for self-conscious individuals to assert their autonomy and affirm their sense of self as more than mere biological existence. By risking life, they demonstrate that their essence transcends the immediacy of life and asserts itself as pure "being-for-self," an existence defined by self-determination rather than passive absorption into the continuity of life. However, this struggle also reveals the interdependence of the selves—each must seek recognition from the other to solidify their own identity, making the process both antagonistic and relational. Through this dialectical encounter, self-consciousness is transformed, setting the stage for the master-slave dynamic and the unfolding of Spirit in subsequent stages of Hegel's philosophy. The proposed relation founded in hostility becomes the basic idea from which Sartre originates his idea of the 'look' as "With the appearance of the Other's look I experience the revelation of my being-as-object" (375).

Sartre asserts that the look is an objectifying one as in Marjorie Grene's expression: "Fear, too, is my being as I live in the Other's look, as the look exposes me to his power. He has not yet torn me from myself, but on principle he can, through humiliation or even death. Thus in either shame or fear the Other is the permanent possibility of my destruction" ("Sartre and the Other" 27). For Sartre, the gaze of the Other reduces the self to an object, stripping it of autonomy and exposing it to the Other's power to judge or harm. As Grene notes, this creates a constant vulnerability, where the Other's presence threatens the self's stability through emotions like shame or fear.

Sartre, while acknowledging the potential danger the Other poses, differs from Hegel in suggesting that the Other is essential for providing perspectives about myself that I cannot attain on my own. Thus, the Other's presence takes on a less hostile dimension, as it reveals aspects of myself that lie beyond my own grasp. Hence Sartre, in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* [1943], asserts that "I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am" (312). Sartre emphasizes the self's dependency on the Other to gain a complete understanding of oneself.

Accordingly, as explained by Irene McMullin, "I always understand myself to be these things by way of the third- person assessments that are made possible by the encounter with perspectives other than my own. Thus my identity is to a certain extent *public*—aspects of who I am are available to me only through the eyes of those who share the world with me" (103; italics in original). This highlights Sartre's claim that self-knowledge is inherently relational, shaped not only by introspection but also by the judgments and perspectives of others within a shared social reality.

However, while Sartre emphasizes the role of the Other in shaping the self through objectification and external perspectives, Levinas offers a contrasting view. In his essay "Apropos Buber: Some Notes," Levinas contends, "The statement that others do not appear to me as objects does not just mean that I do not take the other person as a thing under my power, a 'something'" (40). He further argues, "It also asserts that the very relation originally established between myself and others, between myself and someone, cannot properly be said to reside in an act of knowledge that, as such,

is seizure and comprehension, the besiegment of objects" (Outside 40). For Levinas, the relationship with the Other transcends knowledge and objectification, prioritizing an ethical encounter rooted in openness and responsibility rather than the mutual shaping of identities.

By contrast, Hegel's ideas focus on the concept of a universal 'I' identical with the Other and they arrive at the assumption that mutual recognition is of vital importance for acquiring self-consciousness. In the realm of dialectics, especially as framed by Hegel, mutual recognition is a crucial process through which consciousness evolves and self-consciousness is realized. It signifies that the development of an individual's identity and self-awareness is deeply intertwined with others, leading to the understanding that one's freedom and self-realization are co-dependent on the freedom and self-realization of others.

Based on this assumption, however, two dangers present themselves. Firstly, the self and Other are considered dependent on each other for acquiring a full self-consciousness, but the danger is that the Other is turned merely into the means for becoming part of the Spirit or Geist. Hence, this presupposition is in conflict with Levinas's perspective that resists the idea of the Other turning into an aspect of the same as a mode of disregard for the otherness of the Other.

Levinas, quoting Husserl, "it [each soul] has empathy experiences, experiencing consciousness of others . ." asserts that "In the mood of empathy, which Husserl understands as experience...[he] faithful to the history of our philosophy, converts the welcoming of others into an experience of others, that is, he grants himself the right to reduce the unmotivated nature [gratiuite] of the relation-to- others to know which that will be surveyed by reflection" (Outside

37). Levinas critiques this view by arguing that Husserl reduces the ethical encounter with the Other to an object of knowledge, thereby neglecting the Other's irreducible difference.

Against Hegel, Sartre and Hussars, Levinas's approach to the relationship between the self and Other does not have its origins in hostility and is not established as a symmetrical reciprocity. Levinas's standpoint is instead to be associated with the impenetrability of the Other as according to him, our encounter with the Other is always ethical, because it involves the self's "non-transferable responsibility, as if my neighbor called me urgently and called none other than myself, as if I were the only one concerned" (*Outside* 44). Unlike Hegel's dialectical reciprocity or Sartre's objectifying gaze, Levinas emphasizes the irreducible alterity of the Other, where the self's responsibility to the Other cannot be negotiated or exchanged.

In Hegel's view, the Other has no individuality and, his idea much engaged with the Spirit and the universality of the 'I', he claims in *Philosophy of Mind* how:

> Absolute mind recognises itself as positing being itself, as itself producing its Other, nature and finite mind, so that this Other loses all semblance of independence in face of mind, ceases altogether to be a limitation for mind and appears only as a means by which mind attains to absolute being-for-self, to the absolute unity of its being-in-itself and its being-for-itself, of its concept and its actuality. (19-20)

That approach positions the Other as a defining component in reaching absolute truth or knowledge. However, Levinas asks "Is not the philosophy of dialogue precisely—by reference to that which, outside all ontology, otherwise, but just as rigorously, has the value of source of meaning— the affirmation that

it is impossible to encompass within a theory the Meeting with the others as if it were an experience whose meaning reflection could recover?" (*Outside* 39). Unlike Hegel and Sartre, who integrate the Other into a dialectical process or as a potential threat to self-identity, Levinas emphasizes the impossibility of fully grasping the encounter with the Other through theory, framing it as an ethical event beyond intellectual comprehension. They also argue, however, that the self is in need of being recognized by the Other in order to reach a satisfactory level of self-realization.

The main difference between their view and Levinas's is that Levinas posits the Other in a quite different context where the Other is completely abstracted from the hostile assumptions and is ascribed a presence not based on this kind of symmetrical relationship. Instead, the Other is defined in terms of a being for which the self is responsible. Besides, as Robert Eaglestone highlights in his influential work *Ethical Criticism*, "Levinas' ethics is not one set of guiding principles, laws or rules but rather the 'ethics of ethics', the ethical understanding which underlies any principles, rules or laws" (7). Put differently, it is an approach or attitude that shapes all types of relationships the self can have with the Other.

It is important to note that, based on his distinct approach to the self-Other relationship, Levinas is considered one of the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century as he played a pivotal role in the postmodern philosophy's ethical turn. He has been defined as "'the greatest moral philosopher of the twentieth century' and his philosophy hailed as a way to uncover 'an ethical demand in the postmodern'" (Eaglestone, *Ethical* 5). Although his ideas are

often viewed as having a complex relationship with postmodernity, his insights into the relationship between the self and the Other, as well as concepts he introduced like ‘face-to-face’ and ‘trace’, have influenced numerous thinkers.[2]

Returning to the issue of self-realization, the assumption that seeking recognition from the Other is a necessary element in forming one’s identity places the self in a dependent situation. At the same time, it creates an expectation on the part of the self. This expectation of being recognized puts the Other into danger as it is only regarded as an instrument and, for the expectation to be fulfilled, the self may have to display a hostile attitude towards the Other so as to attain its goal.

However, Levinas argues that true ethical responsibility involves a recognition of the alterity of the Other that cannot be assimilated or reduced to the self. This emphasis on the irreducible otherness of the Other was a powerful challenge to many of the core assumptions of modernity, like universal truth or rationality, which tended to treat individuals as interchangeable and reducible to their component parts. As he makes it clear when he highlights that “Reasonable meanings that Reason does not know!” (*Outside* 39), he was deeply critical of many aspects of modernity, particularly its emphasis on rationality, autonomy, and individualism. In his view, as discussed throughout this study, these values lead to a kind of moral blindness in which the Other is reduced to an object of knowledge or power, rather than being recognized as a unique and irreplaceable individual.

However, contrary to Levinas’s concept of asymmetry, mutual

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[2] The impact of his work on thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Jean-François Lyotard and Luce Irigaray, has been substantial and profound.

recognition can also be understood as the foundational idea behind the misconception that truth is what the majority believes or proposes. This, I suggest, bears similarities with the model of perception of human beings. Differing from the widely accepted assumption[3] that our brains process sensory inputs to form a meaningful representation of the outer world as it is, our brains, as suggested by Anil Seth, are prediction machines, “and that what we see, hear, and feel is nothing more than the brain’s ‘best guess’ of the causes of its sensory inputs” (*Being You* 76). This suggests that perception is not a passive reception of reality but an active process shaped by the brain’s anticipatory models, highlighting the mind’s role in constructing rather than simply observing the world.

He concludes that “the contents of consciousness are a kind of waking dream – a controlled hallucination – that is both more than and less than whatever the real world really is” (76). This view reinforces the idea that reality is out of reach and destabilises the sense of absolute truth as “It is just that when we agree about our hallucinations, that’s what we call reality” (87). This suggests that what we perceive as reality is not an objective truth but a shared, negotiated experience shaped by individual brains, challenging the notion of an external, unchangeable world.

For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the Other is a primary ethical experience. He emphasizes the radical alterity (otherness) of the Other, which always escapes our grasp and resists being subsumed under categories. I

[3] Many neuroscientists still assume that perception is a ‘bottom-up’ feature detection. For more on this see Seth’s *Being You* (77). However, Seth argues that “We never experience sensory signals themselves, we only ever experience interpretations of them” (*Being You* 83).

believe that this notion of otherness is somewhat mirrored in the "controlled hallucination" perspective of perception. Here, what we perceive is not a direct representation of the world but a constructed interpretation by our brain based on prior knowledge and current sensory input. The "real" outside world remains somewhat elusive and different from our constructed perception, similar to Levinas's unreachable Other.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of perception as "controlled hallucination" arises from the predictive processing framework in cognitive science. This framework posits that our brains constantly make predictions about the world and then adjust these predictions based on sensory feedback. These predictions are based on our past experiences and learned models of the world. In a way, Levinas's ethical thought also wrestles with our expectations and assumptions about the Other. He warns against reducing the Other to our pre-existing categories and stresses the idea that the Other always surprises us, calling into question our assumptions and demanding a response. He asserts that "Beyond the objective, which is always already correlative to a prior 'aim' and intention to discover—behold an other that reveals itself, but that does so precisely in surprising the intentions of subjective thought and eluding the form of the look, totalitarian as presence—eluding the transcendental synthesis" (*Alterity* 4).

The question then, is: whose reality is considered more "real" if reality itself is out of reach? The corollary is that the self can—or will—assert power to impose their truth on the Other.

This view is key to understanding the vexing aspect of mutual recognition. Moreover, it will help undermine the established profile of the

normative self-Other relationship by rendering the notion of mutual recognition obsolete. Making a mutual recognition essential for the self to become what s/he is, is in contradiction with Levinas's idea of asymmetrical reciprocity as for Levinas, the Other always transcends our categories and conceptual frameworks.

Levinas indeed claims that the self becomes aware of not being alone upon encountering the Other. Contrary to seeking recognition from the Other, the self instead feels a responsibility towards the Other. The relationship between the self and the Other can be regarded therefore in terms of gift giving as in Derrida's expression: "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter gift or debt" (*Given Time* 12). This highlights the asymmetry in the ethical relationship Levinas describes, where the self's responsibility to the Other is not contingent on any expectation of return, aligning with Derrida's notion of a pure gift that cannot be reciprocated.

Hence, when the expectation is sublated, the idea of unconditionality occurs and it is arguable that a site of shaping—of a peaceful relationship—may occur between the self and the Other. This is clearly expressed by Levinas as such: "The other is not the negation of the same, as Hegel would like to say. The fundamental fact of the ontological scission into same and other is a non-allergic relation of the same with the other" (Totality and Infinity 305). In this view, the relationship between the self and the Other is not one of opposition or conflict, but rather one of openness and responsibility, where the self is called to welcome the Other without the expectation of reciprocation or negation.

Otherwise the one receiving the gift is obliged by a burden of returning a gift which can be defined as meeting the expectation of the self. This dynamic however, assumes that the self and the Other share a common foundation, which, worth emphasizing, is their bodily existence. In this way, it can be suggested, prioritizing bodily existence as the fundamental condition, must include animals as well as humans. Animals, then, are also to be considered as that Other who needs to be recognized.

This idea endows animals with a safeguard given that almost all major philosophical traditions have regarded reason as essential for recognition, but have also deprived animals of reason, rendering them as things that are objectified. As living creatures of flesh and bone and endowed with the capacity for feeling pain[4], however, animals evidently manifest how they are more than ordinary objects.[5]

Though Levinas's primary focus throughout his works was on the ethical relationship between human beings, Simon Critchley, in his seminal work *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, highlights the aspect that "The ethical self is an embodied being of flesh and blood, a being who is capable of hunger, who eats and enjoys eating" (179). It is worth noting that post-Levinasian thinkers, like Simon Critchley, influenced by his work, have taken his ideas and explored their implications for animal ethics in more depth, sometimes arguing for a more inclusive reading of the Other that would

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[4] Peter Singer argues that regardless of their lack of a human like capacity of consciousness "there are no good reasons, scientific or philosophical, for denying that animals feel pain" (*Animal Liberation* 15).

[5] J. M. Coetzee's engagement with the question of the animal is apparent in much of his writing. See *The Lives of Animals* (1999) where he draws attention to metaphysical and ethical concerns about animal rights through fiction.

extend ethical considerations to non-human animals. This can be relevant to Anil Seth's argument. So, in light of Seth's arguments in cognitive science, which will be discussed subsequently, I contend that the concept of the Levinasian Other can be extended to animals as embodied beings capable of hunger and susceptible to vulnerability. At this stage, I believe that the question of the animal prompts us to consider the critical aspects with regards to reason and consciousness.

Anil Seth, in his seminal work *Being You* (2021), provides a new angle to the framework set by the Cartesian perspective. He argues that there is a need to critically inquire into the assumption of relating consciousness with intelligence. As he explains that "…the tendency to conflate consciousness with intelligence traces to a pernicious anthropocentrism by which we over-interpret the world through the distorting lenses of our own values and experiences" (249) Tellingly, Seth asserts that "*We* are conscious, *we* are intelligent, and we are so species-proud of our self-declared intelligence that we assume that intelligence is inextricably linked with our conscious status and vice versa" (249; italics in original). According to his account consciousness is rather related with a "biological drive to stay alive" (190) and our living bodies. In this respect, Seth offers a novel way to reconsider human beings relationship with animals as in his view "The essence of selfhood is neither a rational mind nor an immaterial soul", but "a deeply embodied biological process, a process that underpins the simple feeling of being alive (6). This perspective aligns with Critchley's argument regarding sentient beings, in which he states that "...ethics is lived as a

corporeal obligation to the Other, an obligation whose form is sensibility" (*The Ethics* 180). He goes on explaining, "If the condition of possibility for ethical obligation is sensibility towards the face of the Other, then the purview of the word Autrui can be extended to all sentient beings" (181). This extension broadens the scope of ethical responsibility beyond humans, suggesting that the capacity to feel and suffer establishes a moral claim on us, irrespective of the species.

This emphasizes an ethical responsibility that transcends the need for mutual recognition. Within the conventional framework, however, one might assume that if one is not recognized by another, that ends one's existence or decreases its value as a living being. Yet, this perspective could be reversed to suggest that seeking recognition is what makes one dependent and expectant.

While it is true that one might not achieve a complete understanding of oneself, even with the Other's assistance, this understanding remains partial. The Other, being a unique entity, brings their own perspectives and frames of perception to the identification of the self. This incompleteness resonates with Sartre's notion of striving for perfection—a condition he describes as a "useless passion" (636)—as it reflects the human being's mode of "perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself which is never given" (113).

Ultimately, what is being suggested is that, for the self, the desire to have a complete understanding of her/himself appears to be ever out of reach. Furthermore, one could argue that the self often uses her/his perspective as the ultimate tool to define, judge, and in some way comprehend the Other. The troubling aspect with regards to this approach is that it can have the potential to

carry reductive and aggressive assumptions about the Other.

More pertinently in this context, I argue that highlighting the workings of human perception can shed light on the very structure of the self-Other relationship. In what follows, Seth makes it clear that "our conscious experiences of the world and the self are forms of brain-based prediction—'controlled hallucinations'—that arise with, through, and *because of* our living bodies" (*Being You* 7; italics in original). He asserts that "what we actually perceive is a top-down, inside-out neuronal fantasy that is reined in by reality, not transparent window onto whatever that reality may be" (83). This perspective not only destabilizes the notion of objective truth but also suggests that our engagement with the Other is mediated by these constructed perceptions, shaping how we understand and respond to the Other's presence.

In this respect, having faith in the idea of an absolute truth seems to be out of reach for what the brain as a "prediction machine" (76) perceives is "neuronal fantasy…through a continuous making and remaking of perceptual best guesses, of controlled hallucinations" (87). It is from this perspective that I develop what I call the deferral of meaning, an expression attempting to overcome established forms of certainty and absolute truth by allowing us insight into the enchanting power of the notion of uncertainty.

Although 'uncertainty' often carries negative connotations, I employ this term in relation to its significance in deconstruction. As Critchley asserts in his influential work *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, "Deconstruction, as 'the most rigorous determination of undecidability in a limitless context' or as a 'philosophy of hesitation', opens an ethical space of alterity or transcendence"

(236). Especially, for the Other, the addressed is the disregarded and/or disadvantaged, meaning “the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan” (*Totality and Infinity* 245) who may not even possess the necessary conditions of their voice to be heard and must be exposed to the all-encompassing and totalizing attitude, or as Levinas puts it referring to Husserl’s aspect, “the objectifying act” (*Alterity* 16) of the self. Inevitably, the Other, one might assert, is trapped and confined by the language of the self, making visible the working of a relationship echoing the mind set as suggested in what follows: “The peace of empire issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity” (*Totality and Infinity* 22); therefore, as suggested by Levinas, “a primordial and original relation with being is needed” (22). This highlights the ethical urgency of transcending totalizing frameworks and developing a mode of relating to the Other that does not reduce them to a mere extension of the self’s categories, thereby preserving their alterity and dignity.

This dynamic reveals a recurring pattern in philosophical traditions where the self is privileged over the Other. More specifically, in this context, it can be suggested that the main element in this relationship throughout almost all philosophical traditions has been that the vantage point of the self is preferred to the vantage point of the Other. Quite clearly, the self has been regarded as the main source of acknowledging anything, much like Descartes famously stating “I think therefore I am.” As with Hegel and Sartre, the Other has been disregarded and has only been a concern as long as it was necessary to mention her/him in terms of defining this relationship. Levinas’s effort has been specifically to signify “the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an

exteriority that does not call for power or possession, an exteriority that is not reducible, as with Plato, to the interiority of memory, and yet maintains the I who welcomes it" (*Totality and Infinity* 51). Levinas also underlines "the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the other, and consequently the impossibility of totalization" (53). His account of the ethical attitude towards the Other is crucial for the argument to be developed here that will involve ways of thinking about the reader-text relationship analogously with that of the self-Other.

One purpose in pursuing such similarities is ultimately to support the argument for the crucial place of literature with regards to ethics. However, the main problem I would like to focus on before proceeding to a more detailed philosophical examination of the self-Other relationship, is how this relationship comes about and what might be likely motivations for it to have been formed in this specific way.

The point to be emphasised in seeking to understand such a will to dominate is not in the service of legitimating or verifying the self, but in order to establish a clear understanding of this complex relationship between the self and the Other and to offer a plausible approach to this relationship by arguing that, through engagements with literary texts, "by discovering the irreducibility of the alterity of the Other can I understand that I am neither solipsistic ally alone in the world nor part of a totality to which all others also belong" (C. Davis 48). This suggests that literature can serve as a vital medium for exploring ethical relationships, as it provides a space where the irreducible difference of the Other can be encountered and acknowledged.

Building on this understanding of the self-Other dynamic, it becomes necessary to examine the underlying motives that structure this relationship. The first of the two motives I am going to put forward in examining the ways in which the self-Other relationship is set up along the lines of the model of domination/submission is the idea of the search for truth. This needs more explanation in that the search for truth sounds at first irrelevant to the question of the Other. In referencing the 'search for truth,' I am alluding to the prevailing conviction that any concept or phenomenon can be comprehensively understood and assimilated. As Levinas argues, critiquing the philosophies of Hegel and Husserl,

> 'All externality' reduces to or returns to the immanence of a subjectivity that itself and in itself exteriorizes itself. The first person of the present in the cogito, in which Hegel and Husserl find themselves standing on the ground of modern philosophy, guarantees knowledge its congenital synthesizing and its self-sufficiency, foreshadowing the systematic unity of consciousness, and the integration of all that is other into the system and the present, or the synchrony (or the a-temporal) of the system (*Alterity* 11-12)

There is arguably a drive present for the search for truth (knowledge) in every human being as truth is bound up with the human desire for certainty. This suggests that the philosophical systems critiqued by Levinas prioritize totalizing frameworks, where the Other is subsumed into a universalized pursuit of understanding, reflecting the human impulse to reduce ambiguity and assert control over externalities.

Differently put, with respect to "the either-or of the Cartesian anxiety: There is the enchanting land of truth where everything is clear and ultimately grounded. But beyond that small island there is the wide and stormy ocean of

darkness and confusion, the native home of illusion" (Varela et al. 141). The assumption is that "This feeling of anxiety arises from the craving for an absolute ground" (141). The taken-for-granted assumption is that a state of certainty provides the self with feelings of safety and peace. In that sense, the self tends to attach itself to something constantly, something which provides her/him with certainty and, accordingly, with safety. It seems that the self feels secure as long as s/he can define things and possesses a clear understanding of the object or subject in question. In this way, the self establishes both her/his ideas and creates her/his identity so to speak. It is evident from the effort of establishing her/his identity that the self is oriented towards attaching meaning to her/his existence and accommodating her/his place in the universe.

However, the problematic quality of this tendency is that the self starts to provide persistent accounts of everything within this frame of making certain. In doing so, informed by a totalizing approach, the relationship of the self and the Other takes shape within the framework which acts to relate all experience and concepts to an absolute idea of truth. However, "By treating mind and world as opposed subjective and objective poles, the Cartesian anxiety oscillates endlessly between the two in search of a ground" (Varela et al. 141) turning into "the source of continuous frustration" (143). This reveals how the self's fixation on certainty and totality creates an unresolved tension that not only undermines its engagement with the Other but also destabilizes the very foundations of knowledge it seeks to establish.

Inevitably, driven by the desire of attaining the absolute truth, the self tends to develop a solipsistic attitude towards the Other. The encounter with the

Other constitutes a possible danger for her/him as the Other calls in question "this egoism" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 119). From this, one could argue that a self, which is entrenched in the understanding of absolute truth, often tends to sidestep or negate the challenges posed by the Other. This again can be associated with existential concerns, as Sartre contends:

> Fundamentally man is *the desire to be*, and the existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction; it is the result of an *a priori* description of the being of the for-itself, since desire is a lack and since the for- itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being . . . The original project which is expressed in each of our empirically observable tendencies is then the *project of being*. (586; italics in original)

In this sense, Sartre emphasizes that the self, driven by an inherent desire for existence, seeks to solidify its being and often avoids the discomforting encounter with the Other that might destabilize its self-concept and its quest for certainty. Thus, the intense drive of a human being to affirm their existence carries with it the anxiety of having their tower of dogmas, built upon the understanding of absolute truth, invalidated. As Simon Critchley explains, based on Levinasian thinking, "the ego desires liberty and comprehension. The latter is achieved through the full adequation or correspondence of the ego's representations with external reality: truth. The ego comprehends and englobes all possible reality; nothing is hidden, no otherness refuses to give itself up" (*The Ethics* 6). This shows that the ego's desire for truth often leads to a totalizing view, where the Other's alterity is overlooked in the pursuit of a comprehensive self-justification.

Thus, the dynamic operating behind this anxious aspect sets out to produce truth by merging power and knowledge in an effort to overcome the

confrontation with the Other. As Dorothy J. Hale asserts: “we come to self-consciousness about our pretended certainty through the confrontation with alterity, an experience of the other that surprises us in its intractability, its refusal to conform to what we imagine we know—to fit into our personal ‘regime of the norm’ (to use D. A. Miller’s term), the expectations that we call knowledge” (900). This highlights how the encounter with the Other disrupts the self’s preconceived notions, forcing it to confront the limitations of its own understanding and the potential for otherness to exist beyond its control or comprehension.

More suggestively, the mechanism shaping the self’s attitude towards the Other entails two kinds of response as follows: first, escaping any challenge posed by the Other by ignoring that challenge; second, attempting to assimilate the Other by enforcing her/his absolute truth. The self’s insistence on framing the Other suggests a kind of totalizing order in which the operating principle is based on anxiety. Hence, had the self the courage to face the challenge of the Other representing the unknown, alterity and difference, it would destabilize her/his absolute truth.

Additionally, her/his struggle can also be regarded as a means of survival. This struggle for survival constitutes the second motivation for the dominance model that I would like to put forward in addition to the search for truth. Considering both these motivations underlying the self’s domineering treatment of the Other involves an awareness of their complex entanglement.

It seems evident that, in order to give up this hostile approach to the Other, the self has to be prepared to sacrifice her/his fixed ideas and habits of

perception. Some paradigmatic shift is required for the self to adopt a peaceful approach to the Other. Contrary to the belief that the self is afraid of the Other as representing alterity and difference, the troubling aspect is more that the event the self avoids is not so much that of meeting the Other, but the possible change or transformation the self must then undergo in the encounter that might involve a paradigmatic shift, in other words a relation to a changed world too.

Needless to say, one can contend that this radical change in the self's perception entails the desacralization of the idea of certainty. Inevitably, this is a big challenge and one not easily and comfortably internalized. As suggested by Hale, a similar process is analysed in Judith Butler's Levinasian turn,

> For Butler, alterity is defined by the endless potential to resist comprehension, to trouble certainty. And it is precisely the endless possibility for psychological upset that creates the positive conditions for personal and social change. The end of the liberal subject's feeling of 'constitutive 'freedom' defined by private life begins with the individual's emotional experience of the private life as confounded, invaded. Vulnerability allows change. Anxiety, promise. (901).

Butler's term 'troubling certainty' is the key matter that needs attention. This concept underscores the crucial role that uncertainty and vulnerability play in dismantling fixed identities and allowing for transformative growth, both personally and collectively.

Similarly, Levinas's idea of 'excendance' resonates with this process of transformation. The attempt by the self to exceed the line drawn by her/himself, a movement towards the Other, is what Levinas defines as 'excendance' which is "a movement or becoming in which the critical juncture or ethical moment is precisely the collapse of identity and the flight to the other" (Gibson 45). This flight is about leaving behind everything that the self took for granted or valued, such as her/his gender, religion, habits.

It can also be considered as overcoming the prejudices formed as a result of what the self believed in. Homophobia, for example, might in this sense be regarded as a type of anxiety experienced by someone who takes her/his gender and/or sexuality rigidly for granted. Therefore, particularly in the response of the self to the Other, her/his attitude towards the Other plays a vital role in determining both her/his ethical attitude towards the Other but also to life in general. Because “Ethics, in the restricted sense of ethical preferences, choices and actions, derives from the original ethical moment when the self is challenged by the presence of the Other” (C. Davis 49). This emphasises that the self’s initial confrontation with the Other is not merely a moment of difference, but a crucial point at which ethical choices are formed, shaping the individual’s broader worldview.

Here, then, emerge some important issues of concern such as whether the self can be legitimized in its dominating and hostile nature or aspect simply because s/he lacks the necessary courage to face the challenge posed by the Other? Or are the primary motives, search for the truth and the concept of survival with regards to natural selection, to be taken for granted simply because they are essentialised as instinctive, naturalised, deemed to be so-called ‘natural’? These are just two out of the various questions that put the mind into a perplexed state.

The main inquiry, however, needs initially at least to be focalized on the question as to whether the attitude at the beginning of the quest for the self might have been otherwise, or to what extent it is possible to throw off or mitigate essentialising assumptions that posit behaviours as biologically

intrinsic to the self. The utmost importance must be placed from the outset on the nature of the quest of the self which is to shape the emergent and entangled nature of that quest.

Acknowledging that things are in a process of constant change and subject to change as a natural outcome of the ongoing and never ending process of time, means recognising that the self is likewise subject to such a process. Moreover, the concept of ‘controlled hallucination’, as explained earlier, not only renders the notion of absolute truth obsolete, but suggests a novel way of relating to the Other. Given that “human beings perceptual experiences of the world are internal constructions, shaped by the idiosyncrasies of our personal biology and history” (Seth, *Being You* 89). From this perspective, how can one expect to completely perceive the Other as it is?

Instead of striving to form fixed ideas and reach definitive judgments, it is crucial to recognize that the quest is not about arriving at a so-called ‘absolute truth’—which is unattainable. Rather, it is a continuous process open to alterity and leading towards infinity. In welcoming alterity and thus acknowledging the Other, the self circumvents the feeling that they have put themselves in danger when encountered by the Other. By contrast, “His alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 171). This suggests that true engagement with the Other requires a shift from control or domination to an openness that allows for transformative learning, highlighting the ethical responsibility involved in recognizing the infinite nature

of the Other.

On this view, it can be claimed that the self needs to recognize that it is not only in exceeding the comfort zone, but also in adopting such a paradigm shift towards alterity that a way of becoming more prepared for the contingencies of life is found and one that also lessens the possibility of making itself vulnerable precisely by voluntarily taking up a mode of being that is open to vulnerability. This may sound contradictory; however, the self by opening her/himself to a state of vulnerability actually reduces the probability of being vulnerable. It is only at this point that a peaceful and "non-allergic" relationship between self and Other might be enacted.

More to the point, by including "transformative approaches to experience, especially those concerned not with escape from the world or the discovery of some hidden, true self but with releasing the everyday world from the clutches of the grasping mind and its desire for an absolute ground", there is a chance of gaining "a sense of perspective on the world that might be brought forth by learning to embody groundlessness as compassion in a scientific culture" (Varela et al. 252). This approach emphasizes the importance of relinquishing rigid concepts of truth or self and embracing an open, compassionate perspective that allows for deeper engagement with the world and the Other.

Reader-Literary Work Relationship with Respect to Receptivity

The reader-literary work relationship is often disregarded in literary scholarship or formalist criticism—reinforced by the so-called 'affective

fallacy'[6]—so it has either been repudiated, ignored or regarded as passive and one-sided, but always regarded as one in which the reader's dominance is rendered invisible, as with a formalist hermeneutic, or by imposing an interpretative template on the text,[7] thereby conducting the relationship according to her/his own expressed desire.[8] In contrast to this prevailing conception that is dependent on the conventional framework concerning the self-Other relationship, this section strives to problematize this conceptualisation with reference to a rethinking of the self-Other relationship.

Initially, emphasis needs to be given to two key aspects that play a crucial role in apprehending the relationship between the reader and the literary work.

These are: firstly, how this relationship is formed, by which I mean the encounter between the reader and the literary work, highlighting the technical process of how the encounter takes place. The second perspective concerns what takes effect after the encounter, analysing the further process of the interaction between the reader and the literary work. The first aspect of this relationship gives detailed information concerning how this encounter takes place. This perspective is vital in that it is the beginning of the relationship and evinces critical insight

[6]Based on the discrepancy as "what it [a literary work] is and what it does" (31), W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley coined this term to argue that a literary text is neither dependent on its author nor a reader, that is, it is regarded as an independent entity. Hence, the reader's reaction to a literary work is disregarded as the idea is that, regardless of the meanings ascribed by a reader, a literary text's meaning is supposed to be intrinsic.

[7]Hans Robert Jauss comes up with the concept of 'horizon of expectation' explaining that a meaning attributed to a literary work will vary in relation to the reader's set values and expectation based on her/his cultural and social framework. See *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* [1978].

[8]Wolfgang Iser argues that "the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (279), and that the work's "inherently dynamic character" (280) is disclosed through reading. According to his account, the reader's imagination at work forms her/his own reality positioned between the two poles of a literary work: "the aesthetic and the artistic" (279).

regarding the main body of this relationship. The second perspective on this relationship develops in the light of the proceedings of the first perspective. Though these perspectives are two different aspects of this relationship they are interconnected: the first aspect has a determining developmental effect upon the second aspect of the relationship.

Accordingly, a detailed analysis of these two aspects will provide a comprehensive picture of the overall interaction between the reader and the literary work.

To start with, the relationship between the reader and the literary work needs to be analysed specifically as its framework will open the way to provide a primary perception of the process of this relationship.

What type of a relationship is it that is in question? Do the motivations of the reader affect the reader's receptiveness regarding her/his dealing with the literary work? Does the literary work actively contribute to the relationship or is it simply the reader who is active and who makes all the contributions to the relationship? Does the act of reading provide the reader with a kind of dominance over the literary work? Or is it possible to talk about a balanced relationship between the reader and the literary work?

These are some of the key questions that need to be discussed before approaching further substantiation concerning my claim with regards to the relevance of Levinas's perspective concerning the Other in the readerly encounter with the text.

Primarily it should be noted that it is not possible to speak about a one-sided relationship between the reader and the literary work as "most

reception theory assumes that reading a text is an act of completion: homogenization, coherence- building the production of the sameness out of difference" (Gibson 196).

It is true that the reader seems to provide the active part by fulfilling the act of imposing a reading upon the literary work. However, this might be understood to be simply the overt manifestation of the relationship and leads to the idea that the reader is the dominant party in the relationship. As pointed out by Maurice Blanchot:

> every reading where consideration of the writer seems to play so great a role is an attack which annihilates him in order to give the work back to itself: back to its anonymous presence, to the violent, impersonal affirmation that it is. The reader is himself always fundamentally anonymous. He is any reader, none in particular, unique but transparent. He does not add his name to the book…rather, he erases every name from it by his nameless presence, his modest passive gaze, interchangeable and insignificant, under whose light pressure the book appears written, separate from everything and everyone. (*The Space of Literature* 192)

This perspective suggests that the reader's encounter with the work is not one of individual ownership or identification but rather a mutual interaction where the work asserts its own existence, independent of personal or authorial identity. When the reader and the literary work meet and interact with each other, readers find themselves facing a creation constructed consciously and deliberately. Hence, the meeting can be defined as a kind of challenge or mode involving resistance rather than a naive encounter between reader and text. These carefully crafted word groups silently suggest that the reader is not the sole dominant party. Therefore, this challenge somehow seduces the reader to become immersed more daringly in the literary work.

It is precisely this challenge that invalidates the conception of the reader as

one who claims to maintain a position as the dominant party in the encounter. Correspondingly, it can be put forward that there is a dynamic relationship rather than a passive and one-sided relationship regulated by the reader. Literary work, as Ingarden points out, "is something toward which our acts of consciousness are directed, which they try to apprehend, successfully or unsuccessfully, but which is always beyond these diverse processes of consciousness" (145). This act of consciousness can be described as the reader's intentionality to decode the text.

The activity that needs close examination next is the reader's manner of approaching the literary work and whether the reader has any motivation of their own in approaching the literary work. If s/he has any such motivations, the emerging question is whether these motivations of the reader affect her/his receptiveness concerning the literary work.

How might one articulate the problematic of the possible counter-effect of the literary work? It might be assumed that interaction, albeit dynamic, signifies a merely reciprocal—rather than dialectical or more complex dynamic-interaction, in which one gives something and the correspondent offers something in return. However, the interaction which is in question concerning the reader and literary work is not based on an exchange as such. Rather the quality that makes this interaction unique is that, in parallel with Levinas's approach concerning the Other, there is a relation without any reciprocal communication. This point will be taken into consideration at length in the following chapters.

Considering all the points mentioned in the previous paragraphs—the

technical dimension of the relationship; the approach of the reader to the literary work; the counter effect of the literary work on the reader—all foreshadow the way that the literary work is not only an object created by an author, but rather that all these investigations refer to an object having an active dimension representing its dynamism.

Roman Ingarden argues that "the literary work of art is not an object which is existentially autonomous but, rather, is existentially heteronomous; specifically, it is a purely intentional object which has its basis of being in the creative acts of consciousness of its author" (335). While Ingarden acknowledges the author's essential role in creating the literary work, it is important to understand that the work itself, once created, moves beyond the author's full control. The work takes on a life of its own, existing as a dynamic entity open to various interpretations and not solely defined by the author's intentions. From this perspective, the literary work is the focal point as a dynamic creation—more than simply an identity as a collection of words assigned to it in textualist postmodernist approaches, but still no longer under the domination of its author.

Apart from agreeing with Ingarden that the literary work of art is an "intentional object" consciously formed by its author, I would argue though, in a more postmodern rather than first phenomenological fashion, that the literary work goes beyond the linguistic framework and cognitive/narratological storyworlds intended by its author and gains a relative autonomy, existentially, as a consequence of the words' capacity to embrace more meanings than one, this capacity allowing it to depart from anchorage in authorial pure intention.

This shift in understanding the work's autonomy, wherein the text

surpasses the boundaries of the author's original intentions, can be exemplified in the way Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* engages with its audience and resists conventional interpretation. As Jesse Green, the chief theatre critic for *The New York Times*, has pointed out in a review of Beckett's *Waiting for Godo*t,[9] released as a film (2021): "Early audiences were baffled by 'Waiting for Godot'" and "Even Peter Hall, who in 1955 directed the first English language production, claimed not to understand it. When actors with access to its author, Samuel Beckett, demanded explanations from him, he usually professed himself helpless to answer" ("Review: 'Waiting for Godot' in the Bleakest Zoom Room Ever"). This example underscores the complexity of Beckett's work, highlighting how the text resists fixed interpretations and even challenges those closest to its creation, thereby exemplifying the autonomy of the literary work as discussed earlier.

In this connection, the point I want to make is that the literary work of art,[10] in a sense, turns into a self-existing entity having loosened its connection with its creator. Hence, the literary work has the possibility of turning into something completely different than what its author has antecedently aimed for. As delicately stressed by Roland Barthes in *Image Music Text* [1977]:

> writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning to the text (and so to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse

[9] This play was originally written in French and premiered at the Theatre de Babylone, Paris in 1953. In 1954, the play was translated by Samuel Beckett from French to English.

[10] J.M. Coetzee, similarly, points out that what writing "reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place" (*Doubling the Point* 18).

God and his hypostases - reason, science, law. (147; italics in original)

Barthes' assertion emphasizes the radical openness of literature, suggesting that meaning is constantly in flux, which reflects the multifaceted relationship between the reader and the text, where multiple interpretations can coexist. This multilateral relationship of the reader and the literary work suggests that there cannot be just one certain verdict concerning the perception of a specific literary work as there is not one type of reader. Each reader with different motivations and different social, educational, psychological and cultural backgrounds approaching one specific literary work will make manifold inferences in parallel with her/his differing background and motivations.

In the same manner, the counter effect of the literary work will vary across differing types of readers with different backgrounds, expectations. This makes the act of reading and reception unique for each reader.

Derek Attridge, in one of his best-known work of literary theory, *The Singularity of Literature*, reflects how an

> Individual's grasp on the world is mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)

This variability in readers' backgrounds and experiences emphasises the idea that each reading is inherently subjective, shaped by the unique intersection of individual histories, cultural contexts, and personal expectations. So in parallel with this, the corresponding effect—intellectual, cognitive and affective —of the literary work will vary among readers. The act of reading a literary

work, as Andrew Gibson asserts, borrowing from Hans Robert Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, "is in no way simply bound to 'the classical function of recognition', the backward-looking gaze that recognizes a pre-given truth" (196).

Instead, "any work of art demands what Jauss calls 'horizontal change'. It both appeals to the 'horizon of expectations' of a readership contemporary with it, and turns towards 'the horizon of yet-unknown experience'" (196). In consequence, the reader's multiple angles of perception open up new and unique interpretations which concomitantly refer to the non-absolute, dynamic and shifting qualities of the work of art in general and literary work, in particular: for literary works are not books of science composed of facts which intend "to fix, contain, and transmit to others the results of scientific investigation in some area in order to enable scientific research to be continued and developed by its readers" (Ingarden 146). This distinction underscores the interpretative flexibility inherent in literature, where meaning is not static or fixed, but evolves with each reader's engagement with the text.

By contrast, as Ingarden suggests, "the literary work of art" serves "to embody in its concretization certain values of a very specific kind, which we usually call 'aesthetic' values" (147). Given this flexible relationship between the reader and the literary work, the dominance of the reader over the literary work and the consideration of the literary work as a mere object would be an unwarranted assessment: it is a product co-created by each reader. Particularly because of this dynamic linguistic quality, the literary work should be considered as exempt from the concept of "nourishment" which "is the

transmutation of the other into the same” and which “becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 111). In contrast to the act of nourishment, which seeks to absorb and transform the other into the self, the literary work maintains its alterity, resisting the reduction of its meaning to something purely personal or self-serving.

Though Levinas asserts in *Totality and Infinity* that “In enjoyment the things are not absorbed in the technical finality that organizes them into a system. They take form within a medium [milieu] in which we take hold of them. They are found in space, in the air, on the earth, in the street, along the road” (130), this concept aligns with the literary work’s resistance to closure. A literary work has things to say but is never finished at all.

On the contrary it is always open to new interpretations and perceptions, as each reader’s engagement with the text is shaped by their unique idioculture. For Attridge, this idioculture is the accumulation of personal experiences, cultural context, historical background, and so on, which influences how they approach and interpret the text. This idioculture affects the reader’s interpretation and response to literary works. It is an acknowledgment that every reading of a text is, in a way, singular and influenced by the individual’s unique set of experiences and contexts. In broader terms, recognizing the role of idioculture is essential for understanding the multiplicity of responses a single literary work can generate and the richness of interpretation it can offer. It also serves as a counterpoint to overly deterministic or reductive readings that might try to pin down a single correct or authoritative interpretation of a text.

Despite its appearance as a material object and way of existing as an

object of material qualities, it is dynamic. Its dynamism is correlated with the words endowed by its author. Though the author plays a vital role as the creator, her/his constraining and determining influence ends each time the literary work gets in touch with the reader: the work opens up new and unending meanings and connotations in its interactions with each reader.

Consequently, the formation process or the coming into being of the literary work never ends. Its formation is neither attached to its author nor to a specific reader. It is reformed, recreated any time an interaction takes place between the reader and the work. This, despite the insistent demand of the reader to disclose the literary work by making use of her/his present intentionality, should or does not mean, however, that the literary work as a storyworld takes shape in parallel with what the reader imposes upon it.

Instead, Attridge argues that every literary work presents a singularity —something unique that is inherently tied to its ability to be repeated and experienced anew in each encounter. A responsible reading, according to Attridge, involves recognizing and valuing this otherness rather than assimilating the text into pre-existing categories or familiar interpretative frameworks. This means allowing the text to challenge, surprise, and alter the reader's current understanding. Consequently, there can never be a definitive meaning; for the literary work is not fixed within a defined and limited circle of essence.

For Attridge, a literary text is an event—something that happens anew each time it is read. It is not just a static object with a fixed meaning. Thus, a responsible reader engages with this eventness, experiencing the freshness and

newness of the text in each encounter. As Gibson claims, following Jauss, "the knowledge of any given text that is made possible by a particular horizon of expectations will always be shadowed by a perplexity, even bafflement before a countervailing obscurity that only an unknown future can illuminate" (196).

Precisely this characteristic of the literary work corresponds to the situation of the Other in question of the theories put forward by Levinas with regard to the self-Other relationship. The meeting point between the literary work as an other and the Other engaged by Levinas is that neither can be understood for no one can ever be certain of the Other in question. Nor do we possess certain information about the Other existing separately, for there is only the face-to-face situation.

In a manner similar to the Levinasian concept of the Other, the literary work does not speak. To clarify this, I turn to Critchley's explanation of clotural reading. He suggests that it encompasses a dual-layered analysis that explores both the concept of closure and the ethical considerations involved. In line with this, I would like to adopt Critchley's perspective that this type of reading brings about "insights, interruptions, or alterities" which "are moments of ethical transcendence, in which a necessity other than ontology announces itself within reading, an event in which the ethical Saying of a text overrides its ontological Said" (*The Ethics* 30). Rather it appears. That is, drawing inspiration from Levinas's ethical philosophy, Attridge sees the act of reading as an ethical encounter. The reader has a responsibility to the text as an other. This does not mean trying to determine the author's intended meaning but rather being open to the multiple possibilities of meaning the text offers, even if

they challenge the reader's beliefs or assumptions.

While the reader must remain open to the multiple meanings a text can offer, Levinas extends this idea into the realm of art, where he critiques the very act of representation itself. Levinas distrusts any form of representation. For Levinas, the art work, by imitating and representing reality through images, creates a detachment from the physical world. According to his point of view "Art is non-truth, obscure, made up from the very act of obscuring being-in-the-world" (Eaglestone, *Ethical* 105) As Robert Eaglestone puts it: "ethics stems from the face-to-face relationship, guaranteed by an assumption of presence. To suggest that presence is only represented in material forms, to confuse the issue of presence with the issue of how presence is represented, is to challenge the actual face-to-face relationship with the Other" (99). This distinction highlights how, for Levinas, the act of representing or imitating the Other in art can obscure the direct, ethical encounter that is essential for true responsibility and understanding.

However, the quality I would like to highlight is that the encounter with the literary work might be regarded as another version of the face-to-face event. Suggesting that the Other appears in the form of a literary work does not reduce, encompass, or limit the Other to the margins of a material presence as long as the dynamic quality of the literary work—as discussed above—is acknowledged. This is because, while the reader is exercising the act of reading with an aim of dissolving the mystery[11] behind the literary work, s/he cannot simply grasp the

[11] Even the author might not have a clear idea as Coetzee's words suggest, "Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago" (*Doubling the Point* 18).

literary work as the unknown intention of the author while writing the literary work together with the interaction between the literary work and the reader make it hard for the reader to elicit some sort of truth within the set margins of a text. The interaction is never steady, but always inconsistent, so the literary work never reveals itself overtly but is always in a mode of becoming as long as read by the reader. Even the same reader will make different inferences while reading it for a second time. Hence, like the Other introduced by Levinas, the literary work is not within a specific and defined margin which can be comprehended by the reader, but, on the contrary, is in a never ending process of becoming. It is precisely this that excludes the literary work from other kinds of text that are being consumed in an instant.

In reading the literary work, as the Levinasian Other, means that, "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it" (*Totality and Infinity* 51). This overflow of meaning, as Levinas suggests, signifies the endless complexity of the Other that defies simple comprehension or containment, allowing the reader to encounter the text in a way that challenges fixed interpretations and embraces the dynamism of the literary work.

This quality of the literary work is the meeting point with the undefinable and incomprehensible Other of Levinas's theory. Both have many things to utter, yet do not say a word: instead they appear. Both are faced with the limited vision and definite judgement of being in the comprehension realm of the self. Thus both are faced with the dominating attitude of the self in its effort to incorporate it/her/him into the realm of the same.

The true responsibility of the self/the reader is, then, to respond to the Other/literary work. In line with Attridge's concept of responsible reading, the emphasis is on an ethical and open engagement with literary texts, appreciating their uniqueness and the transformative potential they offer to readers. The responsibility is not related to any understanding of the Other, which is, according to Levinas, impossible: for understanding, in a way, refers to a mode of dominion over the Other. Levinas contends that, referring to Husserl's perspective, "within the vitally flowing intentionality in which the life of an ego-subject consists, every other angle is already intentionally implied in advance in the mode of empathy [Einfühlung]" (*Outside* 37). Conversely, the relation should be about responding to the call of the Other—here the literary work—in a responsible way.

Derek Attridge opines that "To read a literary work responsibly, then, is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement, and without passing judgement on the work or its author" (*The Singularity of Literature* 129). This approach emphasises the importance of engaging with the literary work on its own terms, allowing it to reveal its complexities and possibilities without imposing preconceived expectations or reducing it to a mere tool for other purposes.

Similarly, in the context of the Levinasian approach to the Other, the reader's responsibility lies in maintaining the alterity of the Other without attempting to reduce or assimilate it into familiar categories. The Other has to remain in its alterity and, in order to preserve this, the idea of understanding has to be avoided in describing the relationship between the self and the Other:

"Even to describe the relationship with the Other as a relationship implies a totalizing perspective from which both self and Other are seen to share a common ground, which has the consequence that the Other becomes just another version of the Same" (C. Davis 45). Equally, the relationship of the reader and the literary work is not based on the idea of understanding, but instead, the relationship is 'asymmetrical'—just as Levinas defines the relationship between the self and the Other. This comes to mean that

> my obligation and responsibility are not mirrored by the Other's reciprocal responsibility towards me. This asymmetry is consistent with Levinas's conception of the Other: to insist on symmetry or reciprocity would be to imply that I was empowered for the Other, that the Other belongs to the same species or genus as myself. But for Levinas the ethical relationship entails an obligation which is incumbent on me alone; no power *forces* me to act in moral ways. Morality is not moral if it is maintained either because I have no choice in the matter or if I expect to get something in return. The ethical encounter with the Other leads to an ethics which is necessarily one-sided and not formulable in terms of rules applicable to all; and, since it is asymmetrical, the ethical relationship cannot be universalized and transformed into a moral code. (C. Davis 51-52; italics in original)

This asymmetry in the ethical relationship with the Other has a parallel in how the literary work must be approached: it is not to be judged or reduced to a set of predefined categories. The relation between the reader and the literary work functions in a similar way as the literary work demands not to be judged or categorized but, as explicated by Attridge, "to do justice to literary works as events, welcoming alterity, countersigning the singular signature of the artist, inventively responding to invention, combined with a suspicion of all those terms that constitute the work as an object, is the best way to enhance the chances of achieving a vital critical practice" (*The Singularity of Literature*

137).

To clarify the concept of ethical responsibility, it is quite important to note, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, that “One recognizes morality by its gnawing sense of unfulfilledness, by its endemic dissatisfaction with itself. *The moral self is a self always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough”* (qtd. in C. Davis 54; italics in original). Not being moral enough is crucial to the idea of responsibility and indicates that the self will always be subject to falling short of defining and understanding the Other as the Other is a separate being and cannot be incorporated into the realm of the self, meaning the same.

In other words, the enactment of an ethically shaped relationship is achieved through the persistent questioning of the self of whether s/he has been moral enough towards the Other. This evokes the profound philosophical contention argued by Derrida regarding the feasibility of genuine ethical action. As elucidated by Derek Attridge, reflecting on Derrida’s thinking, “Although I can never begin to satisfy the demands of ethics, although my every action, indeed my very existence,…, is a falling short of the ethical, *there is no way I can justify my failure*” (“Derrida’s Singularity” 18; italics in original).

Similarly, the reader, in an attempt to understand the literary work tries to take control over the literary work by applying different approaches so as to give meaning to the literary work and reduce it to the realm of the same. However, the literary work will always remind the reader that s/he falls short in acquiring a whole comprehension of it for the expectations and pre-conceived ideas of the reader, referring to her/his own intentionality, will never match what s/he will come across in the literary work.

Accordingly, the reader will recognize that s/he is not and will not ever be equipped enough with the competence or perfection to assess the literary work fairly. Correspondingly, the reader will also never feel moral enough—so to say—towards the literary work. This incompetency of the reader/ self, if acknowledged, will open the way for accepting that a full understanding of the literary work/the Other cannot be accomplished. Though this idea may lead to a pessimistic perception, just as being incompetent entails negative connotations, contrarily, this approach may generate a comforting potential in renewed thinking of setting free the self from the subjection to the definitive and deductive categorizations of the concept of absolute truth.

Like the Other introduced by Levinas, who makes the self aware that s/he is not the only possessor of the world and that s/he shares it with multiple Others, the literary work, in a similar way, makes the reader aware of other existing worlds and quite different ways of defining life. It suggests that

> Our experience of how literature binds us (binds us to characters, binds us to its emotional effects) is thus the happy psychological condition that frees us from our usual epistemological limits. The felt condition of our own binding makes possible, in other words, our knowledge of life 'as it were.' Incomprehension of the other yields knowledge of the self: we are made to recognize our operative interpretative categories as our own 'regime of the norm.' And this felt recognition of the limits of our ways of knowing opens up, for Butler, the possibility that we might change for the better, that we might actively try to judge less and undergo more. (Hale 901)

The literary work offers various storyworlds and engagements with events and characters the reader might normally not be able to meet. As Robert Eaglestone states: "Artworks in the broadest sense, then, disclose or give us that world in which we live as a concrete, determinate, and specific place, revealed

and enframed by those artworks" (600). One of the most significant qualities of literary experience is that of engaging with divergent and diverse experiences so as to become aware of the contingencies of life as the Other makes the self to discover that the world is not only in her/his possession.

As Eaglestone emphasises, artworks have the power to disclose and frame the world we inhabit, inviting readers to confront its complexities and contingencies. This aligns with the idea that literature exposes the self to experiences beyond its own, challenging the belief that the world is solely for the self's possession. In a similar vein, Orhan Pamuk states how "Reader and authors acknowledge and agree on the fact that novels are neither completely imaginary nor completely factual" (35). Principally, whether the characters or the plot are taken from the real world or not is not of great importance for, even if the characters are sole creations of the author's imagination, it is an undeniable fact that characters open doors to contingent and unknown worlds. But such experiences with characters and their lives do not so much as make the reader empathise with, let us say, the dramatic destiny of a character but they enable her/him to witness and/or introduce an experience that s/he has not experienced before. There could, of course, also be times when the reader has had similar experiences to a character, leading her/him to empathise with that character.

This refers to the established idea that reading literary works greatly enhances the reader's capacity for empathy, as Suzan Keen claims: "the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction known to be 'made up' does not activate suspicion and wariness as

an apparently 'real' appeal for assistance may do" (4). She continues her claim by explaining that "fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers' feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action" (4). Keen may be right in her claim that readers develop such empathy, but what is overlooked is that these reactions of the reader towards the literary work are temporary, a flash merely. The reader's feelings in these instances are short-lived reactions to the depicted situation and generally lack lasting effects on the reader in question. This occurs due to the presence of "safe zones" that do not require any engagement from the reader. Despite this claim by Keen being widely shared, it needs further careful examination.

Empathy, by definition, is "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 4). Its implication suggests that the "spontaneous sharing of emotion" also empowers the reader to comprehend the character. This is perhaps the aspect that requires delicate attention, as it is precisely this concept that is susceptible enough to create the misconception that the Other[12] can be comprehended or managed solely through empathizing with them.

Martha Nussbaum is another critic claiming that the "novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find

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[12] It is arguable that Coetzee's characters can be considered as hard to empathise with as they cannot be pinned down easily. In his novel, *Foe* (1986), Friday's tongueless mouth suggesting resistance to the reader's desire to understand him carries significant implications. To Bill Ashcroft, "He stands for the absence of finality, the impossibility of finality in the narrative itself" (9). In a sense, what Coetzee's writing seems to do is to destabilise the concept of empathy by attracting more questions than it gives answer on the place and necessity of the concept of empathy while reading a literary work of art.

here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic" (162). However, these reactions of the reader are virtual and cannot be equated with one's reaction in real life. As Eaglestone explains "Nussbaum continually passes over the textual nature of a literary work and it is this which forms her crucial blindness. She understands a text as a surface, behind which there are real situations and real events" (*Ethical* 46). For Nussbaum, literature provides a valuable means of exploring ethical principles through its portrayal of realistic people and situations. She is more interested in using texts as a means of testing and refining philosophical theories.

Veronica Vasterling shares a view similar to mine and highlights that "the stress-free, tranquil environment and leisured concentration of the literature lab promises better results than the everyday chaos of real life with its distractions, obligations and emotional over-involvement" (85). She instead presents Hannah Arendt's view by asserting that "the existence of a shared world is dependent on the possibility of articulating many different views of the same reality. Without plurality of stories concerning human actions and thereof, the reality of the web of human affairs will become insubstantial to the point of simply evaporating" (86). This is not to understand the literary work simply as a thought experiment, related to the cognitive possibilities for accessing the inner world of a person: any reaction to virtual situations will never be the same as reactions taking place in the outer world.

Speaking from Arendt's viewpoint, various forms of representation enable the reader to gain an understanding of diverse perspectives. A literary work is not a mirror reflecting directly the world as it is, but rather, as brilliantly noted

by Albert Camus: "The work of art embodies a drama of the intelligence but it proves this only indirectly" (93). Literary works depict familiar concepts such as love, pain, or happiness, as experienced by human beings, in a multitude of ways. This is also a way of raising awareness of different perceptions through storytelling.

To emphasise once again, it is not a vehicle for developing the faculty of understanding or putting oneself into someone else's shoes; however, it is, in a way, forming a bridge between cognition and the real world by providing other worlds as they are lived, enjoyed, loved, in different ways. It creates awareness.

Again, the issues concerning the function of the literary work will be discussed in detail in the ensuing chapters.

The primary concern I aim to highlight amidst all the issues surrounding the place, role, content, and influence of literary works is their perspective when considered from a phenomenological ethics standpoint. Its relation to phenomenological ethics, especially in the postmodern era, has great importance in that its relationship with the reader can be viewed as a representative example of the self-Other relationship in terms of ethics as exemplified in this argument.

The main point for me is the twofold quality of the literary work and the need to reiterate its hidden dynamism in contrast to its material appearance. This makes me want to place the literary work in another category than that which simply offers enjoyment to the self. In particular, this quality ensures that a literary work might be more than simply an other offered up for enjoyment of a self as reader. It is embellished with the magical touch of a human being, here

an author.

However, according to Levinas's approach "the work of art in general, and poetic language in particular, is neither the other *(alter, alius)* of philosophy nor a type of *other (heteron)* able to interrupt the working of a totality and thus give access to the 'otherwise than being.' In general, and for the most part, it is a 'fake' other that totality can easily assimilate and reduce to propositional utterances (*said*)" (Riera 16). This suggests that, according to Levinas, while the literary work may initially present itself as an "other," it remains susceptible to the self's imposition of meaning, ultimately losing its capacity to challenge or transcend the totality of the self's perspective. In this sense, the literary work, despite its potential for alterity, can still be absorbed and assimilated by the self's understanding.

Contrary to Levinas's claims, I want to argue that the subtle dynamism of a literary work, initially unnoticed by the reader, gives the impression that it can be easily assimilated by the reader's self. This perceived familiarity encourages the reader to approach the literary work without hesitation, unlike the caution one might exercise when confronted with an Other perceived as a potential threat. However, exempt from the potential assumption of posing a danger, the literary work invites the reader to exercise the act of reading daringly. Ultimately, the reader having lowered her/his guard is positioned in a mode of predisposition to the contingencies of a literary work. Put bluntly, the reader can even be regarded as open to vulnerability.

The reader's openness to vulnerability creates a space in which they actively engage with the literary work, allowing it to shape their understanding.

In this way, despite lingering in a virtual world, the reader continuously ascribes meaning to what they encounter within the text. The feature of art that offers multiple worlds allows the reader to become more aware and welcoming of others' lives. This is because the reader does not expect "feedback from its recipient," as previously mentioned, reducing the anxiety that arises from anticipating feedback. As such, "Better awareness lies in a finer sense (and rendering) of the limitless proliferation of worlds and their incommensurability. In striving for such an awareness, too, art not only reflects people back themselves, but reflects them back as they have never seen themselves, as both actuality and potentiality, person and event, subjectivity and its other" (Gibson 130).

Besides the function of providing the reader with an awareness of the Other's life, the most important feature of a literary work, more precisely of some literary works like J. M. Coetzee's, is that these literary works confuse the reader and display those limits of understanding on the part of the self as the meaning of a literary text is elusive. It can be variable, subjective, and even indeterminate. This situation, one can contend, mirrors the "alterity" or otherness of Levinas's "Other." The overlapping perspective is that just as one can never fully pin down or encompass the absolute meaning of a text, we cannot entirely know or define another person.

In such works, the work as the Other is not within the comprehension area of the self as the literary work does not reveal itself completely. This unknowability demands an ethical response: to respect, respond to, and be responsible for the Other without reducing them to mere categories or

stereotypes. As Gibson argues: "Nothing we have previously been granted will quite equip us for the text's next move, which thus precisely announces itself in its own singularity, as something that cannot be foreseen or brought back to terms that have already been given" (93).

While reading J.M. Coetzee's works, the reader realizes this exact phenomenon. The text negates to provide full comprehension which leaves the reader in a perpetually perplexed state of mind. In *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, the main character Elizabeth Costello is represented in a continually shifting perspective and she cannot be situated in a fixed context. In consequence, the reader is forced continuously to put aside all that s/he knows in order to approach the text without any specific intention; for the reader comes to realize that none of her/his intentional approaches are useful.

Precisely, that is Levinas's argument that intentionality is established on the premise of "the consciousness of an ego *identical* in its *I think*, aiming at and embracing, or perceiving, all alterity under its thematising gaze" (*Time and The Other* 97). By extension, it suggests that J.M. Coetzee's work frustrates the functioning of the intentionality of the reader, hence destabilizing the tendency of the self to reduce the Other to the same.

Similar to Levinas, Coetzee's portrayal of the Other in his writings is elusive, resisting the self's inclination, that is the reader's, to understand, categorize, and label. In *Foe*, for example, the relationship between Susan Barton and Friday can be regarded as one of the outstanding representations where the Otherness of Friday cannot be reduced to identity sameness. Friday's silence renders him beyond the comprehension of Susan Barton and the reader

too. Friday cannot be put into the traditional slave-master context as the reader confronts a representation that is not represented fully, as observed by Mike Marais, on how Coetzee "in all of his novels, endeavors to represent not otherness, but the way in which otherness is routinely foreclosed upon by attempts to represent it" ("Writing with Eyes Shut" 48).

Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate never has a full comprehension of the native girl in terms of her ideas and feelings. As Marais puts it: "Coetzee eschews representationalist strategies which too narrowly identify the other with the margin and thereby construct it oppositionally in relation to the centre. If constructed in such a way, the 'other' is always already pre-supposed by the discourse of the centre and therefore not the other and, as such, it asserts the totality of that which it attempts to breach in that very attempt" (48). This is a highly important point to be underscored as the case is not to represent Otherness in relation to the self, but to grasp that the Other is absolutely different and not in the comprehension boundaries of the self or the reader.

To elaborate on this, it is crucial to examine how Levinas's view of art has evolved, as it provides further insight into the nature of the Other and its relationship to the reader.

In line with a Platonic view, Levinas asserts in his earlier writing that a painting confirms the real object's absence. He explains that by occupying the object's place, a painting indicates its death. Thus, they "were degraded, were disincarnated in its reflection" ("Reality and its Shadow" 7). Levinas indicates that literary works, without the presence of a face, are no more primary or

fundamental than any other form of art and that there is no ethical significance in works of art. Furthermore, he does not believe that art should be assigned a transcendent role that goes beyond ethical and truthful considerations. [13]

The question, then, is how is it that Levinas's approach to art has been developed to circumvent this confusion over his understanding of the troubled relationship between ethics and art. After Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of *Totality and Infinity*, it is through Levinas next crucial work *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* [1974], forming a "response to Derrida's reading" (Eaglestone, *Ethical* 125), "that these tensions over representation and over the ontological status of the art work specifically the literary art work, break through the text and clearly show up an aporia or blindness" (125).

His traditional notion of face-to-face interaction has transformed or evolved due to Derrida's exploration of the concept of the 'trace'. Derrida's questioning of how ethical connections can be established in the absence or unavailability of the other's physical presence has led to a re-evaluation of the meaning and significance of face-to-face encounters. As a result, the focus of Levinas's work has shifted towards an understanding and interpreting of the term 'trace,' which "in the strict sense disturbs the order of the world" (Levinas, "The Trace of the Other" 357). Like face, but in its absence, trace is interruption, it disrupts the closed, all-encompassing system. It signifies a shift from the notion of the 'face-to-face' encounter to the complex interplay

[13] Levinas's view is contrary to the view held by traditional critics and Martha Nussbaum especially, who writes that "we do 'read for life'" (*Love's* 29). The basic idea is that literature serves as a means to foster moral principles and enrich the human experience.

between speech and its meaning, which becomes primary in his later work. It is also well to acknowledge that Derrida integrated the term 'trace' into his own philosophical framework. He utilized and developed the concept of the trace as a fundamental element in his philosophical analysis and discourse.

Despite Levinas's distrust of art earlier, he has similar ideas with regard to Blanchot, lifelong friend of Levinas, as Gabriel Riera comments: "the other escapes both the order of discourse and the framework of narration, but must nevertheless be written. Faced with the assimilating grasp of the concept, if the other must be preserved as such, then writing has to abandon a series of guarantees and pass tangentially through the scene of knowledge and the order of representation" (16). This reflects a shift in Levinas's thinking, where, like Blanchot, he recognizes the impossibility of fully representing the Other while still acknowledging the need for writing to engage with it in some way.

Blanchot's writing seems to have had some effect on Levinas and, as Riera remarks, he "provides Lévinas…with a formal principle to outline how the primary *ethicity* of language (infinity or 'the otherwise than being beyond essence') breaches totality or Being" (16; italics in original). By discussing the primary ethical function of language, Blanchot provides Levinas with a framework that challenges traditional conceptions of Being, a concept that will be further examined in later chapters.

Regarding the brief and general introduction above, the main focus of the research will be to examine the similarity between 'the ethical relationship of the reader and literary work' and 'the self and the Other' with regards to the ideas of Levinas on the Other.

Furthermore, Levinas's special place in the field of ethics regarding the Other will be explained by comparing him with other philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre.

His distrust of and ambiguous approach to art will be examined as well and art will be read as "a response to the world that, in an important sense, reflects the praxis of his philosophy at an unsettlingly close remove" (Fifield 33). This view underscores Levinas's approach to art as something that responds to the world in a way that aligns with his ethical philosophy, emphasizing the tension between representation and the ethical responsibility to the Other.

In conclusion, the primary purpose of this study will be to display the indispensability to ethical engagement and understanding of the literary work regarded as a bridge creating awareness for ethics of the nature of the possible relations with the Other. This understanding will be pursued by reading Levinas's ethics juxtaposed with a perspective provided by cognitive science in relation to the writing of J.M. Coetzee. David Attwell, with regards to Coetzee's literary work, highlights that "the existential singularity that makes possible and conditions the literary, giving it its force as a mode of resistance to a world that insists on foreclosure, is the agonistic circumstance of 'living out' a life-of-writing in a society that threatens constantly to close it down and to transform it into something other than what it is" ("Coetzee's Estrangements" 238). In other words, his literary distinctiveness emanates from the intrinsic challenges he faces as a writer, navigating a society that seeks to 'close down' his literary expressions, endeavouring to transform them into more conforming and digestible narratives. Echoing Levinasian themes, this struggle can be viewed

as an assertion of individuality and ethical responsibility against a context of societal conformity and indifference to the Other.

The first work to be examined is *Elizabeth Costello* in an effort to demonstrate how Coetzee manages to represent Elizabeth Costello, the main character, from different perspectives— along with her continuous struggle concerning animal rights—focusing on thought provoking questions concerning the nature of reason and the role of philosophy.

By portraying Costello from diverse perspectives, Coetzee underscores that a being is not one-dimensional and cannot be so readily categorized, labelled, or framed, just as with a literary work.

Furthermore, the discussion of animal rights explores the problem of the Other— questioning whether reason is essential for recognition. As Elizabeth Costello mentions in the final chapter, would failing to recognize frogs negate their existence? Costello provides an answer to this question when she claims, "To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being - not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation - a heavily affective sensation - of being alive to the world" (78). Through this, the primary criteria for recognition become the tangible state of having a body of flesh and bone, with the capacity to feel pain and an innate desire to live, rather than an abstracted reason.

Chapter One

"In my work a belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances"

(Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 200).

I will begin this argument with an examination of Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), whose structure, and organisation, formal patterning and thematic focus engage what will become the major themes of my thesis.

This chapter discusses, in the light of *Elizabeth Costello,* how structures orient thinking to a specific mode of perception that in effect deselects other aspects of an issue or thing to be considered.

Elizabeth Costello, a striking novel in terms of its form and narrative, manages to display how structures work, while trying to resist those structures, specifically genres. This has resulted in a variety of critical responses.

Elizabeth Costello is heavily metafictional, exploring the nature of storytelling and the role of the author. These layers of meaning have often prompted debates among critics about how to interpret his work.

The novel will be considered in three parts, the first elucidating its form with respect to its defiance of established sub-genres of the novel.

The second deals with its narrative mode, evincing its resistance to structure, with arguments and counter arguments put forward in each of its chapters but where no conclusions are drawn and the character, Elizabeth

Costello, is estranged along with the novel in which she resides.

Finally, the outcome of these strategies is examined as it also leads to a grasp of the unrepresentability of the main character, Elizabeth Costello, but also highlighting the problem of whether the representation of a character is possible at all. In this way, in parallel with Levinas's thinking concerning the Other calling the self to responsibility, the fundamental point unfolding is the twofold ethical relation which is the responsibility towards the work and the responsibility towards the character in terms of their otherness and singularity.

To begin with, the form of the novel is markedly unusual.[14] It consists of eight chapters, referred to as lessons in the novel, each chapter on a different subject, namely 'Realism,' 'The Novel in Africa,' 'The lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals,' 'The lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals,' The Humanities in Africa,' 'The Problem of Evil,' 'Eros,' 'At the Gate,' and a postscript called 'Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos.' They are termed 'lessons,' yet they address critical issues such as animal rights and an author's responsibility. In that sense, they also take on the form of a critical essay.

In fact, Coetzee presented them previously as lectures[15] or published as essays. However, publishing them later as a literary work of art by using Elizabeth Costello as his persona created confusion as whether to take Costello's positions literally or ironically (Deckard and Palm 337). It was even

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[14] Adam Mars-Jones, writer and literary critic for the Guardian, reveals himself quite unsure whether to put Elizabeth Costello into the novel category as the title of his review makes it clear, "It's very novel, but is it actually a novel?" defines Elizabeth Costello's genre as "Non-Non-Fiction (sic)."

[15] The chapters on animals: 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals' were delivered as lectures at Princeton University and later published in Coetzee's book *The Lives of Animals* (1999), accompanied by essays by distinguished scholars.

regarded as a "bad philosophical argument" inspiring nobody (Geiger 153).

In a review by Andrew Marr, he points out of Coetzee that "his books are generally painful. In style they are almost frugal, and they deal with difficult questions—human evil, whether we can truly empathise with others, our exploitation of animals" (*He is both fish and fowl*). Judging from the chapter titles, each addresses vast and challenging topics, especially to be covered in few pages. Anton Leist[16] and Peter Singer[17] in the introduction of *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010) contend that "Coetzee lays all the options before the readers and suggests that they make their own choices" (11) instead of presenting something more essential.

In each chapter, it is evident that the subjects tackled are serious. However, none of the chapters provide clear-cut statements. Instead, much like in actual lessons, they raise questions and push readers out of their comfort zones. In the first chapter, for example, one of the issues discussed is when the interviewer Susan Moebius asks Elizabeth Costello, who is an Australian author, whether it was easy writing from a male perspective. Costello replies as follows: "Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in. Making up an Australia" (12).

Though this explanation for Costello's writerly activity may sound over assertive, in the following pages an interesting conversation about a similar

[16] Professor of Philosophy

[17] Professor of Bioethics

issue takes place between John,[18] Costello's son, and the interviewer Susan. John expresses how, "I got the feeling during the interview that you see her solely as a woman writer or a woman's writer. Would you still consider her a key writer if she were a man?" (22). Susan asks him, "If she were a man?" Then John changes the question and asks her, "All right: if you were a man?" Susan's reply is pivotal: "If I were a man? I don't know. I have never been a man. I will let you know when I have tried it" (22).

In her response, she offers a counter argument to Costello's claim about fabricating someone else's persona. This viewpoint is further reinforced by her son, John, as follows: "But my mother has been a man… She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what it most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?" (22-23). Here Susan comes up with something more interesting when she puts forward the reflection that, "Perhaps. But your mother remains a woman all the same. Whatever she does, she does as woman. She inhabits her characters as a woman does, not a man" (23).

This explanation underscores another perspective of the subject discussed: how one's deeds are marked by one's own idiosyncratic manner. Hence, inevitably, the act of writing too, even a fiction, will carry traces of the writer's mind set and perspective. However, in the later stages of the conversation John continues defending his idea and claims, stating that "I don't

[18] What Coetzee seems to do by using his own first name for Costello's son is to express his former distress with Costello adopting a vegetarian lifestyle. As he used to believe that "we have not made ourselves to be creatures with … a hunger for flesh. We are born like that: it is a given, it is the human condition" ("Meat Country")

see that. I find her men perfectly believable" (23). Nonetheless, Susan objects to this, remarking "You don't see because you wouldn't see. Only a woman would see. It is something between women. If her men are believable, good, I am glad to hear so, but finally it is mimicry. Women are good at mimicry, better at it than men. At parody, even. Our touch is lighter" (23).

As this dialogue example indicates, counter arguments are consistently presented regarding the feasibility of fully representing someone vastly different from oneself. However, by the end of the conversation, no conclusive arguments emerge. The narrative does not progress through a conventional plot. Instead, characters voice diverse perspectives on significant issues without any impositions.

This approach encourages the reader to contemplate these weighty subjects from various angles. Coetzee's novels often present ethical dilemmas or engage with deep philosophical questions. Significantly, this method does not prioritize one point of view. It allows different perspectives to come up almost at random, thereby providing the work with a polyphonic ambiance.

More importantly, this outcome can be related to the nature of writing and being an author. Coetzee explains, "Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them" (*Doubling the Point* 65). In this way, Coetzee inhibits "any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions" (Attridge, "Ethical Modernism" 655). This suggests that Coetzee's approach to writing, which emphasizes dialogue and the interaction of different voices, complicates the process of deriving clear-

cut moral or political messages from his works.

An outstanding example, probably the most striking, of an unsupported counter claim that is put forward is when Costello brings the comparison between the Holocaust and slaughterhouses into question. This subject is presented through a series of arguments and counter arguments, neither of which are explored to the full extent that might allow one to arrive at a final verdict.

The lack of resolution seems intended to frustrate the reader,[19] inducing a disturbingly inconclusive effect that creates discomfort. The reader is not coerced into adopting particular beliefs or facing imposed ideas. Instead, they are presented with aspects that are not necessarily compatible. As such, "Literature invites responses but cannot coerce them" (Gregory 51).

In terms of this comparison, for example, referring to the Nazi era, Costello states that:

> 'They went like sheep to slaughter.' 'They died like animals.' 'The Nazi butchers killed them.' Denunciation of the camps reverberates so completely with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals (64-65).

She pursues her claim, expressing the view that we find ourselves in an environment marked by "an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without and, self- generating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry,

[19] Leist and Singer admit that "Coetzee's typical style of literalness throws the unprepared reader into an uneasy feeling of having been given clues to important meanings but being unable to decipher them" (7).

livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them" (65). This comparison leads to her critique of reason. She argues that humans often treat ideas grounded in reason as the ultimate truth.

However, this Enlightenment-era reasoning is viewed as a form of instrumental reason, which, in Costello's opinion, aligns with a trajectory towards the totalitarian:

> '*Cogito, ergo sum*' he famously said. It is a formula I have always been uncomfortable with. It implies that a living being that does not do what we call thinking is somehow second-class. To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being - not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation - a heavily affective sensation - of being a body with limbs that have extensions in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes' key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell. (78; italics in original)

Importantly, as her explanation suggests, there's a tendency to value the faculty of thinking above other means of perception. As a result, everything outside this cognitive realm is often disregarded. One might argue that one of the most universalizing statements ever made laid the foundation for a rigid, almost divine structure—a tendency to prioritize reason over other methods of understanding being, life, and the universe.

Costello reminds her interlocutors that creatures do not only consist of a faculty of thinking which is reason, but have a heart as well. She maintains her speech by returning to her striking comparison between the Holocaust and the slaughterhouses as follows: "The question to ask should not be: Do we have something in common—reason, self-consciousness, a soul—with other animals? (With the corollary that, if we do not, then we are entitled to treat

them as we like, imprisoning them, killing them, dishonouring their corpses)" (79). This approach— seeking commonality—has become the cornerstone of relationships among humans. Consequently, anyone deviating from the norm risks discrimination or being labelled as deviant, whether human or animal.[20]

Costello, in a sense, tries to question and challenge the underlying and taken for granted ground which is reason as producing absolute and unilateral thinking. She continues her speech on the death camps and points out the fact that, despite the humanity of the victims, they were killed. She explains that:

> they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, 'the another', as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat ('Can I share the being of a bat?') but as another human being" (79; italics in original).

Here, I believe, it is worth mentioning Thomas Nagel's thought provoking article "What is it like to be like a bat?" [1974] in which he forcefully puts "the fact that we cannot expect ever to accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian or bat phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own" (440).

From this perspective, it becomes obvious that the concept of sympathy is instrumental in creating a channel with the Other not based on whether there are any mutual aspects shared with the Other but rather focusing on the central aspect as sharing "the substrate of life" (Coetzee 80), an expression closely

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[20] Coetzee, in his speech for the non-profit Australian organisation Voiceless, delivered on his behalf by the actor Hugo Weaving in 2006, points to the human-animal segregation by referring to the Nazi era and the Holocaust as follows: "What a terrible crime, come to think of it, to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process!" (qtd. in Dawn and Singer 116; italics in original).

related to Anil Seth's remark, bringing animals and human beings to a mutual ground, the "biological drive to stay alive" (*Being You* 190).

By embracing sympathy, Costello has found a way to provide a frame through which a reason based attitude can be addressed critically. The ethical concern raised is about the one-sidedness of acting on reason merely. Once this is recognized it becomes apparent that Costello emphasises the situation of human beings endowed with reason and self-consciousness who "closed their hearts" not with an aim of being sentimental and begetting temporary reactions based on spontaneous emotionality, but indicating the other aspects of human reality neglected for so long and resulting, for Costello, in a totalitarian self that disregards other beings. What Costello emphasizes is the way reason, traditionally viewed as the guiding force for humans, has imbued them with a sense of superiority. This reliance on reason has blinded humans to other forms of perception.

It is not just about animals; it extends to a learned tendency to disregard beings or thoughts that diverge from the accepted norm. In Costello's perspective,[21] human understanding has been moulded by totalitarian and narrow-minded frameworks, inhibiting the ability to see beyond such confinements. In this connection, as Nagel suggests, "it would be fine if someone were to develop concepts and a theory that enabled us to think about those things; but such an understanding may be permanently denied to us by the limits of our nature" (440). This highlights the fundamental limitations in

[21] Seth similarly argues, "a better strategy might be to adopt the beast machine perspective— mine, not the Cartesian version—which traces the origin and function of conscious perception to physiological regulation, and to preservation of the integrity of the organism" that is "how animals respond to supposedly painful events" (*Being You* 243).

human understanding and the challenge of conceptualizing experiences beyond our grasp.

For Levinas, "The judgement of consciousness must refer to a reality beyond the sentence pronounced by history, which is also a cessation and an end. Hence truth requires as its ultimate condition an infinite time, the condition for both goodness and the transcendence of the face" (*Totality and Infinity* 247). This notion implies that understanding and truth are beyond immediate historical or conceptual boundaries, relying on an infinite, transcendent horizon. Given the pivotal nature of Levinas's thinking, the ethical relation with the Other as infinite responsibility is unfolded. Remarkably, in this context, it is revealing why Costello locates signification in sympathy as a means to approach the Other.

After Costello's speech, someone from among the audience comes up with a hail of questions: "Are you saying we should close down the factory farms? Are you saying we should stop eating meat? Are you saying we should treat animals more humanely, kill them more humanely?...Are you saying we should stop experiments *with* animals, even benign psychological experiments like Köhler's? Can you clarify?" (81; italics in original). All these questions might have been rambling dialogically through the reader's mind too, hence, by means of this character, the possible questions or outcomes are given a voice. Costello insists: "I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles…If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (82). From her response, it's apparent that humans conventionally lean toward deriving clear

statements and principles that explicitly back a prevailing mind set, one that seeks the so-called absolute meaning of life. Or when Costello is asked, "What would you say your main message is?" (10), concerning her novel *The House on Eccles Street*, her answer contains, at the same time, a fundamental interrogation of the novel as a genre: "My message? Am I obliged to carry a message?" (10).

In this context, Coetzee refrains from making definitive statements or assertions. He also questions whether it is appropriate for literature, as an art form, to produce didactic ideas at all. That is why categorizing Coetzee's work has been a challenge. He's been labelled as a postcolonial writer, a postmodernist, a metafictionist, and more. His resistance to clear categorization has been a hallmark of his career.

However, this manoeuvre reflects an ethical position: Statements can lose their meaning and validity over time since historical conditions shape situations. Thus, making definitive statements or discussing principles can lock one into a specific perception, which may be limiting.

In this context, Derek Attridge contends that "There is thus an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification or literary response, and there is also a sense in which the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand" (*J. M. Coetzee* 11). In this view, literature challenges the reader not only intellectually but also ethically, urging a deeper engagement with the text and with the Other it represents.

This ethical engagement, however, is not about making rigid or fixed

statements. As Costello suggests, the fine line indicated by 'opening your heart' marks the condition of being ethical; for this does not require fixed and rigid statements but instead, enables one to empty her/himself of resistance.

To further illustrate this point, Costello clarifies her position in the last chapter 'At the Gate', a Kafkaesque dystopia, when she explains to the judges that "beliefs are not only the ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well. That is all" (203). However, the counter arguments put forward to Costello's claims concerning reason and the nonexistence of a possible language shared between human beings and animals are provided by Norma, her daughter in law, John's wife, who has completed a PhD in philosophy. In a conversation with John she expresses that Costello "was trying to make a point about the nature of rational understanding…that animals have their own accounts in accordance with the structure of their own minds, to which we don't have access because we don't share a language with them" (91).

John asks what her point is and Norma maintains her argument emphasising that

> It's naive, John. It's kind of easy, shallow relativism that impresses freshmen. Respect for everyone's world view, the cow's world view, the squirrel's world view, and so forth. In the end it leads to total intellectual paralysis. You spend so much time respecting that you haven't left time to think…Human beings invent mathematics, they build telescopes, they do calculations, they invent mathematics, they construct machines, the press a button, and, bang, *Sojourner* lands on Mars, exactly as predicated. That is why rationality is not just, as your mother claims, a game. Reason provides us with real knowledge of the real world. It has been tested, and it works. You are a physicist. You ought to know. (91-92; italics in original)

She even asserts that "There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason" (93). Norma's arguments are firmly rooted in reason and rationality, focusing on

the undeniable success of scientific progress and the practicality of reason in understanding the world. Her rational perspective, stressing the importance of logic and scientific achievement, contrasts sharply with Costello's ethical approach. The strength and clarity of her arguments make them sound as sensible as Costello's, which leaves the reader perplexed.

So, in this sense, the case with Coetzee's novels is that, aligning with the concept of the Levinasian Other, and as Attridge contends, they "demand, and deserve, responses that do not claim to tell their truths, but ones that participate in their inventive openings" (*J .M. Coetzee* 64).

As demonstrated above, though, there is not just one argument developed and imposed upon the reader; on the contrary, the reader witnesses the conflict of arguments as in a debate, a debate that can be regarded as taking place namely between philosophy and literature. With regards to this, Carrol Clarkson says that "the longstanding controversy between the philosophers and the poets" like "questions of the relation between criticism and fiction, reason and affect, philosophy and the creative arts, are never far from the surface of Coetzee's writing" (*Countervoices*, 109). This tension highlights how Coetzee's works engage with and challenge the boundaries between these intellectual domains.

Similarly, Marshall Gregory argues in his essay "Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters" that "Life and literature both lead us to form reactions that I like to call,…habits of the heart; the typical patterns of our intellectual, emotional, and ethical responses" (57). Gregory believes that stories, which often reflect real life, have the power to morally affect readers. He observes that

people form judgments on stories in a manner similar to their judgments in real life. I believe that Coetzee's approach as an author, urging readers to contemplate these debates without taking a definitive stance, provides insight into the ethical themes his work explores.

For instance, Costello's most striking comparison of the death camps and the slaughterhouses is challenged by the poet, Abraham Stern. He does not attend the dinner organized in Costello's name and instead writes a letter to her pointing out her unfortunate comparison:

> You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way. (94)

This letter is significant in that it does not leave Costello's argument unanswered for, while Costello has been giving her speech, Norma protests angrily that "She can't just be allowed to get away with it! She's confused!" (81). This letter of Abraham Stern, a name of Hebrew origin, gives voice to the possible objections from a Jewish perspective concerning this comparison which, again, is necessary to situate the claims put forward by Costello.

There are many instances where such arguments are put forward and then are followed up with counter arguments that might well be similarly running through the reader's mind, but which are never developed or discussed fully or even brought to full consciousness as thought. Coetzee's novels have often puzzled critics, as is the case with this particular novel. Regarding

Elizabeth Costello, Attridge asserts that it "...leaves us strongly aware that what has mattered, for both Elizabeth Costello and the reader, is the event—literary and ethical at the same time—of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, and not the outcome" (*Ethics* 205).

This suggests a framework of fragmented and undeveloped assertions that resist the formulation of so-called principles and definitive statements. As Patrick Hayes suggests, Coetzee's "writing seeks to hold open divergent ideas of what makes for a good community, and to place them, within the reading experience, in a continually disruptive dialogue with what excludes and forgets" (29). This narrative technique[22] rules out the usual conceptual way of displaying a deterministic attitude so often associated with an authoritative voice.

What is being suggested is that this narrative technique serves as a way of challenging the reader in terms of hindering her/him in the tendency to simply unthinkingly apply an assumed set of corresponding attitudes or argumentative techniques to what are regarded as the familiar conventions of genres and their underpinning structures. As noted earlier, when ideas or concepts become, they inevitably lose meaning over time.

In this respect, there are also some historically important figures like Atatürk, known as the father of Turks, or Napoleon Bonaparte, the French military leader and emperor, that have been so divinized that even now these figures are widely regarded as exempt from being critical assessment. However,

[22] Coetzee's writing has been regarded as philosophical due to its "unusual degree of reflectivity" (Leist and Singer 6).

with the evolving viewpoints presented by movements like 'Me Too'[23] and 'Black Lives Matter',[24] Emmanuel Macron acknowledged the misdeeds of the emperor who was also the first president on the 200th anniversary of his death. Macron clarified that the emperor's action of reinstating slavery was a "mistake" and "a betrayal of the spirit of the Enlightenment" (qtd. in Cohen).

Inevitably, self-perpetuating cycles of reification and generalisation tear the human being from proper close engagement with current realities and with historical change, imprisoning her/him in customary processes and established structures that leave no space for other possibilities. In this instance, the inflexible and self-validating structure under criticism is the thought system grounded in reason. This system operates to discredit alternative modes of perception.

For this reason, it becomes pivotal to see with an "estranged eye," as Clarkson brilliantly highlights, making use of Shklovsky's view on art, "The process of perception may be an aesthetic end in itself, but in turn, this aesthetic end has the potential to form the basis of ethical practice in the sense that Coetzee understands ethical practice", which is "a way of life that provides the means for interrogating existence" (*Countervoices* 111). Hence "To look at the

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[23] The Me Too (also known as #MeToo) movement is a social movement encouraging people to stand out against sexual harassment and sexual abuse. This expression was originally used by Tarana Burke, an American activist, in 2006, to create awareness of women who had been sexually assaulted. Harvey Weinstein, a wealthy American film producer has become the symbolic case of this movement in being convicted of rape and sexual assault.

[24] Black Lives Matter (also known as #BlackLivesMatter) movement is a civil rights movement committed to bringing justice to Black people by standing up to racism and especially police brutality against Black people all over the world. In 2013, it started with the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter after George Zimmerman was acquitted of shooting death Trayvon Martin, a 17- year-old African American teenager. After George Floyd's death in police custody May, 2020 large and organised demonstrations took place across US, making "it the largest movement in the country's history" (Buchanan et al).

world with an' estranged eye' is to see things from a different perspective, which is perhaps one way of initiating that interrogation" (111).

An example concerning the idea of perceiving life from different angles might be Costello's sister known as 'Sister Bridget' but whose name actually is Blanche. She works at a hospital where people suffering from AIDS are taken care of. She explains to Costello, who has come to visit her after many years, that "To the people who come to Marianhill I promise nothing except that we will help them to bear the cross" (141). In a similar aim, Costello tells her sister that she had sexual contact with an elderly man dying from cancer, so as to provide comfort in all his pain. Although they share similar goals, they achieve them in distinct ways. Naturally, what Costello did here remains incomprehensible to Blanche and perhaps to some readers.

This ambiguity and lack of clear moral resolution is a hallmark of Coetzee's writing. That none of the chapters of the book come up with single verdicts on issues serves mostly to create confusion in the minds of readers whilst raising at least some awareness of the limits of established ways of knowing. As a result, Coetzee is often regarded as a postmodernist writer due to his use of postmodernist techniques.

Attridge states, "Because of its use of nonrealist or antirealist devices, its allusiveness, and its metafictional proclivities, Coetzee's fiction is often adduced as an example of 'postmodernism'" (*J. M. Coetzee* 2). However, rather than classifying him as modernist, Attridge suggests we "characterize his works as an instance of 'late modernism,' or perhaps 'neomodernism.' Coetzee follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth" (2). As Attridge

makes it clear, Coetzee's literary style and writing can often be characterized by a rejection of traditional narrative structures. His willingness to experiment with form and language aims to explore the complexities of the modern world as is the case in many of his novels.

his experimental approach is particularly evident in the chapters of *Elizabeth Costello,* "all eight lessons represent versions of material Coetzee has represented in a range of academic contexts over something less than a decade, in each case using Elizabeth Costello as their protagonist" (Mulhall 139).

Elizabeth Costello received varying critiques of its form and "Its strange mixture of fiction, lecture and semi-autobiographical elements has caused some suspicion among critics and reviewers about what they perceive as an ideological programme on Coetzee's part. Other critics give Coetzee the benefit of the doubt" (Smuts 65).

This critical divide highlights the novel's refusal to provide definite statements despite addressing significant issues in the lessons. Its non-specific genre, which challenges deterministic structures, exposes the inherent limitations of such frameworks. Basically, the fundamental point denoted is the need to put into question the presumed concept of the existence of an ultimate or general truth.

This questioning of absolute truths invites an ethical dimension that aligns with Levinas's thought concerning the Other, who calls the self to responsibility. Here, it can be argued that the work similarly calls its reader to a sense of responsibility by prompting self-examination. This can be considered a

form of challenge. This challenge encourages the reader to move beyond this taken for granted absolutism and universalism in order to move towards a more situated and embodied view of knowledge and the reality of the body of flesh and bone, rather than that of abstract and constructed ideas, concepts and principles which serve as imaginary confinements.

In line with this, Costello highlights the case with the broken word-mirror, stating that "The dictionary that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, where in pious Roman homes the household gods were kept, has become just one code book among many" (19). That is, the words do not "mean what" they "mean" (19) and that "There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts" (19). This expression can be related to Jacques Derrida's perspective on writing as an iterative structure. He argues in his influential essay "Signature, Event, Context" that every sign, "linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written...can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion" (9). This aligns with Costello's view that meaning and identity are no longer fixed, but continually redefined through language and performance.

In similar vein, Costello points to the present situation as conveyed by Stephen Mulhall in his book *The Wounded Animal* (2009): "our notions of a literary canon or tradition, and of individual literary genius, both set within broader cultural frameworks and assumptions, live under the threat of irreparable de-devinization" (164). Nonetheless, the danger of the "word-mirror" being "broken, irreparably" (19) suggests, as one might contend, the

liberation of individuals from the cycle of unexamined assumptions. This cycle hinders one from questioning and adopting the kind of specificity that allows individuals to become more attuned to the impacts of their actions.

In this respect, it also suggests an urge to disrupt the totality of the text engaging with a postmodern refusal of the concept of absolute truth as this supposes "that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring" (Derrida, "Sign" 9).

Similarly, in contradiction with what the interviewer Susan Moebius had expected Costello to be when John expresses her thoughts in words, she says,

> you are baffled even if you won't admit, by the mystery of the divine in the human. You know there is something special about my mother—that is what draws you to her—yet when you meet her she turns out to be just an ordinary old woman. You can't square the two. You want an explanation. You want a clue, a sign, if not from her then from me (28).

However, Costello is a human being of flesh and blood like any other human being and will not accede to the idea of being someone magical by virtue of being an author.

On their way back home, after the prize ceremony, John observes his mother, "*whose words you* [people] *hang on as if she were the sibyl*" (30) or "*the oracle*" (31), and he realizes that:

> He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it (34).

The inclination towards sacralization is, in fact, an outcome of the desire to uncover divine inspiration and employ her work to attain a simplistic

perception of reality. This is evident in the perspective of John and Susan Moebius, who perceive Costello as possessing goddess-like attributes.

However, the structure of the novel itself resists such simplistic interpretations. There is no plot and no organic relation between the chapters of the novel in terms of an ongoing event apart from the existence of the main character Elizabeth Costello. Each chapter provides a different perspective, however, "None of the pieces arrives at a single verdict, any more than any of Coetzee's long fictions arrives at certain truth" (Lenta 106).

Rather, Coetzee builds up different perspectives and "He has preferred not to locate truth within a particular character or position in his story…where no one voice can be relied on to offer the only right view of events" (Lenta 107). Differently put, Coetzee's work cannot be positioned within peculiar boundaries voicing clear cut arguments and opinions discretely through his characters.[25] He thereby avoids being authoritative and deterministic. Furthermore, this implies that these varied arguments and perspectives function as deliberate interjections, compelling the reader to suspend or reconsider their initial judgments.

As Margaret Lenta suggests, his "novels present a polyphony of voices, which readers may understand in order to form their own positions. In the Lessons the position is similar, though characters other than Costello herself are rarely developed beyond the functional" (107). This narrative technique, where ideas are presented without clear imposition or defense, reflects Coetzee's broader approach to literature.

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[25] The case is that Coetzee permits his characters a certain freedom "because he requires, in fact insists, that his characters at least appear beyond his control - have a life of their own" (Ashcroft 5).

By not defending or imposing a specific idea of his own, Coetzee demonstrates that "*Elizabeth Costello* expresses positions on a number of issues but expresses them in such a way as to call attention to their limitations" (Deckard and Palm 343). Coetzee questions the place, role and function of reason throughout his writing and not simply in *Elizabeth Costello*. Effectively, Coetzee employs varying perspectives that resist merging into a unanimous and absolute conclusion since, as Clarkson puts it, "there is no dominating authorial consciousness; instead the reader is presented with a number of competing voices and discourses" (*Countervoices* 9). In doing so, he not only underscores the limitations of statements and ideas rooted solely in a narrow understanding of reason, which in reality represent just one facet of existence, but also points to the limitations of comprehension itself. By emphasising this inability, however, his text sets out to explore too how there must exist other modes and angles of perception.

This ethical engagement, which replaces the idealistic quest for truth, is embodied in what Attridge suggests that "The singularity of the literary work is produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformations of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from inventiveness" (*J. M.Coetzee* 11). This highlights how the ethical engagement in Coetzee's work is tied to the creation of new ways of thinking, challenging conventional norms and offering readers new perspectives.

So Coetzee, by avoiding coming up with definitive statements and eluding conventional representations, keeps the door open for the consideration

of other means of interpretations and perspectives. As Costello puts it, “In my work a belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances” (200). She remarks on the risky and mostly ignored outcome of believing in something absolutely. Indeed, by emptying herself of resistance, she opens up space for other possibilities and perspectives to survive.

Hence, in *Elizabeth Costello,* the reader’s experience of indeterminacy in terms of claims put forward by Coetzee in a counteractive way estranges the reader not only from the character but also from the work. The reader is prevented from becoming immersed in the work as well as being judgmental about what it depicts. Quite clearly, the reader is not allowed to empathise as empathising can bring along with it a sense of the right to judge. In other words, any casual attempt to empathise with someone does not genuinely engage with their singularity; instead, it invisibly underpins a greater effort to avoid confronting and refuting the uniqueness of the Other.

This fallacy of being capable of full empathy, referring to the latent tendency of the attempt to have some sort of control over the Other despite the protestation of goodwill, has been developed in the work of Levinas as follows:

> A separation of the I that is not the reciprocal of the transcendence of the other with regard to me is not an eventuality thought of only by quintessential abstractors. It imposes itself upon meditation in the name of a concrete moral experience: what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. (*Totality and Infinity* 53).

Levinas outlines the problematic situation of empathy which deduces an idea of the Other from self-based experiences, and attempts to think in the name of the Other.

Coetzee's fiction suggests a critical stance towards this precarious approach. It becomes evident within his works that he rejects speaking on behalf of the Other, a stance exemplified by characters like Costello. She remains beyond the reader's comprehension, and in her refusal to be fully understood, she paradoxically displays her singularity. Thus, Attridge suggests that the reader is not merely a passive observer of "this responsibility [to and for the Other] at work in the fiction, but, thanks to its inventive re-creation of the forms and conversations of the literary, experiences, in a manner at once pleasurable and disturbing, its inescapable demands" (*J. M. Coetzee* 31).

This aspect of reading a literary work can be relevant to Levinas's concept asymmetry. Levinas delineates that "This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization" (*Totality and Infinity* 53). Remarkably, he defines this situation as "metaphysical asymmetry" and clearly believes that it underscores the ethical relation to the Other by refusing the totalizing attitude of the self: "Possession is preeminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine" (46). Thus Coetzee, in a similar way, by keeping the reader at a distance and shocking and disorienting her/him through the indeterminacy and ambiguity introduced by his counteractive claims, also discomforts the reader, troubles the reader in her/his own beliefs, actually all too often merely preconceived ideas. Moreover, in this way, as Clarkson asserts, "the readiness to engage you, the unknown reader, in ways that will not have been determined in advance, constitutes the freedom,

but also the risk, of the literary encounter" (*Countervoices* 59). This highlights how the text actively invites the reader into an open-ended engagement, where meaning is co-created rather than predetermined, emphasizing the unpredictable and dynamic nature of the literary experience.

His narrative technique, with an effort of refusing and/or challenging totalization, strives to break the dominating intentionality of the reader. The corollary is that he forces the reader to question her/himself by disrupting and/or pausing his/her regular ways of seeing. In doing so, the reader is asked to suspend her/his present point of view so as to open up ways to move beyond existing paradigms. Coetzee problematizes the conceptual structuring of a deterministic attitude in developing the form of his novel. He gives voice to ideas rather than representing specific characters. For Attridge, this suggests, "The distinctiveness of the ethical in literature, and in artworks more generally, is that it occurs as an *event* in the process of reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed or ignored" ("Ethical Modernism" 654; italics in original).

Coetzee is breaking up regularities and he achieves this, as Smuts insists referring to Attridge's argument, by a "measured avoidance of inscription into 'the ideologically-determined voice which the canon grants'" (64). Effectively, he defies the deterministic force granted by the canon so as to give voice to and open up manifold possibilities. That is why the reader is puzzled by Coetzee's writing, as in the case of *Elizabeth Costello.* In this sense, Coetzee

> gives us a new register for reading, a new code with which to approach the subject of the text. In the end, readers share Elizabeth's fate: we cannot transcend structure, we cannot escape from shapes through which we comprehend the world. What the structure of *Elizabeth Costello* does, though, is to alert us to the presence of real things beyond those shapes, like realism, we have inherited from tradition - it gives primacy to the experience of reading, rather than the conclusions derived from reading. (Smuts 75)

His narrative technique, in other words, indicates the necessity for looking beyond structures that condition one to uniform ways of looking at things. Attridge further suggest that "Coetzee has used a variety of formal devices that disrupt the realistic surface of the writing, reminding the reader forcibly of the conventionality of the fictional text" ("Ethical Modernism" 655). This disruption compels readers to question not only the conventions of storytelling but also the assumptions underlying their own perceptions, thus encouraging a more critical and self-aware engagement with the text.

Building on this, the novel's form and narrative technique play a significant role. By sidestepping definitive statements, the genre avoids the perilous trap of constraining oneself within narrow boundaries of these statements. Instead, it sustains a cycle of inquiry, preventing premature definitions and judgments from taking hold. Succinctly put, the fallacious aspect of propositional thinking and uttering is that such statements operate to such incarcerating effect that the possessor of the statements restricts her/himself in a world and world view that is then used to confine others. Coetzee offers revealing insight into the suppression and restricting effect of deterministic structures. In the first chapter, 'Realism,' Costello and her son John are introduced, and she gives her prize speech at Alton college. However, the

ensuing structure of the chapter resists conventional narrative development.

> Dissimilarly, Coetzee, by interfering in the narration by mentioning some features of realism, reminds the reader that s/he is reading a story and holds the reader at a distance so as to prevent her/him from becoming absorbed in the narrative. Indeed, at times when one would expect, as reader, to be absorbed by the narrative, Coetzee, as author, interferes: "The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe" (4) or, when right at the beginning, he mentions that There is first of all the problem of opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a single bridging problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. Let assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory where we want to be. (1)

As can be inferred, he puts instructive comments and metacommentary into the developing story which result in the reader having to take a step back and realize that s/he is reading a piece of fiction. Hence, he ensures that the reader keeps a distance, breaking the tendency to get involved in the narrative and, at the same time, preventing the reader from empathising with any character in the narrative. He gives clues as to how realism as a genre works and tries to make the reader realize that it is a constructed structure.

As Dirk Klopper observes though:

> Once this narrative world has been put in place, the self-reflexive references to fictional devices are abandoned and the narrative subsequently sustains the illusion that it describes an actual person, deals with rap-life experience and issues and is set in geographically identifiable locations. In other words, the narrative projects the illusion of realism" (119-120).

By the same token, Coetzee, by inserting these instructive parts points out the nature of structures and how they work on readers. In terms of form, as

expressed by Klopper, the narrative in the first chapter called 'Realism' starts by drawing attention to the fictiveness of the work, and tries to display how structures work. Here, I would like to refer to Anna Kornbluh, who takes a renewed approach to formalism in her work *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*, especially within the realm of literary studies. She asserts, "Novels know that the worlds they build are artificial, artifacted, designed, and this is how they know that the same is true of any world; in their self-concept they effectuate political formalism" (55). That is that novels, through their self- awareness as constructs, can illuminate the constructed nature of our perceived reality as *Elizabeth Costello* does.

In the ensuing six chapters—'The Novel in Africa,' 'The Lives of Animals (The philosophers and the Animals),' 'The Lives of Animals (The Poets and the Animals),' 'The Humanities in Africa,' 'The Problem of Evil,' 'Eros,' — the work develops without the "fictional devices" serving as warning signals of the constructed nature of the imaginary world of the story. While the first chapter displays the constructed status of the structures, in the next six chapters the reader finds her/himself absorbed into the world of the novel despite its incoherence, general disconnectedness between chapters and non-empathetic characters. However, in the final chapter, the blinding impact of the vicious circle set in motion by these structures is highlighted. This is exemplified through Costello's challenging encounter with the judges, whom she perceives as having a "troublingly comic feature." She regards them as "...excessively literary", similar to a caricaturist's conception of a bench of judges (200). This chapter 'At the Gate' concerns the inevitable situation of

becoming entrapped in structures despite the fact of being warned about the fictiveness of the work beforehand. For this reason, at one point, in addition to embodying an individual entangled in deterministic structures, beliefs, systems, and ideas, Costello can also be viewed as representing what the reader undergoes during the act of reading. This dynamic highlights the reader's own struggle to engage their will attentively and thoughtfully.

When we turn back to the first chapter 'Realism', as Smuts points out, the situation foregrounded is that "readers acquire a sense that they are about to engage with mediated reality, and that this mediated reality produces the experience of meaning, which is central to the experience of subjective reality itself" (68). In other words, the reader is prompted to construct their own version of reality using the clues supplied by the structure. However, the reality thus formed is actually shaped by the predetermined framework of the structure in question. So, then, the reality turns into a predetermined design arising out of the dominant structure.

Moreover, Costello remarks in her speech that "The word-mirror is broken irreparably, it seems…The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each proclaiming 'I mean what I mean!'" (19). It follows that she points out that the rule of a signifier signifying in relation to one specific signified has come to an end and, rather, that it may indeed resonate with respect to many possible signifieds. This draws attention to the multiplicity of meanings along with the emerging uncertainty and the disappearing belief of the representation in things as they are.

Derrida's deconstructionist literary thinking, influenced by Levinas's

thought on the Other, aids us in looking beyond the emerging uncertainty in a literary text, specifically in *Elizabeth Costello*. As Simon Critchley notes, "the textual practice of deconstructive reading can and, moreover, should be understood as an ethical demand" (1). In relation to the concept of uncertainty, the claim is that "…deconstruction is a 'philosophy' of hesitation, although it must be understood that such hesitation is not arbitrary, contingent, or indeterminate, but rather, a rigorous, strictly determinate hesitation: the 'experience' of undecidability" (*Ethics* 42). Needles to say, it expresses the essential ethical concerns that make it possible to break free from the limitations of ontology. In this connection, Smuts asks "what is at stake in the act of reading and writing if there is no clear code on which to base a mutual understanding?" (68). While this might appear to be a lamentable circumstance, conversely, one could argue that it is not a matter of deploring. Instead, subjective literary realities are established, referring to multiple methods of constructing realities that emphasize alternative ways of perceiving them. This, in a way, also refers to the singularity of a work—for the self-revelation of a work will differ from one reader to another in that, that the work never discloses itself completely and finitely as Attridge insists: "The otherness of the work is inseparable from what might be called its *singularity* and its *inventiveness*" ("Ethical Modernism" 654; italics in original).

Remarkably, in *Elizabeth Costello,* the case is that the reader is asked not only to realize the otherness and singularity of the work itself, but also of the character, which is Elizabeth Costello. This twofold demand gestures to the

responsibility of the reader in terms of reading responsibly. The act of reading can be seen as an ethical encounter not just with the text or author but also with the characters within a narrative (to which I will return later).

The major tendency, however, is to try to put the work into known frameworks and to interpret it along with preconceived conceptual apparatuses with an aim of giving meaning to it. This tendency, the attempt to dominate can be overcome through a deconstructionist reading.

As stated by Critchley, "The deconstruction of logocentrism proceeds by showing how the limit, or closure, of a logocentric text is irreducibly flawed. The closure with which a text's dominant interpretation surrounds itself is shown to possess certain faults, or breaks, which are the marks of an alterity which the text is unable to reduce" (*The Ethics* 74). This idea of irreducible alterity can be linked to Costello's critique of rigid perspectives, as when she describes the "concentrated gaze of everyone in the room" (19-20), highlighting the oppressive nature of fixed and reductive views.

I suggest that this concept can be closely associated with the notion of 'controlled hallucination' explained in the introduction part. As Anil Seth pointedly puts it, "It's just that when we agree about our hallucinations, that what we call reality" (*Being You* 87). That is, the majority being in agreement on an issue completely. She continues her argument: "Remove your gaze for an instant, and the mirror falls to the floor and shatters" (20), pointing out the illusory aspect of structures. This parallel highlights how both Seth's and Costello's perspectives challenge the perceived stability of reality, suggesting that it is held together by collective agreement rather than inherent truth.

As Smuts acknowledges, “certain literary structures, like realism, become so entrenched that one does not question them, or even notice them. The form becomes rigid, totalitarian: it seeks to propagate itself without regard for the consequences of its reception” (69). Remarkably, in this construction, the text turns into an enclosed system where the characters lose their contingent status. As such, Iris Murdoch foregrounds in her essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” that “the contingency of the characters must be respected” and “defended for it is the essence of personality” (*Existentialists and Mystics* 285). According to her account, “A novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in; and to combine form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways is the highest art of prose” (286).

So, in a similar way, Coetzee too provides his characters with that space of freedom by creating works operating outside of dominant and rigid literary structures, in particular those of formal realism. There is strong evidence to suggest that Coetzee’s work and the Other in Levinas bear common effects of unsettling entrenched practices of the reader and the self. For reasons ethical, in both cases, the reader and the self are requested to cast aside set expectations as “the other absolutely other—the Other—does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 197). This approach points to ways in which the reader and the self are positioned differently by being asked to push their own boundaries in order to expand awareness and generate the possibility of modes of justice.

Building on this ethical dimension, Coetzee, by means of his experiment with narrative technique, manages to exemplify how “the totalitarian

propensities of structure" work. His character Costello finds herself stuck in the deterministic and totalitarian structure which underscores her confinement within structures. Hence the work interrogates the ways in which totalitarian structures prevent one from existing freely as one conforms to preset formulations of such structures. As a result, in line with Attridge's claim with regards to a work's inventiveness "It may be said that the mode of reading which Coetzee's works gives rise to in turn gives rise to a philosophical mode of thinking, which often occurs through a sense of estrangement (or defamiliarization)" (Wilm, *The Slow* 13).

In the novel, that Costello is undefined and estranged in the eyes of the reader, in a way, evinces her resistance to deterministic approaches. Her situation as a fictive character in a constructed world emphasizes dilemmas inherent in representing the Other. It suggests that the character's fictional status in a created narrative setting highlights challenges associated with representing or portraying the Other, which is described by Attridge "as textual otherness, or textualterity: a verbal artefact that estranges as it entices, that foregrounds the Symbolic as it exploits the Imaginary, that speaks of that about which it has to remain silent" (*J. M. Coetzee* 30). One can assume that this is why Coetzee frequently employs allegory and metafiction in his narratives.

Her confinement becomes apparent especially when she is asked to make definitions about herself in the last chapter which, like the first chapter, contains fictive qualities, called 'At the Gate'. As Costello moves to pass through the gate, however, an officer tells her that "First you must make a

statement" (193). "A statement of what?", she asks. The man, replies "Belief. What you believe" (194). This gate can be seen as an entrance to the society of believers, which, in this context, refers to the majority. In this society, individuals who make definitive statements possess clear-cut beliefs, and such statements become the sole means of joining the majority.

This perspective represents one interpretation of the 'representations' within liberal democracy. Without a belief or a statement to share, one is marginalized, often resembling an animal,[26] and deemed inadequate or irrational to conform to the ideal construct of a human being. As stated by one of the judges "Without beliefs we are not human" (200), but Costello explains that "In my work a belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances" (200).

Costello's explanation alludes to the potential violence inherent in possessing beliefs and issuing statements, as they might hinder the endeavour to preserve the Other without reducing it to sameness. From this perspective, the primary challenges of holding beliefs and expressing statements revolve around two key issues: firstly, the confinement within the narrow confines of these beliefs and statements, and secondly, the tendency to evaluate everything and everyone through the lens of these beliefs and statements. This habit poses a direct threat to the relationship between the self and the Other, which is formulated as "metaphysical asymmetry," as it ultimately reduces the Other to

[26] Ido Geiger, in relation to Coetzee's interest in animal rights, points out that Coetzee, like Kafka, "follows these animal lives to the bitter unsayable end. Unlike Hegel, he will not assimilate them into the order of reason" (158).

mere sameness.

The issue with language and writing arises when questioning whether it is possible to remain outside the cycle of making statements and holding beliefs through the use of language and writing. The critical issue regarding language and writing is that one often finds oneself trapped in this cycle, as language itself is a structure created by humans. The pertinent question then arises: is it the constraints of language that limit the scope of our statements? It is, therefore, a case of the power dynamics inherent in language: its ability to define, include, exclude, and shape perceptions of the Other. But when used with self-awareness, language can offer a powerful means to represent and view the other more authentically.

Klopper, in this regard, makes a noteworthy point:

> *Elizabeth Costello* demonstrates that we have only language by means of which to engage with the question of language. There is no stepping outside to transcend its limits. Any determination in language requires a subjection to the limits of language. At best we can step outside a particular discursive formation (the narrative) into another discursive formation (the postscript), thereby redrawing the boundary and creating another determination. This finitude, this occupation of a horizon of determination, is paradoxically the very condition of infinitude, of an endless constitution and reconstitution of the experience of being in the world, an experience that contains the possibility of realism and allegory, fixity and displacement, familiarity and otherness, self-possession and self-transcendence. (130)

From this, the problem of language having limits can be overcome as exemplified in *Elizabeth Costello* by recreating other determinations which enable one to escape the previous constructions as exclusive signifier/signified: "for the very idea that representations might embody reality seems naive and

jejune, evincing a hopeless failure to appreciate the obvious and inexpungable difference between words and world - between the phrase 'a glass of water' and a glass of water" (Mulhall 163). This distinction emphasises how language, rather than capturing reality, constructs its own systems of meaning that can be deconstructed or reimagined.

The peak of the novel's mode of narrative self subversion is reached in the last chapter, 'At the Gate', finally exposing the fictiveness of the situation that Costello *as a character* is exposed to. The narrative is in pursuit of the real, perhaps, even as it lays bare its own fictiveness. The postscript, engaging the question of the transcendence of language indicates the ambiguous nature of representation that takes place in literary works.

Hence, just as Levinas seeks to shield the Other from the aggression of the self, the text transcends in relation to the self's comprehension, in this case, the reader. The problem with language is its delay in conveying meaning. Though Lord Chandos[27] suffers from the challenges of language, the reality is that it helps break the restrictive chains of structures. Contrarily, the vulnerable point literary texts[28] highlight is the reality of bodily existence that exceeds the constructed ideas and structures distancing the embodied self from the real world.

All things might be different from what they seem to be. The body,

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[27] Lord Chandos is a fictional character writing a letter to Sir Francis Bacon called "The Letter of Lord Chandos". This fictional letter is composed by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and was published in a newspaper in Berlin in 1902. The letter voices "the lament of a gifted writer who feels the sources of poetry, his very medium, language, drying up in his mind" (Schwarz 22).

[28] In this connection, Elisa Aaltola claims regarding Coetzee's understanding of "alternative animal ethics" that he prioritizes "poetry, virtues, emotion, and imagination" instead of "theory and its concentration on principles and reason" (141).

including that of animals, can be regarded as an entity shared with every being. Thus, in this context, it can be argued that the focus on the body illuminates the potential understanding of a more profound and genuinely vulnerable reality, both beyond and deeply entrenched within the structure's paralyzing and limiting capacity. Evidently, this aspect not only entails discussion of bodily existence, but it also highlights the role of language in laying bare the paralysing and limiting work of structures.

Literary language provides a means to approach an understanding of this situation, albeit gesturally. More precisely, it acts as a tool to counter the inclination in criticism and reading to pin down specific meanings. It aids in protecting the Other from the self's harassment, and simultaneously allows the self, constantly at odds with its own conflicting ideas, to explore varied interpretations, forging paths away from deterministic structures.

Through its formal disruption, *Elizabeth Costello*, the novel, says something that Elizabeth Costello *as a character* is unable to say. As Attridge succinctly puts it, "Since it is language that has played a major role in producing (and simultaneously occluding) the other, it is in language –language aware of its ideological effects, alert to its own capacity to impose silence as it speaks – that the force of the other can be most strongly represented" (*J. M. Coetzee* 30). This irony is achieved by neither confining the character to a restrictive structure nor attempting to represent her from all perspectives. On the contrary, quite the opposite. Coetzee achieves this not by explicitly representing Costello, but rather by emphasizing her unrepresentability, which renders her inaccessible. Clearly, this challenges the notion that language inherently has

limits.

As Simon Critchley rightly contends: “Literature is an attempt at saying nothing” (*Very little* 44). It is precisely this quality of literature, particularly in Coetzee’s works, that allows characters to surpass the reader’s understanding.

This problem of language, as a structure having limits, is further interrogated in *Elizabeth Costello* as clearly expressed by Smut: “The irony is palpable. In her fiction world, Costello is a writer who channels voices; she is also a voice being channelled through another writer, namely J. M. Coetzee… She feels stuck in a clichéd, constructed world: ‘She cannot stand the literariness of it all’” (70). In one sense, Costello underscores the notion that one is never truly free.

Instead, one is always, whether consciously or unconsciously, bound to structures, thereby channelling the voices of the ‘powers beyond us.’ When asked about her beliefs, Costello demonstrates that endorsing a belief backed by logical arguments might just be an inevitable consequence of a totalitarian system rooted solely in blind faith in reason. The outcome/result is a disregard for the body in terms of its existential significance. However, Costello, in a very Kafkaesque manner, with an effort of resisting this deterministic structure, tells the judges, who represent a social structure whose judgement is final, that she simply believes in the frogs:

> When waters subsided - I am speaking of the waters of one river in particular now, the Dulgannon - acres of mud were left behind. At night you would hear the belling of tens of thousands of little frogs rejoicing in the largesse of the heavens. The air would be as dense with their calls as it was at noon with the rasping of cicadas. Where do they suddenly arrive from, these thousands of frogs? The answer is, they are always

> there. In the dry season they go underground, burrowing further and further form the heat of the sun until each has created a little tomb for itself. And in those tombs they die, so to speak. Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the colour of mud. Once again the nights are silent. Silent until the next rains come, rapping, as it were, on thousands of tiny coffin lids. In those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake.[29] As the caked mud softens, the frogs begin to dig their way out, and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens…it is a story I present transparently, without disguise. Why? Because today I am before you not as a writer but as an old woman who was once a child, telling you what I remember of the Dulgannon mudflats of my childhood and of the frogs who live there, some as small as the tip of my little finger, creatures so insignificant and so remote from our loftier concerns that you would not hear of them otherwise. (216-217)

Costello refers to being an old woman, a human being, rather than her role and function as an author, which is only one part of her identity. She points to her corporeal existence, which precedes her identity as an author. This can also be interpreted as a response of existential significance, similar to the frogs, whose existence is unknown to the judges Costello confronts.

Like the frogs, Costello is deeply embedded in life and does not require validation from the judges to understand her existence. These judges are characterized by their pursuit to attribute meaning to everything and their search for a logical basis for judgment. The story about the frogs is "realist", but sounds very irrational to the judges, and as Costello makes it clear "…the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing" (217).

However, it is evident that the realist tale of the frogs appears

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[29] *When we Dead Awaken* [1899], last play by Henrik Ibsen, is regarded as an obscure work of art based upon its structure mixed with symbolic and realistic elements. It has been acknowledged that "Ibsen presents a gloomy, yet sober, judgment on his oeuvre; he refuses to offer closure, and instead exposes his dramatic form to a new temporal horizon, leaving it unfinished" (Sorensen 28). Costello implying this play can be read with a similar motive too.

disconnected in relation to the lesson from 'At the Gate,' which is a kind of allegory manqué. Importantly, her answer points to the sphere outside reason and the necessity of moving beyond dominant constructed images by referring to the status of bodily existence. She maintains her speech telling them that, despite the literariness of the situation,

> the Australian continent, where I was born into the world, kicking and squalling, is real (if far away), the Dulgannon and its mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them…I speak to you of frogs. Of frogs and of my belief or belief and of the relation between the former and the latter. Because they exist (217-218).

Her long story about the frogs[30] as an answer to the question of what she believes in is provoking to the reader too. Indeed, her response confounds the judges, who anticipated something more logical and reasonable, something within their realm of understanding or aligned with their way of thinking, to make sense of what Costello presents as her belief.

Contrary to the judges' expectations, which are confined to their understanding and the prevailing views of the majority, Costello shares a story about the life cycles of frogs. She emphasizes that these frogs are real, possess a desire for life, and remain indifferent to whether one believes in them or not. She subtly alludes to the frogs' genuine existence, which lies outside the constructs humans create and restrict themselves to. Frogs lack the human type of self-consciousness that depends on the Other for self-affirmation. Thus, these

[30] In a rare interview conducted by Henrik Engström, Coetzee, when asked whether he had a special relation to a specific animal, explains that he has no pets but "I have what I consider to be personal relations to the birds and frogs that visit or live upon the land I 'own,' but I do not for a minute believe they have personal relations with me" ("Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature"). His answer highlights human being's problematical tendency of reducing existence into a humanistic framework and ascribing significance to everything in relation to the human as pointed out earlier by Elizabeth.

frogs are unconcerned with recognition; their indifference underscores their genuine, bodily existence and their inherent desire for life, which, while similar, is distinct from that of human beings.

Moreover, "finding our way into the being of another is not something sayable or readable. It is not something verifiable or refutable—nothing we can say is true to the facts" (Geiger 157). Eventually, the judges' lack of knowledge about the existence of these frogs does not put an end to their existence. Hence, the acknowledgment from another, pivotal for humans in affirming their existence and inherently self-centered and reciprocal, is irrelevant to frogs. They do not exist within constructs made by humans, which inherently serve to detach humans from real life.[31]

So, in one respect, Costello by giving such an answer, manages to elude the limits of comprehension of the judges and, moreover, reveals the way their structures work. If it does not align with what is generally accepted or fall within the purview of the "concentrated gaze," it is doomed to fail—much like Costello, who cannot pass the gate, John in *Boyhood,* who faces harassment by the Afrikaans kids, and Friday, whose silence excludes him from the prevailing narrative. She does not give an answer demanded from or expected by the judges as

> Their system of adjudication, their formalistic approach to belief, their barefaced commitment to the tenets of reason and normative structure render Costello's pleas utterly foreign to their understanding. In other words, the judges' allegiance to a rigidity of form precludes the possibility of interaction with her subjective reality (Smuts 71).

[31] In this context, Seth argues that consciousness is not necessarily tied to intelligence but to the biological drive of being alive. His work on consciousness initiates a compelling and innovative discussion on how consciousness serves as a means of survival.

Coetzee's "self-reflexively aware" text again refers to the finitude of deterministic and totalitarian structures, leaving no space to move, as in the situation of Costello herself. This is why Costello exclaims that we "close our hearts." This statement unveils another facet of authenticity tied to emotionality, or in other words, perceived weakness in the eyes of the judges, in contrast to the broad-brush capacity of reason, which is deemed powerful. In a similar way, a comparison between Red Peter[32] and Elizabeth Costello can be made in terms of them both conveying a speech that is not in line with the expectations of the audience. It can be assumed that "The true identity of the animal and the poet is dismissed and devalued: they will only be accepted when disguised in the humanistic, academic veil"(Aaltola 122). This suggests that, much like Red Peter, Costello represents the individual stripped of their essence due to authority and power, with society imposing its ideas upon them and creating a constrictive framework that treats individuals as mere puppets, similar to characters in a novel.

From this viewpoint, anyone unwilling to conform to the majority's definitions is inevitably cast out. This stems from the master-slave dynamic, with the emphasis on mutual recognition rooted in aligning with the majority's expectations. However, the central question to be asked, I believe, is whether this recognition is voluntary or is it rather a forced fitting into the position prompted by the established norms of the society? In effect, when the necessary recognition does not occur, it can lead the individual to harbour suspicions and

[32] Red Peter is the narrator in a short story *A Report to an Academy* [1917] by Franz Kafka. Red Peter, an ape, offers an academy a report on how he learned to behave like a human. Costello providing Red Peter's account seems to address issues of evolutionary theory. For this reason, it is arguable that Costello might be pointing to the mutual past of humans and apes as embedded in life likewise.

begin questioning themselves. This is because there is an inherent tendency to seek recognition or approval from others, often symbolizing the majority, which in turn represents the possession of truth and power.

Generally, to become a part of society, individuals often find themselves in conflict with their own identity, as society pressures them to conform to widely accepted and recognized norms, prompting them to relinquish their unique characteristics. In this respect, it is evident that otherness issues a challenge to the same; however, the miscomprehended aspect is that it is not a threat as widely acknowledged, but as brilliantly addressed by Levinas: “The Other is not the negation of the same, as Hegel would like to say. The fundamental fact of the ontological scission into same and other is a non-allergic relation of the same with the other” (*Totality and Infinity* 305).

While Levinas’s notion of otherness challenges the concept of the same, Coetzee similarly confronts the reader with the need to reconsider established conventions and break free from limiting structures. In presenting structural limitations as part of the reading experience, Coetzee requires each reader to break with the structures of generic convention. Specifically, Coetzee offers readers a context that encourages them to distance themselves from the text, aiming to make them aware of the blinding effects of societal and aesthetic structures that act as barriers to seeing other perspectives.

Similarly, one could argue that Coetzee, for the same reasons, refrains from speaking in his own name and instead employs literary personae, as

demonstrated when accepting the Nobel Prize in 2003. His abstinence[33] from making definitive statements in his own name, which demand unwavering loyalty, stems from their potential from making definitive statements in his own name, which demand unwavering loyalty, stems from their potential to trap the statement's author within the confines of institutional norms.

Figuratively speaking, it can be argued that, at some point, one becomes a captive of one's own definitive and unambiguous statements, to which one is expected to remain loyal and unchallenged. In emphasizing this vicious cycle, it is important to stress that it discloses the effects of words on the mind, and the mind on words. Thus, as the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach famously asserted, "We are what we eat," this notion can also extend to "we are what we say." This suggests that the words we choose profoundly influence our thought processes. Consequently, it is evident that carefully chosen words and sentences are essential, not just for the writer.

More to the point, the core issue here seems to be Coetzee's critical stance on the authority of the speaker or writer. As Clarkson asserts, "through the use of third person", Coetzee "throws the balance of the speech utterance off-centre" (*Countervoices* 37). In this way, "the position of authority with respect to the utterances is one that has been destabilized" (37). The narrative in *Boyhood*, for example, is presented in the third person, which gives it a more novelistic and detached feel. A concerning element related to the writer's authority is also evident here. Coetzee's framework alludes to a struggle that

[33] In a rare interview "Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature", conducted by Henrik Engström, it is mentioned that Dorotea Bromberg at Bromberg Publishing had never met Coetzee. Bromberg explains that "It's not that he is a misanthropist or anything like that" but that "he is shy— and very protective of his writer's peace."

spans "between self and other, present and past, self and self—since the written site of that self is internally and dialogically split across self and other, present and past, writer and protagonist" (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 39). This is because the written expression of oneself is intrinsically divided, creating a dialogue between self and other, present and past, as well as between writer and protagonist.

Costello's own famous novel is based on a character, Molly Bloom (who becomes Marion Bloom) who is taken from James Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922] and imagines an alternative life for her in Eccles Street, Dublin. This intertextual resonance, while a metafictional device, similarly challenges one-dimensionality. It serves as a reminder that just as a character can exist in multiple dimensions, a self's identity might remain concealed or retracted, open to reinterpretation by others. It is as if the "bottom has dropped out" in the hermeneutic sense, suggesting that a self lacks a definitive foundation; there's no final word.

This notion aligns with Levinas's view that art cannot offer a complete or definitive understanding, emphasizing instead the fluid and open-ended nature of interpretation and meaning. Levinas's perspective is to dismiss any claims that art has an ontological function or that it can provide us with a complete understanding of the absolute, or any sense of truth. Furthermore, he does not believe that art should be assigned a transcendent role that goes beyond ethical and truthful considerations. Levinas believes that "Representation is a kind of death or degradation, in part, because it takes which is temporal and freezes in time" (Buckingham 117).

In terms of Coetzee's works, here *Elizabeth Costello*, an avoidance of representation is at stake as in the case of Costello, who is determinedly kept outside of the reader's comprehension. In his works "there exists a parallel of philosophical dimensions at the level of the content and the level of the form; these dimensions develop in a gradual way through a discursive estrangement of the reader and the reflexive involvement by the reader" (Wilm, *The Slow* 12). In that sense, they possess a characteristic that makes them appear perpetually evolving, consistently prompting the reader to reevaluate and rethink her interpretation of the texts.

Thus, instead of serving as a mere means to achieve ethical and philosophical objectives or disregarding external factors beyond the text, his "work shows how the ethical signifies in language" (Eaglestone*, Ethical* 94). As stated by Robert Eaglestone, "ethical demands are linguistic demands, ethics and language are intertwined in an inescapable way" (94). Costello, in a similar vein, by taking Molly Bloom out of Joyce's novel, opens up other possibilities of a character, quite different from her representation in *Ulysses*. Indeed, literary works, almost by definition, have many openings, but the hermeneutic or critical structures applied to them often serve to close those openings or disavow them in pursuit of a linear and deterministic reading. Tellingly, Coetzee's works "seem always open to being constructed and deconstructed by the reader. And they seem ever engaged in constructing and unworking themselves" (Wilm, *The Slow* 12).

Like Red Peter, for Elizabeth, Molly Bloom is also embedded in life, the complex life of an imaginary but in some sense real world of Dublin in 1904,

but also the life she takes on through myriad subsequent readings of Joyce's novel. So, too, Costello in her conversation with her son, when he asks her why she conveyed a speech related to Kafka's "Report to the Academy" when she was supposed to speak on Realism, she replies,

> Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping. That is where Kafka fits in (32).

Her approach to realism offers an account of thinking beyond the structures, here realism, which restrain the aesthetic effect of resonance, of existing beyond current norms and structures of meaning. Even a tale that begins in the fantastic might be taken as a dimension of realism if we extend the concept to take in emotional rigour and how different worlds might be embedded in each other. Elisa Aaltola suggests that for Costello, we need to understand what lies behind the principles and "It is this that poetry gains its impetus from. It is implied that poetry opens up perspectives for criticism of standard cultural meanings (such as rationalism and speciesism) and for clarification of sentiments muddled and forgotten under the weight of those meanings" (121). This suggests that poetry, for Costello, serves as a tool for unveiling the complexities behind societal norms, enabling both critique and deeper emotional understanding.

The case is that works of art take shape variously and in most cases do not represent mere realities, people or things, as they are. However, they are also products of life or lived experience and cannot simply be regarded as

made up or created from substances unrelated to life as lived experience. For Coetzee, works of art and their creators are embedded in each other; every work bears the traces of her/his creator, that is, of life, even if life includes the reading of other texts that have resonated with the author as reader. Hence "These screams may express the intimacy between Costello's sense of her mode of embeddedness in life and that of Red Peter, both feeling the tough of madness, of self-willed self-destruction" (Mulhall 167).

Literary language is promiscuous for Coetzee, containing within it the reverberation of many existential encounters and enunciations and is a vehicle for the recognition of how literary language therefore is able to open up many possible worlds and many other ways of perceiving life, rather than insisting on the misconception of being able to understand the Other that is defined as empathy. Literary language disrupts the non-dialectical. As Klopper suggests, referring to Red Peter:

> The heterogeneous materiality, the diverse forms of sensory and biological experience, the varied cultural contexts, the allusions, all these can be combined and interpreted in more than one way, can be read differently…This is not to say we understand its apeness, its otherness. What we understand is rather, is this embeddedness, the fact that, like us, the ape is embodied and has relations with life through the body. (129)

The pivotal point about works of art is that they pressure the reader to reflect beyond normative structures. Costello mentions in her speech on realism that the central point about fiction is not its potential for arousing empathy but its capacity to engage the feeling of bodily experience and the desire for life.

In the speech to the English department, she mentions Ted Hughes,

stating that "The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body. With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body" (96). The significant detail she highlights plays a key role in revealing the miscomprehended effect of literature as one reduced simply to an enhanced capacity to empathise with the Other.

On the contrary, what literary language encourages is the capacity to see beyond normative structures and to gesture to further possibilities of elaboration. The assertion of empathy, perceived as putting oneself in another's shoes, is simply fallacious, and it also carries the seductive tendency to be judgmental as one presumes to have understood the Other. What about animals, who are endowed with vastly different capacities?

If we heed Costello's remarks, the issue is not the typical argument presented for art and empathy; rather, it revolves around art's ability to highlight alternative modes of perception and the *Umwelt* or world that it opens up—similar to the case of Kafka's Red Peter. The problem that Costello experiences is that she makes an effort to step out from conventional approaches and/or structures based on reason formulated as "I think therefore I am" and that render animal consciousness out of the question, beyond comprehension. That is to say, dishonouring the beingness of animals as a result of them lacking reason, which is defined as "The power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements logically" (Stevenson 1480).

On the contrary, Costello tries to get access beyond that of Cartesian method by focusing on specific bodily experiences and it is this that isolates her from the academic community—for she insists on a "physical form of

identification with animals" (Danta 728).

The unrepresentability of Costello suggests avenues for examining the intersection of Coetzee's narrative technique and Levinas's well-known concepts related to the face. Levinas emphasizes the Other's state as surpassing all self-derived notions about it, signifying its transcendence, as follows: "the term 'face' here denotes the way in which the presentation of the other exceeds all the idea of the other in me" (Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* 5). That is, the Other is not in the area of my perception and comprehension, therefore it refuses, in a way, to be incorporated into a totality.

In this sense, one could argue Coetzee's text displays the urge to interrupt the thematising and totalising attempt of the reader. Thus, it becomes an unending endeavour for the self to define the Other, symbolizing Infinity. This concept of Infinity can be elucidated through the lens of 'saying':

> Levinas sees the act of saying, and the exposure it entails, as the mark, and the very possibility, of ethical sincerity. Whereas ontology ultimately must reduce saying to the totalizing closure of the said, saying is a state of openness to the other. It is for that reason that Levinas has to speak of a state that is otherwise than Being, or being's other, since the ontological terms of philosophy in Husserl and Heidegger dissimulate and subordinate the primordial subjectivity structured as responsibility in which one finds oneself as soon as one enters language, prior to any assumption of that role...Saying…breaks through the noema involved in intentionality, stripping me in extreme passivity of every identical quiddity. Subjectivity is the dis-interested vulnerability of saying. (6)

Saying is not finished, a reference to an Infinity that cannot be limited, unlike the said which already pertains to something specific and/or defined. Levinas posits, "Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an

implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts" (*Otherwise* 169-170). In that sense, any interpretation that disrupts the said and suggests that the artwork is a point of rupture brings our attention to the persistent weight of our obligations. As put by Eaglestone, in contrast to other interpretive approaches similar to Martha Nussbaums' or J. Hillis Miller's, "philosophy, which must fail for Levinas, criticism too must fail, but always be open to interruption. There can be no final reading, no last word" (*Ethical* 179).

In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee experiments with narrative technique as a means of exploring and aesthetically embodying Levinas's inspirational approach to the Other and his critique of the totalising philosophy, that "Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other" (*Totality and Infinity* 46).

Despite the remarkable convergence between Coetzee's literary works and Levinas's thoughts on safeguarding the Other, Levinas's stance toward art in general and literature specifically remains distant. For Levinas, the artistic realm conveys a certain powerlessness, and he problematizes the act of substitution that prevents the establishment of an ethical relationship. To "maintain an ethical relation," Levinas insists, "I refuse the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me" (*Totality and Infinity* 79). Levinas foregrounds the denial of one's agency and contends, "I refuse to figure in drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of

me" (79).

His emphasis is on the living face of the Other that cannot be or should not be encapsulated and bound to a specific moment as he believes that that still moment is the "petrification of the instant at the heart of duration" which turns the artwork into something "inhuman" and "monstrous" (qtd. in Robbins 52). While he offers a credible explanation for the 'petrification' of moments in literary works, it is crucial to differentiate Coetzee from this approach.

Coetzee's mode of representation is evidently not centered on "petrification" or confining his literary texts within a particular moment or space. On the contrary, he attempts to provide his literary texts with as many openings as possible. One might contend that his work serves as an open portal to an endless rupture paralyzing the monolithic stance of the reader or self.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, it can be observed that such a petrification of the moment is not in question. The key aspect is that Coetzee's narrative technique is employed in a way that avoids restricting the character to a specific moment; quite the reverse, it ensures the unavailability of the character. This enables the literary text to evade the discourses and reader's imposition.

As discussed earlier, particularly evident in Coetzee's literary works, the face is not limited to a specific representation. In this context, as Robbins says, referring to Levinas's perspective, "to decode a face in the manner of other signs would be to reduce it violently, to turn it —horribly— into a mask, that is, not just a surface but something petrified and immobile" (60). In *Elizabeth Costello*, with its insistent effort to avoid the categorical and the propositionally

definitive, the literary text does not reduce the face to an object that can be decoded; instead, the case, here, of the non-representability of the face, is born out in the effort to retain the Other without reducing it to the same.

More specifically, to preserve the enigmatic character of the Other, the text is rendered nonreciprocal by means of defying conventional frames of representation.

As we have seen, that is the most outstanding quality of Coetzee's literary text: that the text actively resists any reduction to a singular interpretation and, instead, is consistently crafted to confront the reader's preconceived notions, concepts, and mind set. Coetzee's literary works emphasize the unavailability and irreducibility of the Other. His non-committal approach in his novels encourages readers to envision alternative worlds beyond their conceived and limited perspectives.

Before advancing to subsequent chapters, it is imperative to emphasize that the initial chapter, through an ethical perspective, has aimed to delineate the foundational framework for understanding the multifaceted, non-permeable, and polyphonic qualities of Coetzee's literary oeuvre. This sets the foundation for and provides a comprehensive overview of the forthcoming chapters.

Without adhering to the chronological order of the novels, the subjects addressed in each chapter are elaborated in depth in relation to the topics discussed in this chapter. The chapters of the thesis progress in a thematically interconnected manner.

Initially, there is a critique of the 'higher life,' emphasizing the disgrace

inflicted upon animals.

In the third chapter, the narrative underscores that the promised 'absolute truth' of the constructed structure never materializes. When one steps outside of this structure, one's existence is also rendered meaningless.

In this context, in the fourth chapter, it is articulated that there is not a forthcoming absolute truth and that we are perpetually late for the rendezvous with the Other, the neighbour, contributing to its inherent elusiveness.

In the final chapter, it is postulated that if one, does not step outside of this structure and embraces the fact that "We half-perceive but we also half-create" (Coetzee, *Age of Iron 166)* and loses control within one's limited perception, one will inevitably begin to live in a complete hallucination, which is a fundamental ethical concern underpinning the self-Other relationship taken into consideration in the dissertation.

Reading the following chapters through a thematic lens will provide a coherent understanding of the underlying narratives and interconnected motifs.

Chapter Two

"The idea of infinity is desire" (Levinas, "Meaning and Sense 98).

J. M. Coetzee's Booker prize winning work *Disgrace* (1999), driven by ethical concerns entrenched in the concept of the higher life, was also adapted into a movie in 2008. As a result of the controversial issues[34] dealt with in the novel, *Disgrace* has attracted much attention,[35] both negative and positive.

The main character David Lurie's disgrace in the eyes of society, reminiscent of Odysseus's quest[36] in his negotiation of difficult times, does not, however, end with a return to where he started.[37] In *Disgrace*, Lurie sets off on a journey which can be regarded as a turning point in his life, where he loses his job and is, so to speak, exiled from his home, as well as losing his epaulettes, the symbols of his superiority.[38] It is a journey not only dealing with Lurie's personal transformation concerning his relationship with his environment, but also one that raises broader questions about established ways of receiving the world. In Lurie's case, these originate in his persistent tendency

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[34] He was criticised for behaving irresponsibly in his representation of a black man raping a white woman, which could have had harmful effects on the fragile relationships in post-Apartheid South Africa and that such a "portrayal cannot help but contain an anti-black racist message" (Crary 261).

[35] For an account of the critiques directed at Disgrace, see Peter D. McDonald's "Disgrace Effects" (2002).

[36] It is important to bear in mind that Odysseus represents the conventional type of hero and interestingly "a protocolonial hero to exploring Greeks" (Malkin 2). Lurie, on the contrary, gives revealing insight into the changing nature of not only the legacy of the colonizer's position, but also the colonial mindset.

[37] The idea is based on returning to the familiar, that is the same.

[38] This sense of superiority is rooted in a hierarchical system of values that asserts a 'higher life,' often associated with intellectual, social, or cultural privilege. In Lurie's case, his position as an academic and a figure of authority represents this constructed superiority, which collapses as he loses his job and his social status. The 'epaulettes' symbolize his role within this system, highlighting how his fall from grace dismantles his connection to these values.

to grasp and regard human beings as simply "benchmarks,"[39] in the sense conveyed by the cognitive scientist Anil Seth.

On the contrary, Odysseus[40] who also has to leave Ithaca, his home, and is confronted with difficult situations, in the end manages to come back home, returning to his beloved Penelope and land.[41] In Lurie's case, the most distinctive aspect of his quest, however, is that it is already proleptically signalled by him through his liberal use of classical and Romantic allusion, part of his own self-romanticisation as a modern epic hero. In this particular quest, however, the return home to the familiar birth place does not take place.

Instead, the novel critically interrogates the very idea of returning to a self that is home/same, deconstructing such conceptualisations and demonstrating that, existentially, the never ending journey takes centre stage, where one is always getting to the *unfamiliar*, thus referring to the idea of futurity as well as to infinity.[42] From this perspective, as Levinas posits, "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure" ("The Trace" 348).

In this context, *Disgrace* can be approached as an exploration of the

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[39] Anil Seth, professor of cognitive and computational neuroscience, uses this expression to explain the self-centered perspective of human beings. See Tim Adam's interview with Anil Seth, "Neuroscientist Anil Seth: 'We risk not understanding the central mystery of life.'" The Guardian, 21 August 2021, www.theguardian.com/science/2021/aug/21/neuroscientist-anil-seth-we-risk-not- understanding-the-central-mystery-of-life.

[40] Odysseus, a hero represented as a noble man of wisdom and courage in Greek mythology, here, serves the purpose of displaying the urge to reconsider the nature of the set of values and ideas framed by Western thought.

[41] The perception of homecoming is one of the ideas challenged with reference to the Levinasian approach to the 'same'.

[42] The concept of infinity is considered through Levinas's perspective.

difficult attempt to abandon a solid set of values deriving from a stable foundation in order to arrive at a new, more open and more progressive relation to the world. So, in a sense, *Disgrace* might be read in the context of reversal by bringing forth the notion of groundlessness, the state of living "without foundations" (Varela et al. 219), thus corresponding, as this chapter will explore, to Lurie's daughter Lucy's critique of the higher life.

It can be argued that the novel's central dynamic, for both protagonist and reader, hinges on a forward momentum. This movement thwarts expectations, consistently leading one towards the unfamiliar and emphasizing notions of uncertainty—a state lacking fixed meanings and established frameworks. As Jan Wilm puts it "His works disclose worlds by making them strange, by obscuring our view... They force us to look closer, to involve ourselves more slowly, and always to take a step toward the text when the text seems to make us take a step back" (*The Slow* 222).

Particularly, there are two critical instances where orthodox positions, whether traditional or progressive, fail to deliver hermeneutic resolution: the first concerns Lucy's rape and her attitude towards the three black men responsible; the second is the moment, in the final scene, when Lurie gives up the afflicted dog. It can be argued that the variety of interpretations of the novel hinge on how it challenges conventional ideas and narratives of heroism, particularly at these two moments. Let us pause to examine some of these readings.

Cynthia Willet, for example, while trying to explicate the general working of the novel, admits that "despite clear Kantian moments" (3)

concerning being kind to animals through the virtue of being a nice person, it is still difficult to frame the ethical drive behind Lurie's act; according to her, "neither self-respect nor–rationality" (3)—the ethical terms of Hegel and Kant— are helpful in providing an enlightening framework for the apprehension of Lurie's ethical rationale.

She suggests instead that Julia Kristeva's argument concerning the nature of the psyche might be a plausible framework with which to understand "Coetzee's melancholic protagonist" (10). She asserts that the melancholy caused by the split of the individual from the mother's body prompts that individual to compensate for the ensuing "incompleteness" through consolatory meaning found in art. Expressed quite simply, she contends that the main motive underlying the novel is the search for this kind of meaning.

Furthermore, based on Kristeva's approach to the Other, her "ethics of the irreconcilable,"[43] she asserts that Lurie "emerges from a journey of self-knowledge, or rather a knowledge of his own woundedness and inability to know, transformed by a need to tend lovingly to abject others" (11). Her approach, informed by psychoanalysis, manages to come up with a compelling perspective, yet, it primarily focuses on the self and its journey to find meaning and establish a foundation for itself.

Another recent interpretation by Carrie Rohman emphasizes the interconnected relationship between human and animal beings, suggesting that even the category of the aesthetic is one shared with animals. Adopting a posthumanist perspective, she insists that when Lurie realizes that dogs know

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[43] This term is introduced in Kristeva's work *Strangers to Ourselves* (2002).

when they reach the end of their life, this recognition finally ruptures his formerly self-centred perspective. From this, she extrapolates that Coetzee's concern is to show how "The less precious and exclusive Lurie's and humanity's ways of being in the world become, the less self-assured humans can be of their own distinctiveness" (572). In effect, according to this account, to acknowledge a mutual artistic cosmos develops a perception "of art as a phenomenon of the living rather than a human singularity" (572). Indeed, this approach, as will be seen, is close to Lucy's claim that there is no higher life centre on the idea of human exceptionalism.

Calina Ciobanu also offers a posthumanist framework as the title of her essay, "Coetzee's Posthumanist Ethics," suggests. Ciabanu argues that *Disgrace* challenges the anthropocentric structure human beings make use of in managing their world and explains that "if humanism constructs its subject, 'the human,' via a constitutive exclusion of the animal from the relations of ethical and political consideration, then *Disgrace* imagines a world in which these limitations do not obtain" (669).

Her approach is based on Levinasian ethics with regards to the Other with the additional difference of extending to and including animal beings as well as humans. The posthumanist ethos presented in the essay involves the need to think of new ways of setting up a connection between human and animal beings and much of the discussion concerns the potential of this ethical force as it plays out in the novel.

A Brief Introduction to the Term 'Groundlessness'

The current chapter builds on approaches to the novel that involve a critical rethinking of how human beings act and order their worlds. While doing so, it also explores new perspectives from cognitive science, offering materialist and evolutionary insights. Specifically, Lurie's act of giving up the dog and Lucy's unconventional response to her rapists are examined as pivotal moments that shed light on the novel's underlying ethical drive.

The argument in this chapter is built on the term of groundlessness, serving to disclose the failed efforts of "absolutism and nihilism" resulting from an urge to establish an absolute ground, and instead foregrounding "the possibilities inherent in a mindful, open-ended stance toward human experience" (Varela et al. 234). Central to its insights is the idea that Lurie, as a white man, representative of the higher life—an understanding deriving from the roots of Western thought based on the foundationalism of reason and the idea of the exclusiveness of the human as a conscious self—is confronted by his daughter Lucy, an independent woman representative of a body of thoughts questioning this notion of higher life through a stance that exemplifies the concept of groundlessness.

The term groundlessness—a philosophical idea revived by Nietzsche and central to much postmodern thinking—is taken up in *The Embodied Mind* (2016), first published in 1991 and a key text in combining cognitive science and neo-phenomenology for the development of the cognitive humanities: "to realize the fundamental instability or groundlessness of the subjective/objective

dualism is in a sense to slip out of the ‘field of consciousness’” (Varela et al. 240). In this context, if an individual fail to perceive an object distinct from their own subjectivity, questions arise about the basis of their perception. This not only challenges the notion of the subject but also makes the very idea of an object and objectivity debatable.

Varela, Thompson and Roche further claim: “We do not ‘overcome’ or ‘step out’ of this dualism as if we knew in advance where we are going, but we do see the arbitrariness and futility of going back and forth between the poles of a fundamentally groundless opposition” (240). This unsettling of one’s fundamental beliefs reveals the concept of groundlessness as a quality that welcomes the contingencies of life, resulting in the realization of a ‘groundless’ attitude. Such an attitude embraces uncertainty and accepts the instability inherent in human experience.

My aim throughout this thesis has been to suggest that, rather than seeking and finding meaning, the acceptance of groundlessness and the embrace of uncertainty lead to a continuous deferral of meaning. The primary feature of this groundlessness-based framework is its reference to a perpetual state of deferred meaning. This notion of infinity, paired with the future, offers an alternative reality. Moreover, within the essential realm of existence, the ‘Other’ can be understood as functioning outside the domain of sense-making.

While examining the novel from the aforementioned perspective, we will consider Lurie’s quest and his relationship with various representations of the ‘Other’: women (in terms of gender), black South Africans (in terms of

colour), and animals (in terms of species). More suggestively, Lurie's major effort in trying to set up a relationship with the Other will be illustrative in forming an understanding concerning the idea of infinity, future and delayed meaning based on 'groundlessness'.

This understanding aligns with the autopoietic "knowing how to negotiate our way through a world that is not fixed and pregiven but that is continually shaped by the types of action in which we engage" (Varela et al. 144). Such a framework emphasises the active, evolving process of engaging with an ever-shifting world and with the Other.

Two Key Moments: Lucy's Rape and Lurie's Dogs

These two key incidents in the novel are of particular significance in the discussion that follows; each has played a crucial role in the reception of the novel but both are also milestones in Lurie's life. The representation of black people as raping Lucy, the daughter of David, has been viewed by academic readers and reviewers as the most controversial episode in the novel, criticized as potentially contributing to the endangering of the fragile peace established after the end of apartheid. That is why Disgrace "… has been accused of racism, of feeding national hysteria and of reflecting white anxieties in the post-apartheid context"[44] (Graham 433). The novel was especially criticized by members of the ANC, the African National Congress, and reported to the South

[44] Professor Pumla Dineo Gqola, at the University of the Witwatersrand, mentions in an interview in The Guardian referencing her book Rape: A South African Nightmare (2015) that it is important to focus on the historical perspective for "rape was a core feature of British colonial rule. Under apartheid, no white men were hanged for rape and the only black men who were hanged for rape were convicted of raping white women" (R. Davis)

African Human Rights Commission with the claim that “in the novel, J. M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can, the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man” (qtd. in Rosemary Jolly 37).

Equally pivotal to the novel’s structure are the animal beings[45] which serve as crucial narrative elements. They play a significant role concerning questions around the concept of higher life, which is the central focus of this chapter. The gist of the argument to be developed here is that the human-animal relationship depicted in *Disgrace* presents a way of reconsidering the basic self-Other relationship through a cognitive lens that offers the potential for creating a new ethical approach to the novel.

The earlier sections of the novel draw liberally on metaphors of animals even before the dogs are introduced.[46] Coetzee, by drawing an analogy between animals and human beings, is seeking to present what he regards as the common ground between them.

In the ensuing passages, as I will demonstrate, Coetzee arguably seeks to highlight the overlapping behaviours of humans and animals as creatures. He underscores their interconnectedness, not merely as entities distinguished by the mind/body conflict, but as living beings deeply entwined as parts of nature. As Timothy Morton points out in his work *The Ecological Thought* (2010), using the word ‘mesh’: when beings are

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[45] In an interview conducted by Henrik Engström, Coetzee mentions how “Most reviewers have more or less ignored their [animals’] presence” in his novel Disgrace, and quite importantly highlights how reviewers tend to “mirror the way in which animals are treated in the world we live in, namely as unimportant existences of which we need take notice only when their lives cross ours” (“Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature”)

[46] Coetzee deploys a similar pattern in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), edited by Amy Gutmann, by using fiction to introduce a debate on animal rights. He attempts to demonstrate the problematic approach based on Cartesian perspective downplaying the worth of animals by arguing that “An animal …is an embodied soul” (33) like a human being.

interconnected there cannot be a centre, thus abolishing the assigned superiority and worth of one over another (38). It is, therefore, by arguing against the conventional humanist perspective of regarding animals and humans as separate beings, that Coetzee not only challenges the framework promoting the assumption of human exceptionalism, but also questions the understanding of the hero in a classical sense.

Through the reworking of the notion of the hero's journey without a return home, as in Lurie's case, the ideas of scapegoating and sacrifice are also subject to consideration as they emerge out of the context of the classical Greek sense of heroism.[47] In *Disgrace*, these notions are to be significantly redefined. Later in the novel, Coetzee brings the actual animals into the plot after Lurie has been driven from the 'higher life' and his professional status as a literary intellectual, and at this point his relationship with animals acquires a different dimension through his work at the clinic and with Lucy's dogs at the farm.

From the outset, Lurie's quest revolves around his relationships with animals,[48] women, and black people. He attempts to situate himself as part of this journey with them, yet they remain elusive and beyond his full

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[47] The classical hero is regarded as a great man, a king like King Arthur or a warrior like Hercules who, in the pursuit of dignity and honour, sets off on an epic quest. However, in this story, the understanding of heroism and its narrative takes on a doubtful aspect. In the classical sense of heroism, the hero is a noble man, a human being, and the notions of scapegoating and sacrifice are integral to the epic narrative. However, Coetzee attempts to deconstruct the narrative of classical heroism by incorporating animal beings. He questions the concepts of higher life, which are not only pervasive in human assumptions concerning species boundaries but also peculiar to structures, such as classical epic, that are based on human exceptionalism

[48] Coetzee explains that "animals are present in my fiction either not at all or in a merely subsidiary role. Partly this is because the fact is that animals do occupy a subsidiary place in our lives, and partly it is because it is not possible to write about the inner lives of animals in any complex way" (Engström). Coetzee's statement is compatible with the understanding of the Other as being elusive and unattainable.

comprehension. Crucially, with this in mind, his journey points to a still more fundamental issue: "When the reasoning mind no longer clings and grasps, ... one awakens into the wisdom with which one was born, and compassionate energy arises without pretense" (qtd. in Varela et al. 247) for the Other. Besides being a journey about acknowledging one's limited understanding of others, Lurie learns that an ethical relationship with the Other entails embracing open-ended possibilities, encouraging one to withhold quick judgments about anyone or anything.

This is played out in the development of Lurie's own intellectual endeavours so that the centre of his research and writing shifts from a self-identification with Lord Bryon to a focus on the perspective of Byron's mistress Teresa.

Perpetual Failure of Representation: The Deferral/Delay of Meaning

Disgrace's inherent structure, therefore, embeds the perpetual failure of representation, that is, the revelation of a play of the signifier signifying a signified which, as a signifier, signifies another signified, in an infinite and endless ongoing process to point to the way in which always "in representation presence is already past" (Levinas, "Language and Proximity" 120).

In the attempt to explicate this idea further, I draw on the cognitive scientist Andy Clark's seminal work *Surfing Uncertainty* (2016), in which he investigates the underlying mechanisms of human perception. Although in some sense presented as foundational, Clark's model involves a process of predictive coding of the world that is endlessly and continuously modified and

changed in its deep entanglement with that world and changing environments, including those others who share and are part of it.

For Clark: “Brains like ours... are predictive engines, constantly trying to guess at the structure and shape of the incoming sensory array.” He strongly suggests that “Such brains are incessantly pro-active, restlessly seeking to generate the sensory data for themselves using the incoming signal...mostly as a means of checking and correcting their best top-down guessing” (3). More suggestively, our brains use “stored knowledge to predict...This in turn underlines the surprising extent to which the structure of our expectations (both unconscious and conscious) may be determining much of what we see, hear, and feel” (27). These processes are continuously modified by a process of efferent feedback as we adjust to the environment but all too often predictive coding mechanisms operate according to the generation of solipsistic schemata, generated “by our expectations concerning the sensed scene as by the driving signals themselves” (Clark, *Whatever* 199).

The corollary of this, he argues, referring to the neuroscientist Chris Frith’s perspective, is that our perception is all too often “controlled hallucination, so the thought goes, because it involves using stored knowledge to generate a ‘best multilevel top-down guess’” (*Surfing* 169). The predictive coding/processing model of the brain provides an interesting materialist counterpart to Levinas’s post-structuralist conception of language and signification. Predictive processing bears a similarity to the pattern of relations between signifier and signified, where, although the possibility of capturing a

definite and objective meaning is a default assumption, in both the materialist cognitive account of predictive coding and in the post-structuralist understanding of deferral, as in the phenomenological account of mind, definitive meaning and the separation of subject and object are unattainable.

The power of this approach lies in its capacity to generate the practice of delaying meaning as a result of the failure of representation. Ultimately, the concept of perpetual failure of representation not only underlines the unavailability of any definite meaning, but also closely associates the consistent deferral of meaning with the unavailability of the Other, who is continuously subject to the self's effort of reducing her/him to the realm of the same. This approach is key to understanding the working of the novel. The concept of failed representation corresponds to the state of controlled hallucination. As both terms suggest, arriving at a definite meaning and having a direct access to a so-called objective reality cannot be of concern. Instead, at this point, as I shall demonstrate, the notion of groundlessness helps to destabilise the sense of closure and the authority of self/subject.

Furthermore, while these notions challenge the privilege and superiority of the self over the Other, they also reshape the ideas of agency, centre, and objectivity, casting doubt on the standpoint of the subject as a point of reference. In this context, in *Disgrace*, Lurie's relationship with the Other is evident through his interactions with the women he meets, the animals he observes closely, and the black individuals who seek retribution for past injustices against him. Remarkably, Lurie's relationship with the Other proves

to be a reflection of the perspective that "… consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" (Levinas, "Language and Proximity" 119). Furthermore, this can be related to the assumption that our "perceptual experiences do not necessarily—or ever—directly correspond to things that have a mind-independent existence" (Seth, *Being You* 139).

The underlying premise of the argument presented is that an ultimate comprehension or meaning is not the focus, as it is unattainable—even if there were an ultimate and objective meaning.

The Constant Failure of Sense-Making (Cartesian Anxiety)

Taking it a step further and introducing a different perspective, one could argue that a word representing something is actually a word indicating another word, which also attempts but never truly succeeds in naming that specific thing. From this, by not being able to represent that thing, representation becomes an act of pointing to an absence rather than a thing, a space that can never be fully and definitively grasped. In the first half of the novel, Lurie struggles to understand both Melanie, his student, and his daughter Lucy. His interactions with them reveal that he views them as objects, mere fodder for his narcissistic self-romanticization, seeing himself as a defiant figure against the emerging regime of political bureaucratization. However, even as he embarks on a journey that challenges such complacency, the individual attempting to empathise with the Other, aiming to understand the Other's feelings, is continually shown to fail. One cannot step into the place of the Other, just as a word cannot fully embody a thing or idea.

In this context, it suggests that the self cannot fully engage with or accurately conceptualize the Other's exact situation and emotions. This can be named as the constant failure of sense-making; in the context of a traditional Cartesian perspective on mind and method, it is seen to result in a dreary situation where "we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos" (Bernstein 18). However, this discouraging view is a product of a cognitive and philosophical realist framework that assumes as its starting point the concept of a pregiven world; but as Varela, Thomson and Roche insist, drawing on the new assemblage of phenomenology and cognitive science, there may be such "a pregiven, independent world—an outer ground—but one that we could never know" (142) referring to

> the Cartesian anxiety and its ideal of the mind as a mirror of nature. Cartesian longing reveals the desire for mind as a mirror of nature as the ground of its belief in pre-emptive doubt as the road to ultimate truth. The certainty of the method of pre-emptive doubt might provide the balm for the anxiety around the prospect and experience of uncertainty. When this cannot be achieved, the only other possibility seems to be nihilism or anarchy. (Varela et al. 142, 141)

A similar pattern of assumptions seems to hold between naming things and trying to understand the Other. The similar pattern underlying these two acts of cognition can be defined as the process of sense-making with a motivation of taking control of the moment, that is, looking for a stable ground. This approach takes us to the Levinasian critique concerning Western philosophy, for which "meaning or intelligibility coincide with the manifestation of being, as if the very doings of being led to clarity, in the form of intelligibility, and then became an

intentional thematization in an experience" (Levinas, "God and Philosophy" 155). The problematic aspect of Western philosophy is that "In the fabric of the thematized thinkable, every rending conserves or ties again the thread of Same" (176/7). Levinas is critiquing how Western philosophy, with its focus on thematization—or the process of categorizing and defining—tends to reinforce the Same, which represents the familiar, the known, or the self-contained. Even in moments of rupture or disruption, when something "other" is introduced into thought, Western philosophy has a tendency to reabsorb this disruption into its pre-existing structures, restoring the dominance of the Same. This dynamic prevents a genuine encounter with the Other, as the Other is often subordinated to the framework of the Same, reducing it to something that can be grasped, categorized, or assimilated rather than encountered as radically different or unknown. Levinas's critique points to the limitations of traditional philosophy in allowing for a truly ethical relationship with the Other, one that does not immediately reduce the Other to something familiar or controllable.

No Back Home/Same: Never-Ending Journey

For this very reason, the notion of Lurie returning home or to the self is deconstructed.The novel foregrounds a never-ending journey similar to "a work conceived radically is a moment of the same unto the other which never returns to the same" (Levinas, *The Trace* 348), which, similar to the concept of a perpetual delay of meaning, gives rise to a unique kind of hope and possibility. It is one that finally abandons closure and the quest for certainty and thus enables the

unavailability of the Other, giving the Other the opportunity to express her/ himself. From this perspective, I argue that literature challenges history by continuing the story that history has deemed finished. That is, as strongly emphasized by Coetzee himself with regard to literature's capacity to rival history, the writing of:

> a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history … In particular, I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigm and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enter the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history—in other words, demythologizing history. (Coetzee, "The Novel Today" 3)

It could be asserted that Coetzee adopts this approach in analysing Lurie's so-called quest and his relationship with the Other, specifically with tangible entities like women, his daughter, black people, dogs, and other animals. In this sense, a novel might break up the regulative forces of history by setting the Other's story in motion.

One such episode illustrative of this approach, for example, is the presentation of Lucy's decision regarding her giving birth to the baby whose father is assumed to be one of the three rapists who attacked her in her own house after locking Lurie in the lavatory. Though the rationale for her decision cannot be grasped completely by Lurie, and probably by many readers, it is the key moment marking the change of perspective. From the generation of Lurie, representative of history and a past where educated and then powerful white people assumed control over black people, to the new generation of Lucy, representative of a humbler and welcoming attitude. This new attitude reacts

completely differently from Lurie’s generation, viewing black people as neighbours and preferring a nonviolent approach to tension between human being.

Lurie’s Relation to the Other Characters

Lurie, the main character of the novel, is initially portrayed as embodying the unsatisfied and self-centered ego, prioritizing his own desires without considering the needs or wishes of the Other. This brings us to the essential point acknowledged by Levinas: “here every power begins. The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession” (“Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” 50). Lurie specifically represents the white patriarchal middle class, viewing the world egocentrically from a position of privilege, remaining blind and deaf to the material inequalities faced by those living in the shadow of such privilege. In Hegelian terms, Lurie shows no recognition and therefore no respect for the lives of such Others.

He prefers not to think at all about his own position; his “mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (72). This self-neglect highlights his failure to engage with or critically examine his own beliefs and actions. The various female characters in the novel offer a diverse perspective on Lurie’s relationship with

women. Each has unique characteristics, backgrounds, and plays a distinct role in Lurie's life. Soraya is the first woman introduced; Lurie engages her to fulfill his sexual desires, and he remains oblivious to her life outside of their liaisons. There is also the department secretary with whom he has an affair, his ex-wife, his daughter Lucy, his student Melanie Isaacs, and Bev, who cares for animals.The only male character that Lurie regards as a dominant male like himself is Petrus. However, in the novel, Petrus serves as a counterforce to Lurie's colonialist assumptions, challenging both his presumed white ownership of land and nation and his patriarchal claim over his daughter. Petrus exerts far more influence over Lucy than Lurie does, effectively displacing Lurie as the patriarch.

Petrus, in other words, is the main male character displacing Lurie's ego from its self-entitled centre, unsettling his implicit power over country and women.[49] Petrus not only reverses the power dynamics but also the positions of self and the Other. Specifically, Petrus reclaims his rights over his invaded country, initially using Lucy's body as the vehicle for this assertion.[50]

The other male characters, occupying more minor roles in the novel, are mostly introduced to the reader through the perspective of Lurie. Though Lurie is not the narrator of the novel, the narrative orientation is centred in the focalising gaze of its main protagonist. However, the actual narrative voice is an impersonal narrator. Coetzee employs free indirect discourse, crafting a

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[49] See Elleke Boehmer's article, "Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in Disgrace" (2002), where she problematizes the sort of reconciliation achieved through the silence of women

[50] See Mike Marais's review where he dismisses the claim that the novel articulates "a politics of white abasement" ("Very morbid phenomena" 38).

narrative where characters largely remain mysterious and elusive regarding their motivations and intentions. This narrative technique contributes to the strategy of keeping the Other undefined, affording them a space of freedom that preserves their distinct alterity.

Lucy's Critique of Higher Life Through Groundlessness

The novel's concern regarding the constructed nature of concepts like 'disgrace' and 'honour' serve to explore the nature of the concept of the higher life. The point in mentioning the constructed nature of these concepts lies in the vital phrase "Like a dog" (205) often uttered and clarified by Lucy concerning her acceptance in becoming Petrus's third wife. She states: "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again...To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity" (205). Lucy emphasises the abstract world in which humans live and highlights how humans are, in reality, on the same level as animals. Often, these animals are dismissed for supposedly lacking the capacity for reflective thought and, consequently, for adhering to a set of moral values.

It is arguable that Lucy's forceful stance derives from the understanding of letting go and breaking away from the incessant tendency to pinpoint and define. Rather than searching for an "Archimedean point upon which we ground our knowledge" (Bernstein 16), the concept of groundlessness[51] allows

[51] Based on the "theory and practice of the Madhyamaka or 'middle way' school of the Buddhist tradition", the idea is that the constant tendency to grasp results in a "deep source of frustration and anxiety" (Varela et al. 142; italics in original).

one to open their heart[52] by setting aside preconceived notions. Her argument underscores the bodily existence that is frequently overlooked by human beings. This is evident when she counters Lurie's disapproval of her life, explaining that "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (74). *Disgrace*, in this regard, presents a critique of the concept of higher life that, in this instance, overlooks the beings of animals.[53] From this standpoint, the novel brings to light the fundamental issue at the heart of the Enlightenment's legacy: the assumption that human beings are set apart from animals and other forms of life.

The crux of this matter lies in how human beings project their concepts onto the world and subsequently navigate their lives, assuming these concepts are inherent to the world. This underscores the dilemmas embedded within the subjective and objective dichotomy. Hence, "given such a situation, we would have no choice but to fall back on our inner representations and treat them as if they provided a stable ground" (Varela et al. 142). Eventually, like a vicious circle which one cannot escape, one might start to define oneself in line with these concepts. To take it further, "Grasping can be expressed not only individually as fixation on ego-self but also collectively as fixation on racial or tribal self-identity, as well as grasping for a ground as the territory that separates one group of people from another or that one group would appropriate as its own" (Varela et al. 252). This highlights how individual and collective identities

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[52] In *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), its protagonist Costello uses the same expression to draw attention to diverse ways of perceiving the world.

[53] Coetzee asserts in an interview that his interest is "in a change of heart towards animals" by arguing that "The most important of all rights is the right to life," and that he "cannot foresee a day when domesticated animals will be granted that right in law." (Engström)

can become entangled in patterns of attachment that reinforce division and exclusion, ultimately shaping how we perceive ourselves and others.

In this sense, as Coetzee notes, "Affronts … to the dignity of our persons are attacks not upon our essential being but upon constructs—constructs by which we live, but constructs nevertheless" (Coetzee, *Giving Offense* 14). He continues, claiming that:

> This is not to say that affronts to innocence or dignity are not real affronts, or that our outrage with which we respond to them is not real, in the sense of not being sincerely felt. The infringements are real; what is infringed, however, is not our essence but a foundational fiction that may well be indispensable for a just society, namely, that human beings have a dignity that sets them apart from animals and consequently protects them from being treated like animals. (14)

Coetzee clearly suggests, with reference to the fictionalized and abstract world in which human beings live, that we tend to value that abstract world more than our essential being and bodily existence. He goes even further, asserting a relationship between human dignity and how it functions to define humanity, ultimately shaping human rights. Importantly, he suggests that:

> There is thus a real sense in which an affront to our dignity strikes at our rights. Yet when, outraged at such an affront, we stand on our rights and demand redress, we would do well to remember how insubstantial the dignity is on which those human rights are based. Forgetting where our dignity comes from, we may fall into a posture as comical as that of the irate censor. (14)

This pivotal theme in *Disgrace* introduces the complex relationship between bodily existence and abstract concepts, such as dignity.[54] Coetzee's

[54] To stress the significance of the notion of dignity in modern human rights discourse, it is pivotal to point out that the initial sentence of Article I of the Universal Declaration begins as follows: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

intention is not to highlight the dominance of one over the other. Instead, he seeks to underscore the constructed and often taken-for-granted nature of abstract concepts like dignity, which can obscure the value of the body and bodily existence. One might contend that the problematic nature of the perspective lies in the Cartesian anxiety caused by the dilemma of "a grand and seductive Either/Or" (Bernstein 18), that is "Either there is absolute ground or foundation, or everything falls apart" (Varela et al. 140). In a sense, the argument is that one often clings to an absolute and grand truth based on reason, while ignoring other potential perspectives.

Coetzee discusses and questions the idea of higher life via the conflict between Lucy and Lurie over the animal clinic where Bev volunteers to help the animals in pain. In fact, it is a place to end the lives of unwanted animals as Bev explains "The trouble is, there are just too many of them" (85). Upon Lucy's explanation of the function of the clinic, Lurie notes the insincerity of such animal—welfare acts and remarks that:

> I'm sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal—welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat. (73)

This explanation refers to one of the conflicts between Lurie and Lucy, which is about higher life, but at the same time, Coetzee, by this comment, implicitly critiques a fact of people who do exactly what Lurie mentions above and so draws attention to the fabricated nature of higher life as a means of relating to reality.

As Clarkson puts it, "If, on the one hand, human social life seems far

removed from the rest of the sentient world, Coetzee's novels also offer a sustained vision of humanity's shared–and parallel–existence with other animals" (*Countervoices* 123). As Clarkson highlights, Coetzee's portrayal of humanity's intertwined existence with other animals challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, a tension that becomes central to Lucy's rejection of the 'higher life' concept, which Lurie unquestioningly upholds.

Lucy rejects the concept of a 'higher life' that Lurie, as a man devoted to thinking and writing, takes for granted. This conflict between them regarding the notion of 'higher life' delves into the central examination of the dichotomy between the naturalization of constructed words and the awareness of their constructed nature. Thus, this dichotomy suggests ways to reflect upon the conflict of body and mind.

The underlying basic idea of my argument is that it is necessary to raise broader questions about the conflict of body and mind in order to further engage with problems entrenched in a system that devalues the existential importance of embodied life. The idea of groundlessness, then, could be assessed as an attempt to shed a new light on this clash. Lucy's belief in the absence of a 'higher life' and her use of the phrase 'living like a dog' both allude to a utopian world. In this world, abstract concepts crafted by humans are neither absolute nor definitive. Here, one can exist, similar to a dog, free from the constraints of such concepts—without being pigeonholed into a predefined framework and thus embracing *groundlessness*.

Illustratively, Lurie, himself, at the clinic while observing the dogs, remarks with ironic disdain that "they are very egalitarian, aren't they…No

classes. No one too high and mighty to smell another's backside" (85). Similarly, one could argue that these constructed concepts create a perceptual distance between humans and animals. Specifically, humans who prioritize abstract concepts over the body often tend to overlook or diminish the corporeal realities typically associated with animals. Thus, the body and the sensed world as real elements of the real world are sacrificed all too easily for abstract concepts, as for instance crusaders and jihadists sacrificing themselves and others for a so-called higher purpose of dying in the name of God or Allah, or animals being used as experimental objects for the so-called better future of humanity. The central theme given voice to is that the sensual body,[55] be it a human being's body or an animal's body, becomes a visible medium of resistance, posing challenges to the established order of higher life.

Furthermore, this gap occurring between the actual experience of human beings with their environment and the one based on higher life in which "we try to escape actual experience by invoking foundations to supply our lives with a sense of justification and purpose" (Varela et al. 234) estranges one from the world s/he inhabits.

Relating to the Other: Responsibility

Interestingly, much like Coetzee's argument concerning the abstract and insubstantial nature of concepts like dignity, which humans often take for granted, there's another issue: such concepts tend to make individuals overlook more

[55] A bill recognising animals as sentient beings was passed for the first time in UK law in 2021. For more information, see the press release "Animals to be formally recognised as sentient beings in domestic law" on gov.uk.

fundamental values, such as responsibility towards the Other, defined by Levinas as ethics; this first philosophy, as he sees it, suggests that "before culture and aesthetics, meaning is situated in the ethical, presupposed by all culture and all meaning" ("Meaning and Sense" 100). By implying a different aspect of constructed concepts, he claims that the Other, referring to "Meaning, the intelligible, consists in a being showing itself in its nonhistorical simplicity, in its absolutely unqualifiable and irreducible nakedness, existing 'prior to' history and culture" (101).

He goes on to describe the relationship between the self and the Other regarding responsibility as an "obsession" and that "Responsibility as an obsession is proximity; like kinship, it is a bond prior to every chosen bond" (123). His argument asserts that this responsibility towards the Other is not a choice made by the individual of their own accord. Rather, this responsibility is designated to the self in times preceding culture, suggesting it is not a constructed notion.

In this debate, the notion of 'higher life' that elevates humans, as previously mentioned, justifies the diminishing of meanings grounded in ethical concerns. Specifically, as Levinas emphasizes, it minimizes the 'responsibility as an obsession' towards the Other, fellow beings, nature, and animals. The human being, perceiving himself as free and destined for freedom, fails to understand his true situation: he is a hostage to the Other, and thus not truly free. As noted, "To be obliged to responsibility" overflows "freedom, that is, responsibility for the others" (136).

In this context, Lurie refuses to accept responsibility for his actions with

Melanie Isaacs, his student. Arrogantly, he dismisses the suggestion that he might benefit from counselling, as proposed by the university committee. When Lucy confronts him directly, asking, “...are you so perfect that you can’t do with a little counselling?” (66), Lurie, blinded by his arrogance, counters, “I would prefer simply to be put against a wall and shot. Have done with it” (66). This response reflects not only his defiance but also his refusal to acknowledge the harm he has caused.

Lurie’s failure to recognize his ethical responsibility towards Melanie stems from his objectification of her, viewing her as merely an object of desire rather than a person. He cloaks his actions in the literary trope of the Byronic hero, justifying his behavior with the notion of being overtaken by passion: “I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros” (52). His self-serving interpretation masks the exploitation and imbalance of power in their relationship, ultimately underscoring his inability to confront his responsibility towards the Other.

Lucy confronts him directly, asking, “...are you so perfect that you can’t do with a little counselling?” (66), Lurie, blinded by his arrogance, counters, “I would prefer simply to be put against a wall and shot. Have done with it” (66). This response reflects not only his defiance but also his refusal to acknowledge the harm he has caused.

The subsequent passage will draw attention to the changing aspect of Lurie. This is not to say that he reaches a point of understanding the women he has hurt or his daughter Lucy, who repeatedly emphasizes that he cannot understand her since he was not present when she was attacked. The point, after

all, is that he enters into a, so to say, different phase in his life and, after all the experiences he undergoes, the opera he has been working on is affected as well. The preoccupation with the character of Byron shifts to his mistress Teresa, evincing the shift from the centre as he believes that "he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honour" (209). This shift points not only to his decentralized situation and evolving perspective but also to the voice of the Other as expressed through art. This underscores both the vital role of art in representing the unheard and the undeniable call of the Other.

Furthermore, another important aspect of literary works, of art in general, is that as revealed by Lurie giving up the dog, works of art "have the capacity to create meaning, ethical and otherwise, one single, singular, even illogical encounter at a time" (Ciobanu 684). Thus it might be claimed that art promotes singularity and creates an opening to the Other, the unrepresented.

Lurie's Changing Attitude: Losing Grip of Authorial Endorsement

Lurie begins to accept Lucy's decision though he cannot make any sense of her motivations by highlighting his inefficacy as a father, telling her that "I'm just an old lag serving out my sentence. But you go ahead. You are well on the way" (216). The fact of not insisting on having a complete grasp of her state of mind, in a way, seems to reflect a change of attitude towards the Other based on the understanding of groundlessness, at the same time echoing Levinasian ethics.

This transformation suggests an opening to the Other, to the future indicating hope and this is explicitly delineated by him as he observes his daughter in the flowerbed from the distance, while contemplating how when he passes away one day "...she will, with luck, still be there doing her ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds. And from within her will have issued another existence...a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten" (217).

This reflection on legacy and continuity resonates with semiotic theory, where meaning is perpetually deferred and the connection between signifier and signified becomes increasingly tenuous over time. Essentially, each signifier undergoes a decrease in its referential power in relation to the signifiers that come after it. Moreover, this process is not retrospective; a signified does not define its preceding signifier in hindsight. Instead, the pattern of this relationship is consistently forward-looking, with the present signifier always intertwined with those succeeding it until they blend into one another. From this, one might argue that the novel counters any claims to a fixed or absolute meaning. Rather, it strives to highlight a break that exists outside the constraints of absolutism.

Concerning Lurie's and Lucy's relationship, to insist on understanding her would mean to make an effort to reduce her to the same, where Lurie might then have control over her. He arrives at his own conclusions by the observations he makes about her, with the limited knowledge he has about her.

This is effectively and brilliantly articulated by Levinas, who states that the the Other "falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear, so

as to capture it" ("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 50). This notion aligns with the way human beings perceive, as noted earlier, by utilizing stored knowledge to derive meaning.

Lurie, in a sense, does not want to allow Lucy to escape "the network of a priori ideas". However, as Levinas points out, "A face has a meaning not by virtue of the relationships in which it is found, but out of itself; that is what *expression* is" (20; italics in original). Then, the effort to contain the Other within in the realm of the same not only suggests a desire to maintain control over the Other but also to fend off the anxiety stemming from the unknown or inexplicable. Drawing from Cartesian philosophy, this reaction might be viewed as a defence mechanism or a mode of survival.

Luring the Women: Lack of Unselfing[56]

In the first six chapters of the novel we have an overall idea about Lurie's professional life as a professor of modern languages and his publication of three books, none of which have made any kind of impact. His personal life, divorced from Rosalind, with a daughter called Lucy living in Cape Town, is now defined by the pursuit of a sexual life which he claims to be driven by his uncontrolled sexual desire. He meets a woman named Soraya every Thursday for intimacy. He defines her as a "ready learner" and after meeting her "he enjoys her pleasure" (5). There is no hint of what Soraya feels or whether she likes it or not. For David, the focal point is what he can extract from the Other,

[56] Iris Murdoch mentions this term in *The Sovereignty of Good* (2014), explaining that unselfing is an "attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (91). That is, abandoning the egoistic focus of the self.

in this case, Soraya.

When Soraya ends their meetings, David finds no joy with another woman also named "Soraya." The fact that both women share the same name underscores David's general approach towards women. He sees them not as individuals in their own right, but categorizes them under the generic concept of woman with no specific differences except their physical features. Such descriptions are evident when he refers to Soraya's "long black hair and dark, liquid eyes" (1), or when he depicts Melanie, his student, as "small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (11). Even Bev, an elderly woman and friend of Lucy, is given a similar treatment in Lurie's eyes as "a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, airy hair, and no neck" (72).

This objectifying perspective can be illuminated through Levinasian philosophy, which suggests that "Cognition consists in grasping the individual, which alone exists, not in its singularity which does not count, but in its generality, of which alone there is science" ("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 50). Lurie, influenced by this mind set, positions himself in relation to the Other, ignoring their unique personal attributes.

A significant incident occurs when David encounters Soraya in public with her children. She avoids him, but he persists, leading to an intrusive phone call that ends their relationship. David metaphorically describes the situation by comparing himself to a predator encroaching on a "vixen's nest" (10). This introduces a recurring theme in Coetzee's work: the use of animal metaphors. While animals are not physically present early in the narrative, they exist

metaphorically, highlighting Coetzee's intent to draw parallels between the lives of animals and humans.

The story evolves when David invites his student, Melanie, to his home. Despite momentary ethical qualms about their teacher-student relationship, David tries to seduce her. He uses his position of power to manipulate her, evident when Melanie acquiesces to his invite but with reservations. While they do not become intimate during this first encounter, David's pursuit continues. Despite the ethical boundaries he is pushing, he is acutely aware of the power dynamics at play.

David's predatory behaviour continues. Guided by a selfish impulse, he eventually coerces Melanie into an intimate encounter. Grappling with the fact that she is "*no more than a child*!" (20; italics in original), followed by an attempt at clearing his conscience when he tells himself that it was "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself of the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (25). Again, Coetzee employs animal metaphors to emphasize the blurred lines between human and animal behaviour. Coetzee's work often explores posthumanist themes, challenging traditional distinctions between humans and animals, and this intersection highlights Lurie's lack of empathy and the harm he inflicts on others.

He further objectifies her when they become intimate in his daughter's room, drawing parallels between Melanie and Lucy. This reinforces Lurie's inability to connect empathetically, viewing women as mere objects of his desires. The narrative argues for the importance of responsibility over mere

empathy.

A critical aspect of this flawed approach to the Other, in this case Melanie, is that he fails to recognize the extent of harm he inflicts by indirectly abusing her. Significantly, this can be interpreted as an indication of the absence or even complete lack of empathy in the self, as represented by Lurie.

The most interesting implication of this is when he makes love to Melanie in his daughter's room. Melanie, a Greek name "derived from the roots of melas (black, dark)" (Norman 213), represents the Other to whom David has no real access.

The point focused on within that connotative representation is the unavailability of the Other despite the similarities Melanie has with Lucy in terms of age, gender, youth etc. Importantly, this renders the notion of empathy and his capacity to empathise with someone obsolete as that actually alludes to a covert form of exerting power over the Other by attempting to identify the Other's condition. The presumption is that such failed attempts at understanding underscore the argument about the absence of empathy in the relationship between the self and the Other.

In this scenario, Melanie's vulnerable state is evident, yet she remains overlooked by Lurie, and her plea for acknowledgment goes unanswered. Coetzee, by not representing Melanie, underscores the failure of representation but instead points to anything except Melanie's weak condition and, by doing so, essentially gives voice to her fairly.

This may sound paradoxical; however, in not representing her, Coetzee allows her to represent herself and so he does not intrude into Melanie's private

area by speaking in her name. In a similar manner, "What the signifier Lucy reveals, this is to say, is that what it must reveal cannot be revealed because it is not of the lucid order of the phenomenon and its logic of manifestation" (Marais, "J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace'" 86).

Coetzee's narrative technique of omitting Melanie's voice paradoxically gives her more agency. By not speaking for her, he grants her the space to represent herself, ensuring he does not infringe upon her narrative. This method is reflective of Coetzee's broader literary strategy, emphasizing the unrepresented and overlooked. It is crucial, then, to note that true understanding of the Other requires responsibility before empathy, a concept Lurie struggles with throughout the novel.

Lucy's Response: Breaking Away from the Legacy of her Ancestors

The rape of Lucy by three black men functions as a triggering moment for Lucy, representative of the Other, to ask Lurie, representative of the self, the white patriarchal system, and history, to keep his distance from her story. In other words, by not sharing her experience with Lurie and consistently emphasizing, "*You don't know what happened*" (134; italics in original), Lucy underscores the unavailability of her perspective to him. He attempts several times to make her talk about her reasons for not reporting the three black attackers; however, he always comes up with his assumptions grounded on his own preconceived ideas. More specifically, within the context of grasping, "the idolatry of supposing not only that there is a ground but that one can appropriate it as one's own acknowledges the other only in a purely negative,

exclusionary way" (Varela et al. 252). So, importantly, "the realization of groundlessness as nonegocentric responsiveness, however, requires that we acknowledge the other with whom we dependently cooriginate" (252).

In a revealing exchange between Lucy and Lurie, he asks, "why don't you want to tell? It was a crime. There is no shame in being the object of a crime. You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party" (111). Lucy takes a deep breath and shakes her head only; Lurie goes on assuming, "Are you trying to remind me of something?" (111) and Lucy responds "Am I trying to remind you of what?" (111), and here Lurie counters with a self-centred and self-projected statement "of what women undergo at the hands of men" (111). Clearly this statement reveals the underlying egotistical investment and his own guilty feelings as he refuses to give Lucy the necessary time or show any vital respect to allow her to express herself. Then, however, finally Lucy reacts: "This has nothing to do with you, David. …The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone" (112).

Lucy's declaration reveals a layered perspective on the incident. She is asserting her autonomy and emphasizing the deeply personal nature of her trauma. Lucy actually notes that the incident demands a manner other than what Lurie would have displayed. Lucy, in a way, represents a departure from her father Lurie, who is emblematic of ancestry, history, and the white patriarchal system. Crucially, she emerges as an indicator of alterity, refusing all the preconceived attitudes inherited by her father's cultural and philosophical

legacy. Her means of approach takes us to Levinas's term "pardon" (*Totality and Infinity* 283). She epitomizes a rupture with the past's deep-seated aspect and approach towards the Other. She represents a break from the past and its entrenched views towards the Other. Levinas's idea of "pardon" aligns with Lucy's intent. To pardon is to act upon the past, to repeat the event, but to cleanse it. Pardon allows the subject to move on as though the past had not occurred, keeping the past alive but in a purified form.

Building upon this concept, the crux of the argument revolves around Lucy, who is Lurie's direct descendant. While she shares a blood lineage with Lurie, Lucy represents a revitalized preservation of the past. In her, we see a "past pardoned in the purified present." She emerges as a beacon of the future, embodying hope, change, and infinite possibilities. Lucy's actions and beliefs set her apart from her predecessors, making her a living testament to the power of alterity.

This aspect is crucial in understanding Lucy's enigmatic reaction to the three rapists, necessitating an approach that transcends conventional attitudes typically exhibited by the majority. It is this manner of response that requires the assistance of art with its capacity to activate the imagination:

> …the imagination must achieve what appears to be impossible: it must enable the self to abandon its point of view in culture and, in so doing, construct for it a position that is precisely not a position, one that would therefore allow the self to be within the world while giving it from nowhere within it. Only then would the self, as a singular entity, be able to relate to other entities as singular entities. Only then would history stop speaking through the self in its predetermined relations with other beings. (Marais, "J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace'" 81-82)

Marais provides a compelling viewpoint on human perception and

interaction with the world. He notes the challenge inherent in forming genuine relations with other beings while preserving their uniqueness. He likens our dominant perspective to a persistent shadow, an ever-present overlay on our interactions that can only be negated in moments of uncertainty and darkness. When one is unsure of their senses—what they see, feel, or hear—there emerges a space where the established perspective may be temporarily abandoned. In this profound obscurity, the shadow of assumption disappears. This means that only when our assumptions become uncertain can we truly allow for the mystery of the unknown. The framework becomes unreliable, allowing room for entities to exist without our preconceived notions.

Further emphasizing this, Marais posits that true neutrality or an "uncommitted non-position" demands stepping outside of the confines of language and the cultural roles it enforces, as he explains, "If an uncommitted non-position is to be achieved, what is required is a stepping outside of language and the positions that it inscribes in culture" (82). Drawing upon this idea, one might infer that the concept of "groundlessness" can facilitate this departure from our inherent biases. Varela and his colleagues suggest that to truly inhabit our global world, we must counteract the human inclination to cling to set notions, especially when they manifest collectively, stating that in order to "build and dwell in a planetary world, then we must learn to uproot and release the grasping tendency" (252).

So I suppose this can be achieved through the concept of groundlessness as in order to "build and dwell in a planetary world, then we must learn to uproot and release the grasping tendency, especially in its collective

manifestations" (Varela et al. 252). This approach points to ways in which the centrality of the human being is put aside and other forms of perceiving the world come into play.

Lucy, as a character, presents a fascinating duality. Despite her name, which translates to "light" (Norman 525), she remains enigmatic, shrouded in mystery. Little is disclosed about her, leaving her obscured from both the reader and Lurie. There is strong evidence to suggest that the novel feeds the sense of ambiguity and seeks to challenge the obligation of understanding her, so that neither Lurie nor the reader can make sense of her attitude. This intentional obscurity positions her outside the scrutinizing gaze of both the narrative's protagonist and its audience.

The novel, in its design, appears to deliberately nurture this sense of ambiguity surrounding Lucy. Marais captures this essence by stating, "… the absence of this singularity [Lucy] from its economy renders the text incomplete...The reader must do what the novel itself admits the writer cannot do and, indeed, what cannot be done" ("J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace'" 87). In essence, Lucy eludes both the writer's and the reader's attempts at understanding, destabilizing the conventional flow of the narrative. Her elusiveness provides an avenue for her to operate beyond the grasp of both author and audience.

My argument not only addresses the unavailability of the Other but also introduces the concept of infinity. That is, the Other cannot be reduced to the present or the economy of the same, nor can it be assimilated into familiar understandings or narratives. Levinas elaborates on this, stating, "The desire of

the absolutely Other will not, like need, be extinguished in happiness" ("Meaning and Sense" 107). Thus, Lucy, representing the Other, remains undiminished by Lurie's perceptions or the interpretations of readers. Her story stands distinct, untouched by the overarching narrative of Lurie or the interpretations imposed upon her.

Lurie and the Dogs: Realisation Yet Not Conversion

One of the critical issues that gives revealing insight into the shift in Lurie's arrogant attitude towards the Other is the moral entanglement in which he is caught up during his initial assistance to the animals. When he starts helping Bev he thinks that he will get used to the idea of animals being killed there. However, when he enters the process by assisting Bev, he sees the cruelty of that process first-hand.

Rather than growing numb, Lurie's emotional response amplifies. An illustration of this heightened sensitivity occurs when he is driving home: "One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face he cannot stop; his hands shake" (142-143). But the emerging feeling here is not just that of an emotional exploration. It represents an awakening.

Through this experience, Lurie confronts unsettling questions that most prefer to ignore. He grapples with the understanding of the processes that lead to a slab of meat being served at dinner or the fate of animals deemed "unwanted." This journey sheds light on the brutal truths concealed within seemingly mundane facilities like clinics or slaughterhouses, compelling Lurie to reckon

with uncomfortable truths.

In the same vein, Sir Paul McCartney, a former Beatles member and a vegetarian, pointing to the reality behind such walls in a video called "Glass Walls" produced with PETA in 2010, more explicitly states: "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian." McCartney underscores the importance of acknowledging the distressing truths that lurk behind the appealing facade of a dish or the fate of animals discarded by society.

This awareness is not simply about accumulating knowledge but accepting the immense responsibility that comes with it. Lurie's journey mirrors this sentiment. He reflects: "he cannot tell whether by nature he is cruel or kind. He is simply nothing. He assumes that people from whom cruelty is demanded in the line of duty, people who work in slaughterhouses, for instance, grow carapaces over their souls" (143).[57] This powerful revelation pushes Lurie to introspect on his past attitudes towards animals. His initial beliefs, as he explained to Lucy: "As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different" (74), seem to resonate with a Kantian perspective: kindness as a tool for human moral elevation

However, his ensuing realization is telling. He observes that, "Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure, despite the good thoughts that Bew Shaw thinks and that he tries to think...the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside" (143). This shifts his perspective, implying that animals have

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[57] In an interview on animals and cruelty, Coetzee states that human beings are not by nature cruel and further claims that human beings "have evolved psychic, social and philosophical mechanisms to cope with killing poultry" (Engström).

an acute awareness of their surroundings. Seth's argument that "consciousness has more to do with being alive than with being smart" (*Being You* 245), reinforcing the assumption that the state of consciousness pertinent to corporeal integrity serves as a medium of survival. Hence, by challenging the Cartesian view of animal beings, he insists that "Decisions about animal welfare should be based not on similarity to humans, nor on whether some arbitrary threshold of cognitive competence is exceeded, but on the capacity for pain and suffering" (243-244). Remarkably, Lurie's enlightenment emerges from the juxtaposition of his cerebral pursuits against the corporeal reality of the animals' deaths. As noted by Kossew, "... his recognition at the end of the novel of the existence of an animal soul occurs through his dealing with the physical, the bodily realities of the dogs' deaths" ("The Politics of Shame and Redemption" 158).

This shifts the traditional debate of body versus mind by challenging the supremacy of intellect over the corporeal. The narrative underscores the importance of recognizing that both humans and animals share a bodily existence. The ability to think abstractly should not eclipse the fundamental reality of life, as asserted by Seth when he states that "consciousness is more closely connected with being *alive* than with being *intelligent*" (*Being You* 230). The narrative suggests that our constructed hierarchies diminish the inherent value of corporeal existence, and when the body's significance is downplayed, the plight of animals becomes inconsequential.

Significantly, another situation worth noting is the irony of how Lurie, emblematic of the egocentric self, undergoes a quest that offers no return to his former self—a seemingly endless journey. During this, he

experiences disgrace, loses all semblance of dignity in the eyes of others, and finds himself ostracized by the entire community. He comes to a level equal with the animals. Despite his current disgraced situation, he is recognized and “adopted” “unconditionally” by the dog. Crucial to this case is the fact that Lurie is able to accept Lucy’s situation without making sense of her. For the most likely inference is that he comes to perceive that insisting on understanding someone is in fact not central or even necessary to communicating with someone, only after he experiences the unconditional and non-reciprocal interest of the dog.

Yet, the irony is palpable. Humans, despite their capacity for empathy and care for their own species, can act in deeply disgraceful ways. As seen in Lurie’s story, mankind sometimes sacrifices animals to atone for their own sins, both in a literal and symbolic sense. Willet’s observation that “the Coetzee tale alters the tragic scenario when it places in the position of the king, perhaps even the fallen god, a maimed dog” (17), underscores the radical shift in how animals are portrayed in this narrative.

However, beyond this, it is also surely asking for a shift in attitude in which the classical sense of scapegoating is seen as no longer fulfilling its purpose as that act belongs to a conventional way of grasping and framing the world that needs be discredited. Put bluntly, Lurie’s act might be referring to a world where no being is sacrificed in the framework of living up to the necessities set up by the tenets of higher life. By contrast, Coetzee might be suggesting that in a similar vein as Seth puts it, that “the quest to understand consciousness [should] place[s] us increasingly within nature, not further apart

from it” (*Being You* 267).

The state of Being Nothing: Lucy and the Dogs

Crucially, another subject that is taken into account is the problematic working of historicity. The critical point with historicity is the burden of the past as it weighs on the present. The present bears the cost of past misdeeds, as is evident in Lucy’s case.

The rape she is exposed to is based on rage provoked by historical events and situations. That is, to speak of history through the three black men as “the rapists are guilty of a similar failure of imagination as in their respective interactions with Lucy. While they certainly do imagine Lucy, they do so in the terms of the history in which they are situated. They construct for her an identity by recuperating her within a set of pre-existing paradigms” (Marais, “J.M. Coetzee’s ‘Disgrace’” 84): that is, the once dominant mind set of the colonial powers.

Eventually, the heaviness of the past turns into a burden and curse on the present generation, detaining it with previously perceived/imposed attitudes, as when Lucy bitterly speaks about the rape for the first time as in the following: “It was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred. That was that stunned me more than anything. The rest was…expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them” (156).

Then Lurie tries to ease her by making an explanation which perfectly goes along with the idea of historicity as when he states that “It was history

speaking through them…A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors (156). In the following dialogue Lurie repeats his suggestion of selling the farm and leaving the country, yet Lucy keeps on saying, "You are concerned for my sake, which I appreciate, you think you understand, but finally you don't. Because you can't" (157). Then Lurie tells her very frankly that "On the contrary, I understand all too well… I will pronounce the word we have avoided hitherto. You were raped. Multiply. By three men…You were in fear of your life...Disposed of. Because you were nothing to them" (157).

This part of the dialogue presents two primary arguments. First, Lucy emphasises my contention regarding Lurie's inherent inability, as a man and a distinct individual with limited understanding, to truly grasp her singular experience from that day. However, Lurie counters with a separate argument about the fear of death, drawing a parallel to his experience with dogs. These animals are often "disposed of" once they become insignificant or "nothing to" humans. The commonality between the dogs and Lucy, despite their many differences, is the profound fear of being discarded, leading to the termination of their existence. The key focus is only on their mutual reality, which is their bodily existence.

What Coetzee seems to achieve by presenting Lucy and the dogs in the same framework of being disposed of easily as a result of being nothing to the relevant political structure, is to highlight the corrupt political and cultural structure that is denying them the political and cultural status of having the right to live as they wish. In both cases, involving Lucy and the dogs, the political

dimension is pivotal. Neither the dogs nor Lucy have their voices acknowledged, due to the prevailing political and cultural discourse. The system they are embedded in is both inefficient and epistemically unjust.

It is evident that Coetzee problematises the system based on Cartesian tenets divesting Lucy and the dogs of a right of living 'like a dog.' Rather than positioning mind and body as opposed, the idea is to regard them as part of a system, that is nature, hence cancelling the approach of one being conferred with superiority over the other.

Furthermore, deploying an ethical approach, here a Levinasian framework, destabilises the established contours of a thinking system attributing primacy to the self over the Other, as it challenges and devalues the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy concerning the subject.

Such an approach engenders further insights as when Lurie names the manner of the three black men, together with the new order of the post-apartheid period, as slavery, but Lucy refuses and claims that it is "Subjection. Subjugation" (159). The choice of using the term 'subjugation' over 'slavery' is significant. With subjugation, one is subjected to an unwanted condition with no alternatives. In contrast, slavery, as a system, implies that there is an option, albeit limited in practicality, to escape or resist the impositions.

Hence, it is clear that dogs and other animals face a harsh reality in the world they share with humans. Their experience of mistreatment mirrors the challenges Lucy faces.nJust like Lucy, who desires to live in a place where she feels she belongs, these animals find themselves in a world with no alternatives. They have no other haven to seek refuge in. This shared world, where both

animals and humans coexist, becomes a pivotal backdrop for their stories.

Crucially, Coetzee employs Lucy's character not just to narrate her individual struggle but to cast a light on the broader, intertwined realities of both animal and human existence.

Lucy Resisting Lurie: Begetting Hope, Enacting Infinity

In the ensuing chapter twenty-two, Lurie learns about Lucy's pregnancy and asks her why she had not told him about it before. Lucy's reply manifests the problematic relationship between the self and the Other by highlighting the disrespectful and disparaging attitude of the self, in this case Lurie, as follows: "David, I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not anymore. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life" (198).

Tellingly, she reminds him of her singularity and her own story. She goes on to express how, "You are the main character; I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through" (198). The important aspect in this expression is that she refers to the selfishly oriented attitude of the self by using the definite article "the" and the indefinite article "a" to give meaning to the missed singularity of the Other as anybody. In the following sentence she announces both her singularity and alterity as when she clearly states that "…on the contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions" (198).

Coetzee, through, Lucy emphasizes personal autonomy, the intrinsic value of every individual, and the rejection of perceived hierarchies or judgments that might belittle or diminish someone's worth or importance.

However, the thought-provoking aspect of this specific incident is Lucy's approach to the three men as shadows of history. She, on an individual basis, manages to break the chain of reciprocal and unremitting vengeance. Her attitude is completely different from her ancestors. She prefers to act on the idea of pardon as put forward in Levinasian ethics.

That is, not as in the biblical sense does she turn her left cheek, which may be read as submission to wrongness, what she is doing is something completely different. She is not passive, as some might claim, nor is she paying for the sins of her ancestors. On the contrary, she is powerful enough to take initiative and seek pardon by not following in the footsteps of her ancestors, who perpetrated racialized cruelty during the apartheid period. She represents hope and peace by breaking the chain.

Another aspect of the concept of sense-making is that, historically, words carry the meanings of the past. While they continue to be used to define and encapsulate the present, they often lag in their ability to accurately portray the current situation. That is using words from the past to judge the present can often lead to misunderstandings and missing the essence of the moment. The common factor here is that, just like the self carries its own experiences distilled from its unique perspective—referred to as 'stored knowledge'—discourses in history will also consistently fall short in their efforts to make sense of the present moment, especially when it comes to

understanding the perspective of the Other.

There might indeed exist no pregiven world waiting to be given meaning by the conscious individual, but instead a situation in which "cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs" (Varela et al. 9).

In this sense, the role of the artist, whether an author or a painter, is to highlight the overlooked aspects of moments, both in the eyes of ordinary individuals and throughout history. Through their works, artists remind us of the diverse forms and perspectives that shape our perception and conception of the world.

The artist too is particularly well aware of the perpetual failure of representation. As Levinas clearly points out: "What common perception trivializes and misses, an artwork apprehends in its irreducible essence…Where common language abdicates, a poem or a painting speaks" ("Reality and its Shadow" 1). Significantly, in this context, the influence of artworks plays an essential role in the endeavour to raise awareness for the ethics of the Other, as they emphasize the practice of deferring meaning.

Scapedog: Human Beings' Disgrace

The last, and quite striking, scene is when Lurie gives up the dog which he has started to like, even to become attached. Lurie's giving up the dog has provoked consternation on the part of readers; the question of why he gives up the dog creates confusion. Yet that is precisely what human beings in the world

do on a daily basis: relinquish animals with whom they share the same stratum of life. This clearly highlights that "The fundamental wrong is the system that allows us to view animals as *our resources*, here for *us* — to be eaten, or surgically manipulated or exploited for sport or money" (Regan 13; italics in original).

The representation of this act conducted daily by human beings makes the reader question the unknown motivation behind Lurie's act and this effect of the novel can be regarded as a way of pushing the reader to question similarly entrenched acts that normalise heart-breaking and ethically charged moments.

By extension, Lurie's ethical attitude is not just limited to his understanding and actions towards animals. It also extends to his acceptance of Lucy's decision, irrespective of whether he comprehends her reasons. Both scenarios underscore the importance of not forcing the Other into the confines of one's understanding, instead of outright dismissing or neglecting them.

The poignant act of giving up the dog, intentional on Lurie's part, symbolically represents the broader human tendency to mindlessly sacrifice animals. This reality, so raw and thought-provoking, aptly gives the novel its title: "Disgrace." The extent of Lurie's realization or acknowledgment of this remains in the realm of ambiguity.

Interestingly, while initially fixated on the character of Byron, Lurie's attention drifts towards Teresa, alluding to a shift in perspective. Whether this change in focus is a clear departure from his previous notions or he is still caught in the narrative of the anti-hero remains open to interpretation. There is

an underlying suggestion that Lurie might be using the metaphor of the stray and mutilated dog to align himself with the myth of the anti-hero.

Coetzee's nuanced storytelling hints at the transformative power of art and literature in offering profound insights. Yet, an inherent truth remains: as readers and writers, full comprehension of one's own or another's motivations is elusive. While Lurie's journey remains marked by ambiguity and elusive self-understanding, the narrative critiques human moral failings, particularly in how people treat animals.

Throughout the novel, the disgrace associated with human attitudes towards animals is continually highlighted. Coetzee uses various instances to critique this perspective. One poignant moment is when Lucy expresses her sympathy for an old bulldog named Katy. She remarks

> No one wants her, and she knows it. The irony is, she must have offspring all over the district who would be happy to share their homes with her. But it's not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things. (78)

Another revealing exchange occurs when Bev asks Lurie about his feelings towards animals. His response is both ironic and stark, shedding light on the often overlooked hypocrisies of human behaviour towards animals: "I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them" (81).

In presenting these moments, Coetzee is not merely highlighting Lurie's fall from grace as an individual character. Instead, he broadens the scope to illustrate the disgraceful behaviour exhibited by humanity at large, as represented by Lurie.

The novel's narrative style underscores this shift in focus. Tremaine

observes: “the ironic, sceptical, tautly cerebral voice in which Coetzee treats textuality, rationality, and ideology grows silent and we hear emerging instead a voice that insists, with a more visceral urgency, on the direct, factual, and compelling reality of bodily suffering and death, the threat of shame, and the desire for salvation” (588). By shifting from an intellectualized narrative to one that emphasizes physical suffering and existential threat, Coetzee deepens the emotional and ethical weight of the story, forcing readers to confront the reality of human vulnerability and the complexities of redemption.

Consequently, Lurie’s response provides a significant revelation. The real “disgrace” implied in the title of the novel stems from the profound ingratitude of humans. Despite the unconditional love animals extend, humans frequently fail to return or even acknowledge this affection.

This deep-seated disgrace is manifest in the way humans exert dominance over animals. They disrespect, violate, and degrade these creatures, arrogantly assuming that animals are devoid of any form of dignity. In a system, both created by and biased in favour of humans, there exists a glaring paradox. As Costello keenly observes, such a system might seem logical and “It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don’t…” (Coetzee, *The Lives of the Animals* 45).

Crucially, in this vein, a deeper purpose might be the idea of foregrounding the urge to coexist in a world “where we no longer need and desire foundations and so can take up the further tasks of building and dwelling in worlds without ground” (Varela et al. 252).

Chapter Three

"Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 6).

This chapter focuses on *Waiting for the Barbarians* [1980],[58] one of J. M. Coetzee's best known novels. As the title implies, its theme is built around the act of waiting—waiting for the so-called barbarians who never arrive. This act of waiting connotes the hysterical situation of the empire and the representatives of the empire, colonel Joll and the magistrate, the magistrate playing the good cop and the colonel playing the bad cop.

By the same token, it can be argued that this act of waiting signifies the deferral of meaning, the elusive truth that never materializes. This is evident in the case of the colonel, who resorts to chimerical attempts to construct a provisional truth—in this instance, the barbarians—while awaiting the absolute truth.

This chapter will focus on how the discourse of empire functions as a tool in verifying torture practiced by the colonel and justified through the binary opposition of civilization and barbarism, one that is created by empire.

The magistrate, entrapped in the empire's binary thinking system, will be examined in terms of his fixation on the barbarian girl, his attempt to

[58] The title brings to mind Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* [first English edition in 1954], in which in a similar manner the characters Vladimir and Estragon expect Godot, who never arrives. It can also be associated with the Greek poet Costantine P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" [1904], where he discusses how a public life is shaped on an understanding based on its enemy, a motive keeping the people of the country together.

attribute meaning to her, and his struggle to transcend the boundaries imposed by the empire, which also constrain his own identity.

The central focus of this chapter revolves around Coetzee's representation of the body, which emerges as the singular shared element of existence among beings, transcending considerations of gender, race, and age. Furthermore, the dissolution of the idea of the signifier referring to one signified examined in the last chapter is also a feature of this novel and bound up here with Coetzee's preoccupation with delayed meaning and the disappearance of the idea of absolute truth.

Building on the dissolution of fixed signifiers, the narrative shifts to the act of seeing, where the focus on bodily pain underscores the novel's engagement with the uncertainty of meaning and the limits of knowledge. The question of seeing, and of finding ways to perform the act of seeing more clearly, develops a modernist and phenomenological, as well as epistemological, preoccupation that reaches back to Conrad's fiction (that is surely a historical reference point for the novel). The case highlighted here, though, is that anything may be doubted, except pain, a reference to the bedrock reality of bodily existence: "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 6).

While Coetzee's depiction of pain underscores a universal human experience, his broader body of work resists being confined to the context of any specific region or nation. His writing intentionally eschews clear national or regional markers. Such an approach can be perceived as a strategic move to steer clear of being trapped within a limited realm of reference or meaning.

Rather, the emphasis shifts to existential and phenomenological concerns, specifically the nuanced relationship between the self and the Other. This relationship is deeply rooted in the realities of bodily existence, the boundaries of language, and the constant, yet always unmet, pursuit of an absolute, definitive truth.

This tension between the physical and the philosophical mirrors Coetzee's broader literary approach, which resists easy categorization and embraces deliberate dissent. According to both Coetzee and Easton, Coetzee's literary trajectory has been one of deliberate dissent. They note that he has "consistently written against the grain, [being] purposefully evasive of commitment to any particular mode of discourse— be it academic, political, intellectual, or literary" (585-586). Such an approach can be interpreted as a resistance to being pigeonholed within any singular movement, aesthetic approach, or group identity. Rather than allowing his work to be confined by such categories, Coetzee redirects focus towards the foundational essence of our bodily existence.

Coetzee attempts to draw attention back to the indispensable condition of bodily existence. The novel's focus on the significant role of the body and the concept of pain is used to unveil the constructed nature of ideas, systems, and the arbitrary nature of language that govern minds. This gradual revelation renders the vital reality of bodily existence obsolete.

As part of this purpose, Coetzee does not give any specific description of where and when the novel takes place. The unspecified setting obstructs narrowly historicist interpretation and, as suggested by the writer Anthony

Burgess, this novel "is not about South Africa: It is not about anywhere and hence it is about everywhere" (qtd. in Gallagher and Coetzee 281). This brings to the forefront the phenomenological aspects of torture, whether practiced legally or illegally, and, as a result, emphasizes the fundamental existence of human beings. As Hannah Arendt writes, the history of torture and suffering is hardly new or confined to one region of the world:

> There have almost always been wars of aggression; the massacre of hostile populations after a victory went unchecked until the Romans mitigated it by introducing the *parcere subjectis*; through centuries the extermination of native peoples went hand in hand with the colonization of the Americas, Australia and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and all empires of antiquity were based on the labor of state-owned slaves who erected their public buildings. Not even concentration camps are an invention of totalitarian movements. They emerge for the first time during the Boer War, at the beginning of the century, and continued to be used in South Africa as well as India for 'undesirable elements'; here, too, we first find the term 'protective custody' which was later adopted by the Third Reich. (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 440; italics in original)

By removing historical specificity, Coetzee seems to intend the reader to view the act of torture in its own shocking beingness of specificity rather than dissolving it into history and indeed, much of the early controversy around his work has been focussed on ethical questions around his avoidance[59] of precise historical contextualisation.

This deliberate avoidance of historical contextualization aligns with Coetzee's broader rejection of being seen as a spokesperson for collective ideals, focusing instead on the ways he constructs representations of complex themes.

[59] Besides being an author holding many prestigious prizes, his literary texts have been a centre of interest as part of him being a white South African writer. That his novels are not "realist and mimetic" enough has generated "political criticism that they are insufficiently engaged with historical reality." His work has been regarded "politically impotent, or even irresponsibly escapist" (Vermeulen 169-70).

In an interview conducted by David Attwell, Coetzee rejects being regarded as “a herald of community” (341) highlighting that aspect of his work that concerns how he “constructs representations” of freedom, but that he “do[es] not represent it” (341). His statement reveals the state of a literary text as not obliged to present historical contextualisation, but that a writer can address political and historical issues indirectly by making use of her/his imaginative capacity to construct representations. Approaching the novel through a Levinasian lens is intended to provide a philosophical framework for these authorial choices so that the work gains a quality of escaping geographical and temporal limitation. This perspective also serves to prevent the reader from creating an immediate connection with the work, thereby delaying their tendency toward pre-emptive closure and internalization of the work.

This narrative strategy can further be interpreted as a means of preventing the reader from accessing a sense of empathy, thus inhibiting the reader’s complete immersion into the work. However, as no work is created entirely without historical and social contexts, it is evident that Coetzee is obliquely at least referencing through the maiming of the Barbarian woman and the magistrate’s own punishment the treatment of political prisoners in South Africa. The notion of universal truth is itself a gesture of absolutism and closure, as Gallagher and Coetzee suggest, so Coetzee, in presenting apparently “universal truths about torture and oppression, also obliquely condemns his own country” (282).

This critique of universal truths is reflected in how Coetzee structures

his characters, stripping them of personal identities and defining them by their roles within oppressive systems. We are not given names of characters but they appear initially as mere functions within a social system: the magistrate, representative of empire. His name refers merely to that authority of the law that allows him to use the power granted by empire, even as his position is related to public service. Colonel Joll, on the other hand, also a representative of empire, represents the military, so that his power is at once associated with the legitimation of overt violence. Likewise, the barbarian[60] is associated with connotations of barbarism, posing a perceived threat to the civilization of those labeled as 'uncivilized.' These individuals are often depicted as lacking cultural practices influenced by more advanced civilizations. The characters are given no proper nouns but are already named before they are described as positions interpellated by structures of power and drawing on preconceived ideas formed throughout history.

The binary opposition of civilization and barbarism provides the infrastructure of the novel. These names have a double performativity[61] effect. On one hand, the reader engages in the act of applying their preconceived ideas derived from the familiarity of naming conventions. Simultaneously, the work itself endeavours to illustrate this overarching inclination toward labelling and attributing meaning. The novel is narrated from the limited perspective of the

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[60] Initially, barbarian was used to define non-Greek-speaking people in ancient Greece. Later the ancient Romans made use of the word to characterize people with no practice of Greek and Roman traditions. However, its current use connotes negative meanings like being uncivilized and savagery.

[61] Judith Butler's use of the term 'performativity' with regards to gender politics has been referred to here as focusing on the act of reiteration and enactment of a socially constructed set of meanings. That is, as Butler asserts, "Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (*Bodies That Matter* 13).

magistrate so that even in this use of the perspectival, a whole and complete understanding of the story cannot be acquired. This is evident especially in his relationship with the barbarian girl, a relationship that is performed as a means also of foregrounding the unavailability of the Other's point of view.

This dynamic of unavailability and asymmetry in the relationship with the barbarian girl mirrors Levinas's concept of the self and the Other, where the Other remains beyond full comprehension, positioned as both distant and transcendent. Levinas reflects on the asymmetrical relationship between the self and the Other: "The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy" (*Totality and Infinity* 215). The relationship of the magistrate to the girl is not only evidently asymmetrical, but what he describes as "blank" (50), iterating a sense that she is opaque to him in a way that debars his access to her. When he first meets the girl he discerns some kind of weirdness concerning her gaze and so asks her to look at him; she replies "I am looking. This is how I look" (30). Her expression is notable as it exposes the magistrate's one-sided perspective on how the self is represented within intersubjective dynamics to the reader. He is the one who misrecognises her look but believes it is the girl who is deficient in her gaze or who is blind. His shaded perspective, a recurring motif in the novel, impedes his ability to truly see her. This is why the magistrate often acknowledges his own limitations in relation to her.

This inability to truly see her is further reflected in his response to her silence, which he interprets as something to be solved rather than as a

meaningful form of communication. The magistrate asks what the colonel and his men did to her. She does not say a word. He dismisses her silence, urging her "don't make a mystery of it, pain is only pain" (36), or jokes with her concerning his own incomprehension, likening her to a wild animal: "People will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl" (39). He believes obsessively that he needs to find out the truth about the marks on her body; through this wound and sign of vulnerability he might have access to her: "until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (35-36). In this connection, his self-centred wish of defining and giving meaning to her can be named as the most distinct component of his attitude in general.

His desire to understand her becomes so intense that he questions a soldier who was in charge of the prisoners and asks him what has happened to the girl. The soldier's explanation, "There was nothing I could do, I did not want to become involved in a matter I did not understand" (42) is suggestive.

The soldier is positioned in his unthinking[62] diffidence much like Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as a servant of the state and representation of a mindlessness that she describes in a brilliant though often misunderstood expression, the "banality of evil." [63] She explains that the situation with Eichmann was his incapacity to think and his insistence on mindlessly following orders, even, as he stated, that "he would have sent his own father to

[62] The magistrate can be regarded as a "cog in the imperial machine" as well, as he believed that the "empire was compatible, if not synonymous, with law and decency" (Woessner 233).

[63] Hannah Arendt attended Adolf Eichmann's trial and wrote a report on the trial and Eichmann in 1963. In her work Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil she originated the well- known phrase 'banality of evil' to describe the case.

his death if that had been required, he did not mean merely to stress the extent to which he was under orders, and ready to obey them; he also meant to show what an 'idealist' he had always been" ("Eichmann in Jerusalem").

By the same token, the soldier in question can be defined within such terms. Neither he nor the magistrate can be regarded as not responsible for what has happened to the girl and the other prisoners. This ethical responsibility and the burden of it can be read through the magistrate's confession about the mess the colonel and his men have caused:

> it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary. On the other hand, there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again. The knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end. (23)

In another instance, the magistrate realizes his one-sided point of view when he goes hunting but does not shoot the buck and this offers a momentary pause to reflect on what he intends to do—to kill an animal—rather than his usual recourse to taking the act for granted. It suggests that some sort of revelation has taken place, prompting at least a passing reflection as that "Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms" (45).

This moment of self-reflection hints at the complexity of the magistrate's role, one that oscillates between personal introspection and his larger function as a representative of empire. The magistrate, viewed as the representative of empire in its dress of legality, the self carrying the mantle of

the authority of justice (but also perhaps the curious writer fascinated with and desiring to depict the private space, beyond his own experience, of his creation of the Other, the experience of the prisoner while being tortured), feels resentful when refused by the girl: “I cease to comprehend what pleasure I can ever have found in her obstinate, phlegmatic body, and even discover in myself stirrings of outrage. I become withdrawn, irritable” (47). Accordingly, he goes to another woman and sleeps with her. He compares the girl with the woman he sleeps with and states that: “She’s incomplete” (48) and that he cannot even remember her face depicting it as “blank, like a fist beneath a black wig” (48).

All of his depictions and statements about her reveal his frustration[64] and impotence, as she does not fit his preconceived notions of women and barbarians. But inevitably, he falls short of giving a description of her which makes him uncomfortable. His most vital statement on his own impotence in creating a connection with her resonates with a Levinasian force for “with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry” (49).

He goes on making a comparison between himself and the torturers, suggesting similar motives: “how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!...I behave in some ways like a lover...but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate” (49). He is acutely aware that his actions, similar to those of the torturers he views as relentlessly cruel, stem from the same motive:

[64] Similarly, Susan in Coetzee’s *Foe* feels frustrated as well when the truth behind Friday’s story cannot be revealed.

to frame the girl, who represents the Other, within the context of the self, trying to make her conform.

This awareness of his own complicit behavior is reflected in his objectifying and self-centered portrayal of the girl, which further illustrates his attempt to frame her within his own limited understanding. The magistrate self-centredly depicts the girl as “a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me” (50). The depiction is also a reminder of the colonel’s shades which represent his myopic vision and his impotence in connecting and making contact with others. Here, however, in the case of the girl the magistrate expects to possess her both literally and metaphorically. But again she is misrecognised from the beginning as he attempts to place her in a framework of his own preconceived ideas; she will not be placed in such a frame. As Bill Ashcroft puts it in his compelling article regarding Friday’s silence, Coetzee, “by refusing to make Friday’s silence speak” in fact, “allows it to open up the utopian horizon of possibility. Silence then becomes the ship, the mirror, the partially desacralized space of heterotopia. In the end, this is the site of an ethical choice, a choice to let the silence speak” (14). This view on Friday’s silence can also be applied to the barbarian girl, as her silence can similarly be translated into “the resistance to the linguistic program of the civilising mission” (14). Just as Friday’s silence resists the imposition of colonial language, the barbarian girl’s silence becomes a form of resistance, challenging the assumptions and power dynamics of the colonizer.

While the girl’s silence serves as a form of resistance, the differing

reactions of the magistrate and the colonel highlight contrasting attitudes toward communication and the recognition of the Other. The colonel, in contrast, pre-emptively refuses any form of communication that does not aligned with his own point of view; he simply cannot recognize that other perspectives might exist. In essence, while neither the magistrate nor the colonel engages in a reciprocal gaze, they differ in their approach to communication: the colonel outright refuses it, whereas the magistrate seeks it but initially misrecognizes the girl, preventing her from becoming a true interlocutor.

While the colonel's rejection of communication stems from his rigid worldview, the arrival of the young officer further illuminates the entrenched ideology of empire, where the assumptions of power and coercion remain unquestioned. After the colonel and his men leave the fort, a young officer visits and they talk about the empire. It can be clearly observed that his presuppositions are entirely congruent with the ideology of empire. He openly acknowledges the idea that "war is about: compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it" (57).

Elaine Scarry suggests of war:

> *The dispute that leads to the war involves a process by which each side calls into question the legitimacy and thereby erodes the reality of the other country's issues, beliefs, ideas, self-conception. Dispute leads relentlessly to war not only because war is an extension and intensification of dispute but because it is a correction and reversal of it. That is, injuring not* only provides a means of choosing between disputants but also *provides, by its massive opening of human bodies, a way of reconnecting the derealized and disembodied beliefs with the force and power of the material world.* (128; italics in original)

While definitions of war vary, most agree that its core involves one

group asserting dominance over another, imposing their perspective and delegitimizing alternative views. Even in discourses of the so-called 'just war', each side believes its cause is just, and it is this belief that legitimizes the violence and killing.

This understanding of war as a process of asserting dominance and legitimizing violence becomes evident when the young officer questions the magistrate about the barbarians' dissatisfaction, revealing deeper tensions in the way the Other is defined. When the young officer inquires about the dissatisfaction of the barbarians, the magistrate's response is revealing. Despite his general detachment from the barbarians and his preconceived notions about them, his fundamental statement is crucial. It highlights how defining the Other arbitrarily, using customary practices as a measure of universal 'civilisation', can foster hostilities and incite violence: "How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid?" (58).

Even the magistrate's situation serves as an example of egotism and the questionable nature of empathy. Although he recognizes the arbitrary nature of contempt, which disregards cultural relativism, he still cannot overcome his self-centred desire to understand the girl through the lens of his own culture. But he is not simply a two dimensional character; there is a sense in which he peers into the problem of epistemic justice even as he undermines the validity of what he glimpses: "I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them. We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that

at all" (58).

But his critiquing explanations of empire's attitudes are in conflict with his own attitude towards the girl. His explanations destabilize not only the importance of what is regarded as empathy, but even its conceptual structure. That is to say, while the magistrate recognizes the unjust attitude towards the barbarians, he fails to see this same bias in his own treatment of the girl: he is blinded by the self-deceiving capacity of his own ego. His failure in recognition not only debunks the concept of empathy but also foregrounds what is indispensable to any ethical relation to the Other: personal responsibility. It is because "It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign … that constitutes the original fact of fraternity" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 214). The idea of empathy invalidates its own structure when the Other and not the self is made central and, in welcoming "the face (which is already my responsibility in his regard, and where accordingly he approaches me from dimension of height and dominates me), equality is founded. Equality is produced where the other commands and reveals himself to the same in responsibility; otherwise it is but an abstract idea and a word" (214). Levinas argues that true ethical responsibility arises when we recognize the Other as radically separate and respond to that alterity with care and accountability, a process that transcends the mere notion of empathy.

One of the crucial scenes in the novel is when the magistrate takes the girl back to her family. For the first time they make love on their way to the barbarians. Beyond the fort's borders, which symbolize the empire's constructed world, both the girl and the magistrate find an opportunity to

transcend the definitions and burdens imposed by the empire. Hence, both naked and as if finding themselves in a neutral space outside of institutional definition, they come closer to each other, and he realizes that "in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, her twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten" (73). Yet, while the magistrate's physical recognition of the girl might suggest a moment of connection, this self-awareness is complicated by his deeper psychological flaws. Coetzee's male protagonists are often afflicted with a Romantic self-aggrandisement that is presented as self negation. As such, the preconceived ideas directed towards the Other can only ever harm and injure the perspective of the self too, becoming further obstacles to any possibility of genuine engagement.

This realization becomes evident when the magistrate encounters the barbarians for the first time in a manner that challenges his previous assumptions. When the magistrate meets the barbarians, he comes to realize that he has never before met them "on their own ground on equal terms" (82) for the only barbarians whom he is "familiar with are those who visit the oasis to barter, and the few who make their camp along the river, and (colonel) Joll's miserable captives" (82). As the magistrate defines them, the barbarians he is familiar with are not those he has made an effort to know, but rather those thrust upon him by force of circumstances. As such, there is no intention of getting to know these people who are so readily simply viewed as enemies.

This scene corresponds to what Arendt suggests in her work concerning the totalitarian mentality or disposition, for:

They do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own

> experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 351)

This ideological framework, which blinds the masses to reality in favor of a self-consistent narrative, is reflected in the magistrate's own experiences when he faces accusations of treason.

In the next chapter, the magistrate is blamed for "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (90). The framework of the empire, whether it refers to preconceived ideas, deep-seated opinions, or any dominant thinking system, lacks the capacity to reassess or revise its entrenched perspectives due to an inherent blindness: looking out of the frame, one does not see the frame. Perspectives that have become totalised as ultimate truths are invisible in their partiality as Germany under National Socialism for example where the only access to a world outside was through Nazi propaganda, therefore no access at all. Any attempt to challenge the system risks the personal security of the challenger or dissident so that the magistrate is still held captive despite being still, in part, a representative of empire. He has begun to change his perspective, but in creating a conflict within empire, the totalitarian thinking system's demand for total consistency with its impositions means "it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity" (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 458).

This demand for complete obedience to the system and the destruction of individual dignity becomes palpable in the magistrate's own experience of punishment. Independent thinking is forbidden, and the magistrate is humiliated

in front of the people for his transgression into thought. He is reduced to a mere state of existence, to bare life. He is not allowed to wash and is fed only when necessary, turning him into something similar to a Pavlovian animal, “at the thought of salty porridge and black tea my saliva runs, I cannot help it” (103). His control over his body is taken away from him completely.

This deprivation of bodily autonomy mirrors the treatment of the barbarians, further underscoring the critical role of bodily integrity in maintaining human dignity. When the barbarians are first brought to the fort by the colonel, the magistrate is sickened by their presence. However, now he too is not allowed to wash his body. Conditions are shown to be of the utmost important in maintaining dignity, something beyond bare life. The integrity of the body is more fundamental than that superiority, dignity through status, that is related to one’s position, race, culture, ethnicity or religion. It is the change in the magistrate’s basic conditions of being, his bodily state that has turned him into one of the prisoners he previously scorned.

The insight that arises from this situation is whether the magistrate still considers himself a “free man” (90). Despite his captivity and self-reflection about his current predicament, the very concept of liberty is now called into question. He asks himself honestly whether there is:

> any principle behind my opposition? Have I not simply been provoked into a reaction by the sight of one of the new barbarians usurping my desk pawing my papers? As for this liberty which I am in the process of throwing away, what value does it have to me? Have I truly enjoyed the unbounded freedom of this past year in which more than ever before my life has been mine to make up as I go along? For example: my freedom to make of the girl whatever I felt like, wife or concubine or daughter or slave or all at once or none, at whim, because I had no duty to her save what it occurred to me to feel from moment to moment: from the

> oppression of such freedom who would not welcome the liberation of confinement? In my opposition there is nothing heroic-let me not for an instant forget that. (91)

This statement by the magistrate emphasizes that his perceived liberty was always illusory. Having enjoyed the freedom granted by the empire and serving as its representative, he is not truly in a position to challenge the empire when this artificial liberty is revoked. That is why there is nothing heroic about his opposition; no principle is involved. When he was in charge and had the power to help, he did not take responsibility for the condition of the barbarian prisoners or make efforts to save their lives. Instead, he chose to remain calm and detached. If it is recognition, it comes too late.

In the passage above the magistrate addresses the officer who now fills his shoes as the "new barbarian." Words arbitrarily shift in the relationship between signifier and signified. While the natives were previously defined as barbarians, the magistrate now characterizes the officer, a representative of the empire symbolizing civilization, as a barbarian.

Similarly, in the magistrate's description of his approach to the girl, he portrays the process as one of entrapment in his net of signification. Yet, he acknowledges that she will always surpass its confines: "I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her" (94). The metaphor of the net illustrates the underlying motive of attributing meaning to—or even possessing—the Other by attempting to impose a fixed chain of signification. This metaphor thus becomes a reflection of the magistrate's own predicament, caught between the empire's constructed identity and the realization that the barbarians, too, are part of this

construct.

The magistrate now finds himself caught between the empire, which refers to his constructed world and its discourses, and the so-called barbarians, who are revealed as a construct of the empire upon which he depends for his identity. The empire, representing preconceived ideas, is a constructed part of his identity, yet it's one the magistrate is born into. His perspective is shaped by the biases and constructed notions of the empire. Hence his vision is not clear, but is disabled, always shaded by the empire. This pressure intensifies as the magistrate begins to question the very dichotomy of civilization and barbarism that the empire imposes.

Now, as a representative of the empire, he finds himself grappling with the very ideals he once took for granted. However, whenever he contemplates the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism created by the empire, he resorts to things sanctified, like the unquestionable status of law. He fails to grasp the affiliation between law and empire as he is still fully convinced that law reflects a universal ideal of justice that is an ethical truth.

But when he is finally released, having been tortured without any formal juridical procedure due to the absence of a formal writ, Mandel deems him a free man. The magistrate is taught the lesson that justice is circumscribed by rather than defining power. Those in power can bend even the law to their own ends or, as in states of exception, they can suspend it altogether.

The magistrate, after listening to the charges against him, now realizes that "They will use the law against me as far as it serves them, then they will return to other methods" (97). The law too may be rewritten as the act of writing

once again endows one with the power to name and restrict the Other. This ongoing, shifting nature of writing mirrors the magistrate's struggle with history and the law, as both are constantly subject to revision.

One of the salient features of the novel is that its base tense is present which provides a sense that things are in process, not finished, not yet past. This underscores the magistrate's uncertainty regarding writing and history, two concepts frequently referenced in the novel. They pertain to the distinction between civilized and barbaric people since writing and record-keeping are seen as instruments of civilization.[65] These tools grant authority to a people's narrative, particularly their written hiStory.

The idea of history and the writing of it is based on facts. However, while these facts are organized, literary activity offers an alternative mode of storytelling. This mode is not bound by facts and definitions but is a dynamic act of storytelling that can generate new possibilities and insights. Nevertheless, as a written document, history too is an act undertaken by the powerful and so called civilized people: there can be no guarantee that historiography is 'objective'; history is another contestable term. The magistrate expresses how

> What has made it impossible for us to live in time like a fish in water, like birds in the air, like children? It is the fault of the Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurring spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. (153-154)

He continues on the same page explaining that the act of writing history is a conscious production, intentionally undertaken and directed by intentionality. It

[65] In a Western context, writing has been given priority as a way of documenting history, thus cultures with oral traditions have been regarded as "societies without history" (Hanson).

suggests one reason why Coetzee has always resisted historicist readings of his work and their reduction to a specific time and place. That is why he has been criticized for being ahistorical in his writing.[66]

From this perspective, the magistrate's telling the story in the present tense may refer to the idea of now, meaning the not finished, the openness of the activity of being. Again, a quality that can be correlated with Levinas's idea of "saying" as opposed to "said." This allows the work to float through time, 'like a fish in water, like birds in the air,' and hinders its being locked down to a specific time and space. One could argue that Coetzee keeps his work from becoming just a part of history, a known past.

While the magistrate's use of the present tense reflects an openness and ongoing process of being, Colonel Joll's embodiment of the empire's military power is anchored in a rigid present. His role emphasizes the empire's control over time and the immediate moment, imposing a fixed and authoritarian view that resists change or uncertainty. In contrast to the magistrate's uncertain, evolving perspective, Joll's present is defined by a sense of totalitarian certainty and the need to impose security at all costs.

This sense of temporal ambiguity contrasts sharply with figures like Colonel Joll, who, as a key representative of the empire, is firmly rooted in the present and its rigid power structures. Colonel Joll embodies the military power and its mission to provide security. His appearance, especially his shades, are a

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[66] Coetzee has been compared with other South African writers like Nadine Gordimer, who is particularly engaged with writing about the political situation in South Africa. However, one argument is that "Coetzee is positioned both as part of a tradition of committed anti-apartheid writing, but also as a writer whose work succeeds in escaping the conventions of politically committed fiction and thus elevating itself to the status of 'art'" (Coetzee and Barnett 291)

crucial metaphor concerning his nonpermeable attitude towards the possibilities of communication. Even more emphatically, he sees himself as possessing absolute truth and power, which he believes gives him the right to mistreat the barbarians. He believes there is no reason to even attempt communication, as far as he is concerned. He is simply the torturer, the wielder of arbitrarily granted imperial power, in other words “rationalization can lead to brutalization” (Woessner 233).

His shades not only disallow any contact with him directly, but they mirror the reflection of the person speaking to him. Significantly, this can be depicted as a metaphor for the communication that cannot be achieved due to the colonel’s impaired perspective, as he unapologetically engages in the brutalities of empire. His vision shaded by preconceived ideas and the ideological impositions of empire, he refuses to get in touch with the prisoners.

The magistrate depicts him as “two little discs 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. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them” (1).

This physical description of Colonel Joll, marked by his opaque glasses, mirrors his mental and ideological opacity, which is further evidenced when he explains the empire’s treatment of the barbarians. When the magistrate asks a soldier why they hold the barbarians captive, the soldier’s reply reflects the non-permeable mind set of the colonel based on imperial reason as follows: “They saw horsemen coming so they tried to hide. So the officer, the Excellency, ordered us to take them in. Because they were hiding” (19-20). Instead getting in contact

with the fishermen, the colonel does not hesitate to capture them as prisoners.

This willingness to treat the barbarians as enemies, regardless of the context or their actual intentions, further reinforces the colonel's embodiment of imperial logic.

Though markedly different from the magistrate, both represent empire. The inscription of the word "ENEMY" (121) on the naked backs of the tortured prisoners demonstrates not so much the power of writing but most of all the writing of power, the giving of meaning as a way of justifying acts of brutality.

The magistrate's behavior towards the girl is a form of obsession, as he fails to fix her meaning and instead turns her into an object of his desire. Though he takes care of her, this act is driven by his need to understand the injuries inflicted by Colonel Joll. His desire grows out of impotence and the inadequacy of his attempt to truly see her. Instead of engaging with the girl as an individual, he continues to search for his preconceived mental imagery, thereby failing to perceive her for who she truly is.

This ultimately leads to a crucial realization: defining the Other is a form of torture. The act of trying to comprehend the Other based on one's own perspective inevitably diminishes their complexity, reducing them to an object of control and interpretation. However, this act of defining the Other can be explained as a way of reducing the Other to the same. In this sense, Levinas's concept of asymmetrical relationship is invaluable in framing the problem of the magistrate concerning his feeling of inadequacy towards the barbarian girl, denoting the unavailability of the Other.

Torture

Torture, defined by the World Medical Association in the Tokyo Declaration (1975), as "…the deliberate, systematic or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the orders of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make a confession, or for any other reason" is perhaps the most urgent subject of this novel. The significance of torture within the framework of recognition, the self-Other relationship, and the pursuit of absolute truth must be highlighted. It is employed not only as a means to extract so-called truths but as a method to emphasise and impose the self's existence over the Other.

Furthermore, by highlighting bodily existence through the experienced pain, it can be argued that torture operates to reveal the insignificance of constructed truths while simultaneously emphasizing the profound reality of physical existence. Regarding the aim of torture, Scarry argues that "Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (19-20). Torture is the ultimate expression of the aggressive attitude of the self and its desire to impose her/his self-centred truths on the Other: a brutal version of Hegel's master-slave relationship where recognition plays a vital role. This mind set, where recognition holds crucial significance, always carries the potential to result in acts of violent coercion. This understanding implies that the truth of the

powerful is considered truer than that of the weaker.

In Levinas's work, however, the significant component is goodness emanating from the idea of being responsible for the Other: "The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one's being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness" (*Totality and Infinity* 183). Contrary to Levinas's approach, colonel Joll's explanation in verifying his acts of torture, based on aggressive and antagonistic feelings, connects with the central theme being pursued here with respect to the nature of truth as well as of the self-Other relationship.

The colonel regards himself as the possessor of truth and when the magistrate asks him how he ever knows when a man has told him the truth, he explains that "a certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth" (5). He goes on to explain how he extracts the so-called truth as "First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth" (6). The Other is forced to accept that truth and/or be in accordance with the spirit of the truth. The motivation behind torture, as expressed by the colonel, is to unearth a specific kind of truth—his version of the truth. More importantly, since he views the barbarians as enemies of the empire and associates them with brutality, he anticipates the truth to align with the image the empire holds of the barbarians.

This rigid categorization of the barbarians as enemies of the empire leads to a form of circular reasoning, where the prisoners' very existence

confirms their barbarism. As the empire represents, or is expected to represent, civilization, it follows that the prisoners are intended to symbolize barbarism—everything that is considered uncivilized. This type of reasoning ends up with the kind of tautology expressed in the colonel's "Prisoners are prisoners" (24), leaving no room for questioning and simply offering circular reasoning. As a consequence, the act of torture can be read as the colonel projecting his ideas upon the prisoners who do not speak, but who are given meaning by the empire.

Coetzee by laying bare the framework of torture intends to demonstrate that "Tormented, tortured, or abused, the body swallows the rational self, crowds and overtakes it" (Woessner 234). Consequently, it can be argued that Coetzee attempts to destabilize the mind-body dualism by placing the question of the voiceless, pained body at the centre of his text. The focus on the body in pain "is beyond or outside of rational discourse, it cannot be rationally dissected" (234). In this sense, the act of torture can be closely related to the attempt of acquiring a comprehension of the Other.

This idea of the epiphany of the face, as proposed by Levinas, aligns with the difficulty and the inherent violence of trying to fully comprehend the Other. Levinas suggests that "the epiphany that is produced as a face is not constituted as are all other beings, precisely because it 'reveals' infinity. Signification is infinity, that is, the Other" (*Totality and Infinity* 207). Levinas's notion of the face revealing infinity suggests that any attempt to reduce the Other to something comprehensible or known strips them of their alterity, much like the dehumanizing violence of torture that silences the Other's voice. Simultaneously, any attempt at trying to comprehend the Other, be it by means

of empathy or something else, can be assumed to be a move that strongly evokes the kind of act of depriving the body of its voice, as is the case when one is tortured.

In this context, Levinas's notion of the face further underscores the ethical complexity of attempts to comprehend the Other. Levinas suggests that "It is the ethical exigency of the face, which puts into question the consciousness that welcomes it. The consciousness of obligation is no longer a consciousness, since it tears consciousness up from its centre, submitting it to the Other" (*Totality and Infinity* 207). Following Levinas's statement, the self is pushed to question its so-called freedom and, the fact that in a world where the self cannot even have a complete perspective of itself in terms of spatiality, meaning a whole view of itself, suggests the unavailability of having a complete understanding of things and the world.

This limitation in the self's understanding highlights the importance of external perspectives, whether they come from others or from literary works. The Other is essential, as they offer a unique perspective on the world that the self lacks or overlooks. Similarly, literary works provide opportunities to access different perspectives, ultimately fostering a diversification of viewpoints. For this reason, each Other holds significance as a unique and singular entity, more than a representation of a function or type. They play an indispensable role in forming a complex mosaic that resists generalization.

The singularity of the Other also implies their unavailability. By suggesting this, Coetzee appears to be reiterating the idea of the emptiness of empathy— the most commonly employed moral defence in literature—which

ultimately overlooks the uniqueness of the Other.

Another crucial aspect in understanding this notion of the mosaic is its ability to dissolve the aggressive competition that views the Other as a rival. Each Other is attributed a unique value as their individual moments of descent to earth differ, with distinct journeys starting points, lives, and creations of their own reality. Life is a moving target as in Zeno's paradox of motion, 'Achilles and tortoise,' where Achilles will never be able to catch the tortoise as "Achilles has an infinite number of finite catch-ups to do before he can catch the tortoise, and so, Zeno concludes, he never catches the tortoise" (Huggett).

Within this understanding, it can be argued that the hostile and lethal attitude towards the Other becomes irrelevant, highlighting a recognition that emphasises the existential value and alterity of the Other. This recognition is complicated by the dynamics of language and power. This shift in perspective reflects the tension between the recognition of the Other's humanity and the ongoing failure to truly understand them, as the power structures of language and dominance continue to shape interaction. Depending on the given significance of writing, the Other seen in this work, on the contrary retreats into silence: as the soldier testifies concerning their failure to understand the fishermen: "None of us could speak their language, sir" (20). Coetzee, by not giving voice to the Other, refuses to speak in the name of the Other by using the language of the dominants.

Even the magistrate who supposedly tries to understand the barbarian girl does so with the aim of possessing her. As one critic puts it: "the barbarian *Other* generally appears in the novel as a blank slip onto which the Empire

engraves itself; that is, the Empire gives itself form by writing on its subjects" (Moses 120). Writing can be read as a way of exercising power on the Other with an aim of verifying its own existence in seeking for recognition. Coetzee shows how writing itself can become a mode of torture, to think or speak in the name of the Other is to violate the rights of the Other. In this sense, though the magistrate considers himself to be paternal and caring, actually, he exercises such concern with a desire to enter the private space of the Other.

This desire for control is mirrored in the complexities of language itself, where meaning is not fixed, but constantly deferred. Two prominent aspects of writing and language emerge: the arbitrariness of assigning meaning to words, and the impossibility of achieving definitive meaning, as language is oriented towards deferral. Language that is pursued in its purity or absolute meaning is "a natural language or Adamic language… a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 9). Hence, in one sense, Coetzee underlines how arbitrary the act of giving meaning is as in the case with the wooden slips which are interpreted by the magistrate when questioned by the colonel. The magistrate comes up with the explanation: "It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down . . . it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended" (128-129; italics in original). As the multiple meanings seem to demonstrate, the characters too as names of empire elude definition. Such indeterminacy eliminates the possibility of an absolute truth.

In this connection, as Paul de Man explains: "From the experience of

reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we call a 'concrete' example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever" (276). De Man's insight speaks to the nature of knowledge and understanding, especially when confronted with systems of power. Truth is not simply revealed in "concrete" examples; rather, it is shaped by systems that obscure as much as they clarify. Similarly, Foucault argues:

> 'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements… linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth. (*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977* 133)

According to Foucault, truth is not an objective or external reality, but a construct shaped by power relations. These conceptual frameworks underscore the limitations and distortions inherent in the pursuit of truth within structures of power.

The magistrate, in a condition of in betweeness, remains a representative of empire, even as he disapproves of its practices. At first he tries to remain morally blind to the ongoing torture exercised by the colonel, recognising that pretending not to know does not invalidate or prevent the tortures. He also knows the nature of the responsibility he would need to take if he were to acknowledge the tortures. Taking on such responsibility would entail rejecting the magistrate's presumed perception of the empire as possessing the authority to civilize natives, administer justice, and offer protection. That is why the magistrate is unseated and

subject to tortures himself as a display of what will happen to people who dare to question the practices of the state. To raise a voice and criticize the violence endemic to empire becomes impossible: there is no voice except the banality of a passivized majority voice.

This passivization is further embodied in the use of torture, which becomes a legal method of oppression within the empire. Torture as an act and pain as its consequence expose the vulnerable body as the only reality and truth that defies displacement through discourse. As Albert Schweitzer, a philosopher, musician and Nobel Prize-winning physician, insists: "We must all die. But that I can save him [a person] from days of torture, that is what I feel as my great and ever new privilege. Pain is a more terrible lord of mankind than even death himself" (qtd. in Brabazon 247).

The impact of torture, as Schweitzer emphasizes, is not only physical but also existential, reducing the victim to an object of suffering. Coetzee, throughout his oeuvre explores this relationship between state oppression and language that is written onto the body of victims through torture. That is, even the act of writing intentionally with the aim of imposing definite meaning becomes a way of verifying one's existence that is imbued with the intense desire to be recognized regardless of the harm and pain given to the Other. The correlation between language and torture plays a crucial role in unveiling the relationship between bodily existence and recognition.

Language and torture work as means of solidifying the existence of the self, simultaneously referring to the existence of the Other. Yet, though the self directs its efforts towards constructing its own existence by making use of the

Other, this does not put an end to the existence of the Other; on the contrary, the existence of the Other is highlighted. More suggestively, the bodily existence of the Other is foregrounded by means of torture. Remarkably, despite the torturer's efforts to leave a mark on the prisoner's body, the undeniable reality is that the prisoner's existence becomes even more distinct. The torturer will never arrive at and possess an understanding of the Other as in the case of the magistrate and the girl.

Furthermore, as Levinas brilliantly acknowledges "The Other, whose exceptional presence is inscribed in the ethical impossibility of killing him in which I stand, marks the end of powers. If I can no longer have power over him, it is because he overflows absolutely every *idea* I can have of him" (*Totality and Infinity* 87; italics in original). Rather, torture underscores bodily existence and the vitality of bodily welfare as the magistrate states:

> they were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. (132)

The universal truth of the body transcends differences of race, gender, and species. As Scarry remarks: "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, empathetically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it" (49; italics in original), and meanwhile "As in dying and death, so in serious pain the claims of the body utterly nullify the claims of the world" (33). From this, the body of the Other can be positioned as the site of truth but which is not voiced, that is

unattainable as is the case with the barbarian girl.

This concept of the *unattainable* Other aligns with Coetzee's invocation of Kant, who asserts that true freedom lies beyond the grasp of comprehension. (*Doubling the Point* 341). The basic premise underlying these two statements is that neither truth nor the Other can be properly represented in a literary work of art as they are unimaginable.

Building on this idea, it can be seen that in the context of the empire, the construction of truth is tied to a deliberate refusal of communication. With this in mind, rather than delaying his verdict, the colonel by refusing any kind of communication attempts to construct the truth as "He is determined to produce an enemy for the Empire" (Leist 209).

However, the notion of bodily vulnerability extends beyond political or cultural boundaries and reaches into the broader realm of shared human and animal experience. Ideas differ but the vulnerability of bodily existence reaches across differences of nation, race or gender and is shared with animals for: "by leaving the individual with just an injured body (the material body Descartes identified with the primary Other), it deprives the person of the 'essence of humanity,' thus creating his/her Otherness and turning full human beings into 'sub-humans' the systems have been waiting for" (Canepari-Labib 108). This universal vulnerability, transcending individual differences, leads to a greater understanding of how ideas are socially and culturally constructed.

Furthermore, when the constructed nature of ideas is recognized, revealing their lack of inherent quality as carriers of ultimate truth, the profound significance of the body becomes evident. In effect, when the

undeniable reality of the body is acknowledged, the insistence on imposing one's ideas as absolute truth reveals a desire to play God. In recognizing the constructed nature of truth, one must also confront the ethical implications that arise when power is used to impose an understanding of the Other.

Finally, to return to the question of empathy, the torturer is supposed to be trained in and to have experienced torture himself before he wields it, but must be incapable of showing any sign of empathy towards the prisoner. The idea of empathy is revealed by Coetzee as evoking the possibility of understanding the Other, but, actually risking becoming more judgmental as a result of its disregard for the singularity of the Other. Thus, the role of empathy in the torture process complicates the boundaries between understanding and dehumanization.

Interestingly, concerning the fallacious aspect of empathy, it might be useful to mention that "The torturer, who may have been tortured himself in training to torture, may well know better than those who have been neither victim nor torturer the reality of intense pain and the sense of powerlessness it creates" (Eckstein 184). If this is the case, is it still possible to talk about the concept of empathy, allowing one to put her/himself into someone else's shoes, creating a certain understanding of what the Other is feeling? This discredits the role of empathy in establishing a meaningful relationship with the Other and suggests a self-cancelling structure.

This difficulty in truly understanding the Other despite experiencing similar suffering can be seen in the magistrate's own journey. The magistrate, before he was tortured, had no idea of what the girl had gone through. But later,

despite his own experience with the torturers, he still has no definite idea and/or understanding of what the girl might have gone though. The only thing he comes to grasp is the indispensable significance of bodily existence.

This realization about the body's significance sets the stage for a broader reflection on the representation of torture. Moreover, the challenge of depicting torture pertains to the ethical responsibility of the author, particularly considering the sensitive and delicate nature of the subject. Coetzee seems to suggest that there are two key aspects for him of this critical and sensitive issue:

> First, he or she must find a middle way between ignoring the obscenities performed by the state, on the one hand, and producing representations of those obscenities, on the other. Coetzee objects to realistic depiction of torture in fiction because he thinks that the novelist participates vicariously in the atrocities, validates the acts of torture, assists the state in terrorizing and paralyzing people by showing its oppressive methods in details. (Gallagher and Coetzee 277)

Coetzee refuses detailed description, refusing to drawing the attention of readers to potentially sensationalisable depiction. But the deeper aspect is the question of the meaning of the ethically charged responsibility of the author towards her/his characters. Coetzee raises ethical and metaphysical concerns about whether such a depiction would enrich our understanding at all. Coetzee seems to have found a way to deal with this double edged issue by means of his writing technique, one composed of uncertainties, gaps, decentred and indeterminate language and a refusal to allow a dominant propositional voice.

This technique is reflected in the magistrate's own journey, as he seeks to learn the story of the scars on the barbarian girl's body. However, in a similar manner to the author who is tempted by the secluded nature of torture, he is not aware that he too exercises of torture in an indirect way. Through the

magistrate, Coetzee highlights the intricate nature of addressing the issue of torture. He also asks the question of how the mind set of the torturer is formed and whether redemption is possible.

The magistrate's confession concerning his contribution runs as follows "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" (156). Essentially, while they represent two sides of the same coin, Coetzee avoids portraying mere binary oppositions. Instead, he offers a broader perspective on the act of torture, one that transcends the mere banality of evil or an obligation carried out by the colonel and his ilk.

This broader view implicates more than just those directly involved in the acts of violence. Rather, those who turn their backs on the victims bear as much responsibility as the colonel. Coetzee addresses the indifference of individuals like the magistrate and emphasizes the writer's responsibility to confront this sensitive issue directly. As Edward Peters articulates, "[A] society which voluntarily or indifferently includes among its members both victims and torturers ultimately leaves no conceptual or practical room for anyone who insists upon being neither" (qtd. in Eckstein 194). This idea highlights the moral responsibility of individuals within a society, underscoring that those who remain indifferent to suffering are complicit in it.

People of the fort who merely observe or even participate in the magistrate's humiliation can be considered as siding with the torturer: remaining silent equates to turning a blind eye to the ongoing act. This complicity extends

beyond the characters within the narrative to the very nature of storytelling itself.

At a deeper level, Coetzee explores the expectations of the reader eager to learn more about the torture room and the temptation faced by the author to write about it. However, the fundamental point is that for Coetzee the author has to avoid this temptation as it is a space of experience that is entirely foreign to both reader and author. As he argues, "The torture room thus becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer's fantasy where, insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits in the performance of vileness upon the body of another" (*Doubling the Point* 363).

This characterization highlights not only the moral degradation that occurs within such a space but also its physical separation from the world at large. The torture room is shrouded in mystery; since the act of torture is conducted behind closed walls and doors, away from the general public, one cannot truly grasp the extent of what transpires within. That is, it arouses curiosity. As Coetzee puts it: "The dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation" (364). This suggests that by shrouding the act of torture in mystery, the state unintentionally creates the very conditions for writers to explore and represent such acts, turning the forbidden into the subject of literary examination.

Besides, Coetzee questions the attitude of the author in terms of

depicting the torturer as there may be many pitfalls in representing her/him while avoiding "the clichés of spy fiction - to make the torturer neither a figure of satanic evil, nor an actor in a black comedy, nor a faceless functionary, nor a tragically divided man doing a job he does not believe in" (364). The challenge lies in giving the torturer a voice that neither becomes seductive nor transforms into a symbol of ultimate evil. Such a symbol might seem to originate from a realm outside our world, thereby distancing cruelty and evil from the real world.

The difficulty of representing the torturer's voice becomes intertwined with the deeply private and isolating nature of the prisoner's experience, which reduces them to a state of abject bodily existence.

The experience is intensely private, reducing the prisoner to a state of abject bodily existence, where even their bodily freedom is stripped away. Therefore, it is imbued with an ethical dimension of how to enter that private area or whether it is possible to enter it at all. Considering Levinas's argument concerning the Other, depicting the scenes of torture would not enrich our understanding with regards to the Other's pain, but, contrarily, would make the reader an accomplice to the torturer.

Building on this, the delicate nature of the victim's experience is further illustrated by Scarry's analysis of how pain impacts both the self and language. The delicate situation of the victim is notably underlined by Scarry as "Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject"

(35). The idea of unmaking the voice indicates the deliberate attack of the self as it attempts to annihilate the Other by muting her/him and removing any possible communication between the self and the Other. Leaving the Other speechless means, at the same time, the dominance of the one and only voice of the self.

That is why Scarry insists as quoted earlier that "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it" (49). The intense pain reduces the Other to mere bodily existence, causing them to lose their voice and thereby empowering the self.

The corollary of this is that the possible communication with the Other is destroyed as Levinas suggests:

> Speech is not instituted in a homogeneous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give. It presupposes an I, an existence separated in its enjoyment, which does not welcome empty-handed the face and its voice coming from another shore. Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a 'space' essentially asymmetrical. (*Totality and Infinity* 216)

In this passage, Levinas emphasizes the asymmetry between the self and the Other, where genuine communication with the Other is founded on the recognition of difference and the ethical obligation to respond, a dynamic that is shattered through the dehumanizing act of torture.

The magistrate, once unseated and subjected to torture, exemplifies a change in position, descending to a lower status within the system. This shift underscores how titles and principles lose their significance when reduced to

the raw reality of bodily existence. As stated by the magistrate himself:

> In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain. What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore…They are interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well…They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity. (132)

The magistrate's words emphasize that in the face of physical suffering, abstract concepts like justice or dignity lose their meaning. The body, reduced to its most basic needs, becomes the sole reality, demonstrating how, in extreme circumstances, all else fades away, revealing a raw and undeniable truth.

Remarkably, this transformation highlights how the experience of suffering on the body's terms challenges the constructs of power and authority, revealing the ethical responsibility towards the Other as something inseparable from the recognition of shared vulnerability.

Chapter Four

"…consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" (Levinas, "Language and Proximity" 119).

The protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*, published in 2005, is a man in his fifties, Paul Rayment, who is divorced and living an isolated life in Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. It begins dramatically with the description of an accident—caused by Wayne Blight—in which Paul loses a leg and which marks a turning point in his life as his life also crosses over with the lives of the other key characters in the novel, namely the Jokić family from Croatia.

David Attwell has suggested that "In realist terms, *Slow Man* is appropriately about migration and belonging" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 218). However, though on the surface the novel narrates the story of a lonely man whose need for love and care prompts an interest in a woman, Marijana Jokić, that quickly turns into an obsession, actually, at a deeper level, the novel also hints at a less explicit and more complicated condition which is Paul Rayment's rejection of the so-called postmodern condition.

Paul's condition can be read not only as one of disability but as the disabling of a capacity to position himself in what Lyotard has named as the "postmodern condition" (xxiii) defining "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (xxiii). It should also be noted that the description of the accident is itself highly dislocatory—an ungrounding of self

and narrative situatedness— and even the idea of 'an accident' foreshadows the underlying dynamic of the novel, which highlights contingency.

Though oddly, as the novel becomes more metafictional, there is also the sense that this accident has already happened, or at least if we think of the narrative in the mode of what Peter Brooks calls "the *anticipation of retrospection*" (23; italics in original): the sense that in a written narrative like a novel, what appears contingent from the perspective of focalization within the story world has already taken place from the perspective of the retrospective narrating positionality. In this connection, as addressed by Brooks: "If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it" (23). When, for example, Elizabeth Costello turns up, again, there is a sense in which she seems to be claiming authorship of this character, but it also raises the question of what we understand by the idea of an accident: something random or something whose causes might only be fathomed after the fact?

This case suggests ways to study the text further with regards to the idea that "…consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" (Levinas, "Language and Proximity" 119), that is, in this state, the reader is late for the rendezvous with the character in the narrative as "The present tense for a reader in a fictional narrative is not really the present at all but the past" (Currie 5). This suggests that the reader, much like the character in the narrative, is always delayed in fully engaging with the other, emphasizing the temporal disconnect between experience and understanding. The reader's encounter with the character is mediated by the past, reinforcing the distance and the

complexity of truly comprehending the Other.

In this respect, the chapter will explore the concept of time in terms of past, present and future unfolded in Levinas's *Time and the Other* [1987], with the purpose of displaying Paul's conceptual error in making sense of time by pointing to his relation with the future.

From early on in the novel Paul refuses to acknowledge that "No important truth will be achieved by the prolongation of an already acquired truth" (Bergson 35). Levinas's concept of time takes on a new dimension, as his understanding is built upon Henri Bergson's notions of time and intuition: "The intuition we refer to then bears above all upon internal duration. It grasps a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future" (*The Creative Mind* 35). This concept of time, as understood by Bergson, aligns with Levinas's view of time as an ethical experience, where the present is not merely a static moment but a dynamic flow that connects the past and future. Levinas builds upon this idea to emphasize the ethical responsibility in our interaction with the Other, suggesting that time is experienced in relation to our duties and the proximity of the Other.

Levinas's argument in his work *Time and the Other*, referring to Bergson, is that time is categorized in two ways; first, there is the measurable time of everyday life, second, the time of inner life. Levinas explains that the time of everyday life is "a time homogenous like space, made up of invariable instants which repeat themselves, where all novelty would be reducible to these old elements, a spatialized time, the time of action in space, the time of

technique, which conforms to the views and concepts of the understanding" (*Time and The Other* 129).

However, the time concept in Bergson, which Levinas also adopts, is "the direct vision of the mind by the mind,—nothing intervening, no refraction through the prism, one of whose facets is space and another, language" (Bergson 35). Therefore, "Intuition, bound up to a duration which is growth, perceives in it an uninterrupted continuity of unforeseeable novelty; it sees, it knows that the mind draws from itself more than it has, that spirituality consists in just that, and that reality, impregnated with spirit, is creation" (Bergson 39). This resonates with Paul's aversion to adapting to the new. Instead, he clings to the past, resisting both the unpredictability of the future and the novelty inherent in Levinasian time. Paul's aversion to change is encapsulated in his shift away from photography, an art form he once cherished.

In this chapter, Paul's resistance to change and his fixation on the past will be analysed through the lens of Levinasian time. Three key aspects will frame the discussion. First, Paul's mindset, influenced by grand narratives, hinders him from embracing the future as defined by Levinas: "the emergence of the always new, of the unequal" (Time and the Other 132). Second, the discrepancy in time perception between the character and the reader reflects the Levinasian idea that one is always late for the rendezvous, highlighting the nonsynchronous flow of time between the character and the reader. Lastly, this lateness, while frustrating, can also generate new meanings, as the future cannot be completely grasped with present assumptions. Both the character and the

reader experience this perpetual tardiness due to the nonsynchronous nature of time. Thus, one could argue that neither the future nor the narrative can be seamlessly integrated into the present moment—in both scenarios, one is always late.

Coetzee's use of the title "Slow Man" reveals the protagonist's resistance to the acceleration of modern life. Paul, a slow man, both literally and figuratively, seems to be a representative of a kind of male of an older generation whose organic bond with and affiliation to the grand narratives of modernity is informed by the idea of the original, the great hero, and the absolute. His rejection of digital photography illustrates this point: the technology disrupts the process he once loved, where the gradual emergence of an image gave him "a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation" (65). With the advent of the new instantaneous processing, "he gave up recording the world in photographs then, and transferred his energies to saving the past" (65).

This rejection of technological progress reflects broader societal shifts. As Paul Virilio argues in his memorable work Speed and Politics, "speed is war, the last war" (155), highlighting how the postmodern era's emphasis on acceleration permeates every aspect of contemporary life. Needless to say, this technological development is not, however, simply limited to industry per se, but has a much more pervasive effect on the infrastructures in general of post-industrial society. The sense of an ongoing transition from an industrialized society to a new post-industrial society in the West began to receive substantial commentary from the 1970s onwards, but particularly in the decades following

what became known as the ‘postmodern turn’. With this comes a sense of the increased acceleration of everyday life.

The sociologist Daniel Bell had already suggested that

> social life becomes more difficult because political claims and social rights multiply, the rapidity of social change and shifting cultural fashion bewilders the old, and the orientation to the future erodes the traditional guides and moralities of the past. Information becomes a central resource, and within organizations a source of power. (128)

As Bell’s analysis suggests, so-called post-industrialisation seemed to be transforming the social and cultural life of developed societies, its effects becoming more and more concretely realised.

From this perspective, it can be stated that Paul switches to another form of keeping the past alive, one more insistently than ever concerned with the negation of those forces that appear to be coercing adaptation to the new post-industrial society. By presenting Paul as a “slow man,” Coetzee critiques his inability to reconcile with the demands of a fast-changing, postmodern world.

Paul, as a practitioner of the “traditional guides and moralities of the past” (128), remains behind and is left behind by these new developments and he is depicted as having serious problems in adapting to the transformation of society. In this context, the accident that is caused by Wayne Blight draws attention to the association of the name, Wayne, as a “name derived from a surname meaning ‘carter’ or ‘cart-maker’” (Pickering 7871), in other words, referring to craftsman. The name invokes a former era, or a utopian ideal of an era, one of craftsmanship and slow making or artisanship, so the name can be regarded as referring to the era—or the fantasy of an era of organic community

—where Paul is still stuck, and might be seen as evincing how this has caused a 'blight' within Paul's conceptual system.

As Paul persists in maintaining his established habits rather than switching to the condition of the new post-industrialism, he faces severe disability in his capacity to sustain and continue to master his life. Here I would like to subscribe to Levinas's understanding with regards to time based on Henri Bergson's concept of time as "…the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us. The other is the future" (*Time and the Other* 77). It suggests that Paul experiences a conceptual error in his perception of time as he regards time as homogenous, bearing nothing new, and thus confined to the limited perception of theory. In this context, his being out of sync with the postmodern becomes clearer when examining his relationship with Marijana's son Drago, who represents the new era of postmodernism. One specific event reveals his out of synch condition when Drago takes away one of Paul's original prints and replaces it with a copy by making a slight change on the picture, from which act arise larger questions concerning the idea and ideal of the original. It seems to be suggested that Paul's condition is constituted by a disablement which is the perceptual loss of the original whose effects will constantly trouble his fundamental sense of life and its meaningfulness.

This perceptual loss, which disturbs Paul's sense of life and meaning, manifests in his refusal to accept the prosthesis after the amputation. This is both a common disavowal in response to the amputation of a limb, but here also signifies his inability to situate himself in the new conditions of postmodernity. Differently put, the loss of his leg is fundamentally damaging

to his sense of his own completeness and of himself as an original and not a copy: that is why the very idea of implementing an artificial organ undermines his faith in the continued existence of the original.

By extension, in parallel with his existing conceptual system, he regards "a man with one leg … a lesser man, not a new man" (113). This ruminative thinking blocks other possible meanings from emerging as "The same old words, the same disappointing old song. He cannot get beyond it. Yet until he has an answer to his question, whatever in the heart does the singing will be clogged" (232). This highlights Paul's stagnation—his inability to move beyond familiar, unchanging thoughts, which limits his capacity for growth and understanding.

Through its evocation of Paul's condition, the novel engages with Levinas's approach to time and what it signifies in the context of a dysregulation of the temporal that seems inherent in the conditions of postmodernity: "The future is not buried in the bowels of a preexistent eternity, where we would come to lay hold of it. It is absolutely other and new. And it is thus that one can understand the very reality of time, the absolute impossibility of finding in the present the equivalent of the future, the lack of any hold upon the future" (*Time and the Other* 80).

This perspective on time, as radically other and unpredictable, is crucial for understanding Paul's experience and the novel's broader exploration of postmodern conditions. Once it is accepted that this might be a legitimate interpretation of the novel, some of its more puzzling metafictional elements begin to make more sense. For the metafictional attributes of the novel not only

disclose its self-reflective characteristic, but they also function to bring into question the changing nature, in the postmodern world, of authorship, agency, selfhood, the loss of absolute truth, the original replaced by the copy or by an original of a different kind, and the necessity for constant self-fashioning, for making up of one's own story.

In this context, Paul's bodily disability poses a striking challenge to the concept of the original and demonstrates what must underlie a new incapacity to speak directly, without irony, to speak "from the heart" (231). Paul's disability lays bare the construction, function and dissemination of the idea of absolute meaning, the idea of the original, so it follows that Paul

> tends to trust pictures more than he trusts words. Not because pictures cannot lie but because, once they leave the darkroom, they are fixed, immutable. Whereas stories—the story of the needle in the bloodstream, for instance, or the story of how he and Wayne Blight came to meet on Magill Road—seem to change shape all the time (64).

Thus, the situation Paul laments is the loss of belief in the concept of absolute meaning or the origin, even if only considered as a regulative ideal. This is played out through his own body and manifested in his experience of disability representation.

Paul's situation points to that condition of the hyperreal that for Jean Baudrillard is definitive of the postmodern condition: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). This concept of the hyperreal directly relates to Paul's experience, where his disability and inability to adapt to the new, postmodern

conditions reflect a world in which the distinction between the real and the simulated becomes increasingly blurred. Paul's condition, much like Baudrillard's hyperreal, is a sign of a reality without clear origin or grounding, leading to a deeper crisis of identity and agency.

This loss of origin, central to Paul's distress, highlights the broader existential crisis he faces, one that challenges the very foundations of selfhood and meaning. Paul's prevalent concern in his lamentations is not so much the loss of his leg as the loss of an origin: Coetzee, through Paul's affliction, casts his own doubt over the efficacy of ever putting faith in the idea of absolute or foundational meaning, an evident origin which seems destined to have disruptive and deleterious effects on the conceptual systems through which the individual derives a sense of their own identity.

However, as part of the troubling aspect of the concept of absolute meaning, I will argue—by examining the role of Drago in the novel, the son of the Jokic family and representative of the attempt at creating the new and original—that, in fact, each attempt at forming a new set of norms is bound to remain in the designated realm of the exterior forces of a particular historical moment.

As noted earlier, this case brings to mind the problematic with regards to fictional time as the present for the reader in fiction is past (Currie 5). This gives revealing insight into the idea of time in terms of past, present and future, and it also engages with the idea of the new. The effort to produce something new and original can be seen as a battle against the gnawing effects of time. However, one might never fully escape the boundaries set by external forces. Even what

seems new and original may eventually be recognized as influenced by these forces, whether they be ideology, the *Zeitgeist* of the current era, or the author of a novel. This brings us to the ways in which bodies, particularly in Coetzee's work, are not simply physical entities but are embedded within these cultural and social forces, which shape and limit individual autonomy.

Extrapolating from this to the idea of the body as a vehicle, in this novel, for the expression of more abstract ideas, produces the key premise of this chapter, that: "We are not all free to make our bodies as we would like. It is also the case that we do not make our bodies as we see fit, but to conform to pre-given cultural and social patterns of beauty, fitness and adequacy" (Greig et al. 35). By emphasizing how our bodies are not entirely our own to shape, this perspective highlights the tension between individual agency and the external forces that define beauty, fitness, and adequacy. In the context of the novel, this reflects the protagonist's struggle to reconcile personal identity with societal expectations.

This tension between personal identity and external influence, particularly in how bodies are shaped, aligns with a broader consideration of originality and the impact of cultural forces on creation.mThe salient argument to consider is that each purportedly 'new' and 'original' entity is inherently a reflection of the zeitgeist of its formative period. Consequently, what is hailed as innovative in any given era is inevitably subsumed and re- contextualized by subsequent epochs, or future temporalities. As Levinas suggests "…the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us. The other is the future" (*Time and the Other* 77). It is crucial to note that subsequent temporal frameworks, often referred to as

'the future', tend to obfuscate or supersede what is regarded as 'new' and 'original' in the present, reshaping it in accordance with the shifting demands of future eras.

Conceptually, the assertion of an unchanging, absolute meaning or a discernible origin that prevails indefinitely is untenable. This premise accentuates not only the implausibility of attaining an unerring meaning but also underscores the predetermined confinement of constructed meanings within the parameters delineated by the external dynamics of historical temporality.

This point of view, tellingly, suggests the similar case of history writing for, as Coetzee himself has argued: "every account we produce of the past will eventually be revealed to be a story, the kind of story that a man or woman of our times could, in retrospect, have been expected to produce; but that, despite the above, we nevertheless do not have a free hand to make up the past as we wish (or as our times wish us to wish)" (Coetzee and Kurtz 76). This reflects the inherent tension in historical narratives, where, despite the inevitable influence of contemporary perspectives, the past resists complete reconfiguration, holding onto truths that cannot be fully controlled or rewritten by present concerns.

By illustrating this tension, Coetzee's novel provides a vivid portrayal of how these broader philosophical concepts manifest in the personal and bodily experience of the protagonist, Paul.

Focusing primarily on this aspect of the novel, I will discuss how Coetzee depicts Paul's situation, which reveals the erosion of the concept of absolute meaning and the fading idea of origin.

The self-reflective nature of the narration together with the reappearance

of Elizabeth Costello as the so-called author of a novel in which Paul seems to be a character but who is also in communication with Paul at the level of the story itself, blurs the ontological line between the worlds of and identities of author and character and the novel gains an absurd dimension disclosing the aporia that Paul is subject to. As David Attwell has argued, it is in this sense that "The contest between Costello and Rayment comes to occupy the centre of attention in *Slow Man*. It shifts the emphasis from an affecting story about migration, belonging and senescence to a comedy about meaning itself, a Beckettian shift, certainly" (*J M Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 220).

This shift in focus from personal narratives to broader existential questions also parallels the way in which the novel engages with other characters, particularly the immigrants, whose lives intersect with Paul's. The novel, in which Paul's story forms the main impetus for the structure of the plot, also offers a picture of the crossing of the lives of the immigrants. Again, considering the semiotic perspective, these characters can be seen as free-floating signifiers. They have severed ties with their origins to forge and adopt new meanings within the Australian context. From this perspective, their crossing paths appear like pieces of patchwork where different scraps of fabric are brought together to form a new and unlike design or bricolage. In the novel, the interweaving of lives from various origins and backgrounds form a kind of patchwork. This offers a fresh perspective on the concept of originality, particularly for Paul, who, being originally from France, is also an immigrant, much like the Jokić family from Croatia.

In this context, the novel elucidates the identity formations of

immigrants influenced by both the pervasive forces of globalization and the technological advancements of an interconnected global society. Such a portrayal equips the reader with a multi-dimensional lens—spanning the political, sociological, and metaphysical realms—to critically engage with concepts surrounding origins and the quintessential notion of origin.

By focusing on individual characters like Paul and the Jokić family, the novel brings these abstract concepts to life, offering concrete examples of how identity is shaped and reshaped in the face of displacement and cultural transformation.

Paul, from France, and the Jokić family from Croatia, come to meet in Australia, "the sunny land of opportunity" (66). Like plants uprooted, they defy the grounding of essentialist approaches to identity and function as free-floating signifiers which, as Claude Levi-Strauss states of the signifier in this unanchored condition, is "a simple form, or to be more accurate, a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever" (64). By presenting identity as fluid and contingent, the novel aligns with Lyotard "incredulity towards metanarratives" (XXIV).

This conceptual shift away from fixed meanings also mirrors the novel's exploration of how identities can be liberated from static definitions. To fracture the attachment to an origin sets the signifier free from referring to what might have come to be considered or perceived as an absolute meaning. The idea of the free-floating signifier becomes a means of displaying the capacity of identities to change and renew. At this juncture, it seems necessary to provide a

more detailed account of the characters as depicted in the novel, particularly considering the uniquely self-reflexive nature of its narrative voice in their portrayal, to further develop this argument.

To illustrate this, let us focus on the character of Paul Rayment, whose circumstances and interactions with others shed light on the novel's deeper themes. As introduced above, the main character, Paul Rayment, is presented as an "unmarried, single, solitary, alone" (9) man in his fifties, who is involved in a collision with Wayne Blight while riding his bike on Magill Road; as a result of this accident he loses his leg. However, this catastrophic accident drastically changes his life, not only because it deprives him of his leg but also because it inadvertently ushers other people into his life, against his will.

Paul's background further complicates his situation, as his divorce and lack of offspring at the time of the accident emphasise his initial isolation. As a result, in his unfortunate situation, he requires being taken care of by others, even if temporarily. That is how his path crosses with Marijana Jokić who first becomes his nurse, and then afterwards, with her family.

Marijana, by origin from Croatia, has a diploma in art restoration which she has earned from the Art Institute in Dubrovnik. Miroslav, her husband, a technician trained in antique technology, has also worked at the Institute. That is how they met. Later they leave for Germany and she receives nursing training at a nursing college in Bielefeld. When they move to Australia to earn money, both are forced to find alternative employment than that for which they are specifically trained. Hence, after obtaining her South Australian certification, besides private nursing, Marijana does housekeeping too, while her husband

works in a car assembly plant. The couple has three children, a boy Drago, and two girls, Ljuba and Blanka.

The portrayal of the Jokic family allows Coetzee not only to examine immigrant life, but also to draw attention to the unequal conditions existing in post-industrial societies, where, for instance, Marijana has to work at several different jobs, perceived as inferior to that in which she is trained, so that she can earn enough money to survive. The family is forced to adapt to new conditions where they have limited choices.

However, this transition facilitates the emergence of new identity formations, exerting profound influences on the receiving society. This highlights the ever-evolving, dialectical relationship underpinning the construction of both societies and individual identities. As newly free-floating signifiers, the family poses challenges to the established order by importing their own cultural accumulation into their new situation. As one brought up in Croatia, then having lived in Germany, Marijana can be regarded as a dynamic carrier of multifaceted meanings whose mind set and approach to life is perpetually being reshaped. Either party, meaning the individual and the society, carries the potential for its previously set boundaries to be reshaped in a mutual process of intra-action. Importantly, this foregrounds the problematic of the original and origin which is put into question by Coetzee.

In the Australian case, Marijana, as a degree holder in restoration—in itself carrying with it the force of restoring an original—cannot practice her profession; like her husband Miroslav, she has to take on different work. This

presents a sociological change in her status as a member of the society. Instead of working in a context alongside the new and vibrant, with art and artists, she has to deal largely with the elderly and declining and be prepared to intervene in medical emergencies as part of her job as a nurse.

In this condition of changing signification, it is evident that Marijana's identity cannot be limited by any essential attribute or idea of absolute meaning. As earlier mentioned, in the Australian context, like different pieces of fabric brought together, the crossing paths of the Jokić family and Paul form a larger design which can be named as a patchwork with no specific design behind its conception, and no centre: it has emerged by a process of autopoiesis and constant adjustment to ever-changing conditions.

By extension, the idea of a centre is emphasized as well and that is why Paul asks himself the question

> were their two encounters, the first in the lift, the second on the sofa, episodes in the life-story not of Paul Rayment but of Marianna Popova?[67] Of course there is a sense in which he is a passing character in the life of this Marianna or of anyone else whose path he crosses, just as Marianna and everyone else are passing characters in his" (118).

This question is central to the main argument about the original as it brings the conceptual aspect of the centre to the fore.

At this moment in the trajectory of the narrative, the emerging point is the

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[67] Coetzee's use of two different surnames could be read as an act of confusing the reader in an attempt to imply the literariness of the text. Additionally and importantly, the surname can also be a reference to the Russian artist Luibov Popova whose work manifests her "interests in exploring the potential of geometric form, exploiting the possibilities of a limited range of colours, investigating permutations of a specific form or combination of forms, working in series, examining the line and its optical possibilities, using repetition of forms to create rhythm and dynamism, extending the visual potential of the ground, experimenting with the grid as an artistic configuration, and looking at ways of creating sensations of dynamism by intersecting or dislocating forms" (Lodder). By referring to her, it is arguable that Coetzee sheds light on aspects dealt in his work driven by a similar avant-garde attitude as Popova's.

disappearing centre which at the same time hints at the loss of the original. The claim about the disappearing centre is closely related with Paul's questioning of the possibility that he too might not be the centre of the novel, but also just a "passing character" (118) in Marianna Popova's life story. Paul contemplates this possibility and cannot be sure. Thus foregrounded is the claim that, in this case, the novel might not be about Paul as the representative of its core themes and narrative centre.

By extension, this marks, in a way, the disappearance of the centre or, differently formulated, the existence of a non-centre. As Jacques Derrida, in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," remarkably explicates:

> This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic; the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse-provided we can agree on this word—that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (*Writing and Difference* 354)

To demonstrate the parallelism involved here concerning the idea of origin and centre, it is worth considering some of the ways in which the concept of the original has been discussed. The concept of the original dates back to the concept of 'idea'—or Eidos—created by Plato when Socrates famously asks Glaucon "Aren't we also accustomed to say that it is in looking to the *idea* of each implement that one craftsman makes the couches and another the chairs we use, and similarly for other things? For presumably none of the craftsmen fabricates the idea itself. How could he?" (Plato 278). The

relevant aspect of this quotation is that a craftsman requires an original to produce a copy. From this, it becomes evident that the relationship between the original and the copy prioritizes the original, with the copy being defined in relation to it. Considering this, the relationship between the centre and the periphery also prioritizes the centre, with the periphery being defined in relation to it. It becomes evident that there is a mutual aspect shared between the idea of the centre and the original.

The shared characteristic discernible between the two is that both concepts occupy pivotal roles in their respective relational frameworks, whether it be centre vis-à-vis periphery or original in juxtaposition to copy. In this relation the periphery and the copy are defined by taking the centre and the original as base or foundation. Consequently, their definitions and significances are contingent upon the contexts wherein the centre and the original act as primary referents.

Yet, similar to the inherent decentralization of a patchwork, a definitive centre remains elusive; this is what Paul seeks to discern within his narrative, as underscored by the following observation: “But is he a passing character in a more fundamental sense too: someone on whom the light falls all too briefly before it passes on? Will what passed between himself and Marianna turn out to be simply one passage among many in Marianna’s quest for love?” (118).

Paul does not know at all whether he is the centre. He goes even further questioning whether he can even be sure of the absolute and true existence of the “big-bottomed Marianna, known otherwise as Natasha, known also as Tanya” (115), as this might be a dupe or a copy, an impersonation, organized by

Elizabeth Costello. This doubt, the loss of certain meaning, arises as he cannot be sure who the woman really is and asks himself "Does it matter who the woman really was; does it matter if he has been duped?" (117).

It offers us a glimpse into the ambivalent working of a novel driven by a postmodern rejection of the concept of absolute meaning, that is absolute truth. More to the point, this also discloses the reshaped relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier, once emancipated, possesses the capacity to encompass a plethora of mutable meanings, engendering ambivalence as an inherent characteristic of their ontological state. In this instance, the woman could be named Marianna, Natasha, or Tanya, and neither Paul nor Elizabeth Costello can be certain of her name. Similarly, as Claude Levi-Strauss notes:

> In the system of symbols which makes up any cosmology, it would just be a *zero symbolic value***,** that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains, which can be any value at all, provided it is still part of the available reserve, and is not already, as the phonologists say, a term in a set. (64; italics in original)

Hence the woman can be named Marianna, Natasha or Tanya, highlighting the case that she can be "all those things together" (64), but, importantly, therefore "is that not precisely because it is none of those things" (64).

The mood that is generated in the novel arises from the inconsistencies opening into insoluble ambiguities feeding the sense of distrust of metanarratives, stable frames of identity, as even Costello, the so-called author, has no idea about who she really is. She explains this to Paul: "SHE CAME TO

me as you came to me" (115). This highlights two aspects: first, that Costello, as a character in another author's story, lacks complete authority in shaping her characters; and second, as an author, Costello suggests that characters aren't purely figments of her imagination but possess a degree of autonomy.

Although the story is told by an impersonal or third person narrator, the impression given is as if the voice is that of an author taking notes and making the characters speak. This becomes more evident and is perhaps the most salient in disclosing the self-reflective character of the narrative when the author intrudes directly into the plot and meets her character Paul. "It is as if there is an awareness in the novel, and in Paul as well, that his life is being written, that his being is a being of language, that his life is structured in chapters, paragraphs, sentences" (De Boever 41). There are numerous moments in the novel that foreground this idea: "From the opening of the chapter, from the incident on Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well, has not risen to the occasion: that much is clear to him" (*Slow Man* 14). The word 'chapter' makes the reader aware that s/he is reading something fictive. In another instance it says: "From nowhere a young woman in white appears, pauses, regards him watchfully" (4). The word implying the fictive characteristic here is revealed with the expression "from nowhere" and reminds the reader that the story is made up and hence the young woman literally comes from nowhere, has no origin.

Repeatedly, Coetzee employs specific narrative techniques to create a metafictional representation purposefully: "Indecently early, or so it seems to him, a social worker, Mrs Putts or Putz, is brought into the picture" (16). Here

again the expression “brought into the picture” hints at the metafictional aspect of the narration. In another example, this is unveiled by the expression “on the scene” (93) as follows: “Then the bathroom door opens and the Costello woman, wearing his dressing gown and slippers, makes her entry on the scene” (93).

As previously noted, Coetzee often highlights the narrative construction, or ‘lays bare the device.’ Therefore, these words can be viewed as markers indicating the metafictional status of the narration to the reader. Additionally, Regina Janes emphasizes that

> Although readers often forget the fact, writers (and storytellers) have always known that their worlds are tissues of words, that their wonders are airy nothings, syllables strung together in air, on the page, that they do not ‘represent reality’ but create other worlds, valued precisely for their otherness. Writing such as Coetzee's figures present loss (of meaning, authority, purpose) as proliferation (syntactic, of meanings, choices, alternatives); it plunders the tradition, and it carries on. (117-118)

The self-reflective character of the narration becomes more obvious when the feeling of a so-called author being at work is brought to the fore, often indirectly, in free indirect discourse, as when Paul’s thoughts are expressed thus: “If you have hitherto been a man, with a man’s life, may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog’s life. That is what the voice says, the voice out of the dark cloud” (26). However, the phrase “the voice out of the dark cloud” is particularly noteworthy. While it seems to allude to Paul’s inner speech, it also appears to evoke the voice of the author. The ‘dark cloud’ suggests a link to the tradition of mysticism, where God communicates with the individual through the cloud of unknowing. It also implies a form of ventriloquism, wherein the

sentiments of the purported author are relayed to the reader, similar to a ventriloquist animating her/his puppets to speak.

Furthermore, the presence of an author becomes most evident when Paul lies semiconscious in the hospital bed: “A letter at a time, clack clack clack, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid. E-R-T-Y, say the letters, then F-R-I-V-O-L, then a trembling, then E, then Q-W-E-R-T-Y, on and on” (3). This part clearly makes the reader sense an author working on her/his work, especially the word “qwerty” indicating a computer keyboard and referring to the act of writing through digital technical means.

This is equivalent to the phenomenon mentioned earlier of voices speaking in the author’s head.[68] These characters can be assessed as visitors as well who are not asked for, but visit the author unexpectedly. In the later sections of the narration the so called author Elizabeth Costello is included in the narration. This time the author meets her characters—an event which serves to problematise the relation between selfhood and agency with reference to the relationship between author and character.

From this point of view, the confrontation of the author and the character acts as a challenge to the established order of storytelling. However, in the present case, the reader is not only reminded that s/he is reading something fictive but is witness to the confrontation of the author and the character. This highlights the blurring boundaries between the author and the character. The

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[68] Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957), an early example of metafiction has a similar structure where a writer hears a typewriter typing out the narrative of her life that she will turn into a novel. Additionally, “*The Comforters* can be read as building, albeit more tersely, on Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which ‘presents itself as a book-within- the-book’” (Gardiner and Maley 89).

distinction between the creator and the created is diminished, challenging traditional power dynamics in which the author, as the agent, controls the plot and characters' futures while remaining external to the story.

Coetzee seemingly crafts this metafictional effect to illustrate the impact of the loss of absolute meaning and origin, leading to an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard XXIV). Once the distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' become ambiguous, the author's agency as the character's creator is called into question. By departing from novelistic conventions, the author enters the created world and the question is therefore raised of the infinite self-reference of fictionality: in order to disambiguate this state of affairs the reader would have to posit another narrative frame and authorial voice behind this one and so on ad infinitum. As the author loses authority as origin of the text so the metafictional play with ontological levels of narrative affirms loss of origin and therefore the authority grounding meaning—the key feature of the postmodern condition.

The representation of Elizabeth Costello sharing the same milieu with Paul as a metafictive manoeuvre and Paul's awareness of this state of affairs, reveals a postmodern character become aware of the construction of the fictional metanarrative in which the individual is manipulated. Expressed by Paul: "You treat me like a puppet," he complains. You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo" (117). This metafictive awareness not only exposes the artificiality of the narrative construct but also extends as a commentary on the broader existential condition of individuals within larger

social and cultural frameworks.

The underlying idea that is brought to the fore and criticized is the puppet-like condition of the characters in a novel. Similarly, it alludes to the condition of individuals caught in social and cultural metanarratives. For,

> There is often something very scary about being a character in a postmodern novel, and certainly that is true for someone like Paul Rayment, who, since his severe accident (the novel, remember, begins with the accident, so we never get to encounter the physically intact Paul Rayment), frets a great deal about whether he is at all in control of his own life and, if he is not, who is. The presence in his life of Elizabeth Costello naturally exacerbates that worry. (Pellow 535)

Coetzee, by bringing Elizabeth Costello and Paul into the same frame of the picture, in fact, also questions normative concepts of selfhood and hegemony. This creates some sort of existential crisis as Patricia Waugh has put it, for "authors who step into their fictions … are locked into a system of endless regress" (*Metafiction* 142), that is "Their identity disappears the moment that it appears in the fictional text" (143).

The characters play their part in attempting to break the ontological frame of the world designed by the author in an effort to emancipate themselves from the hegemony of the author. It appears that the struggle to establish selfhood gestures towards a challenge to the predefined area of character, an attempt to reshape and make up one's own story as when, for example, Paul realizes this poignant fact about himself: "Damn her! All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, darting this way and that, yammering to himself, with the infernal woman standing over him, observing, listening, taking notes, recording his progress" (122).

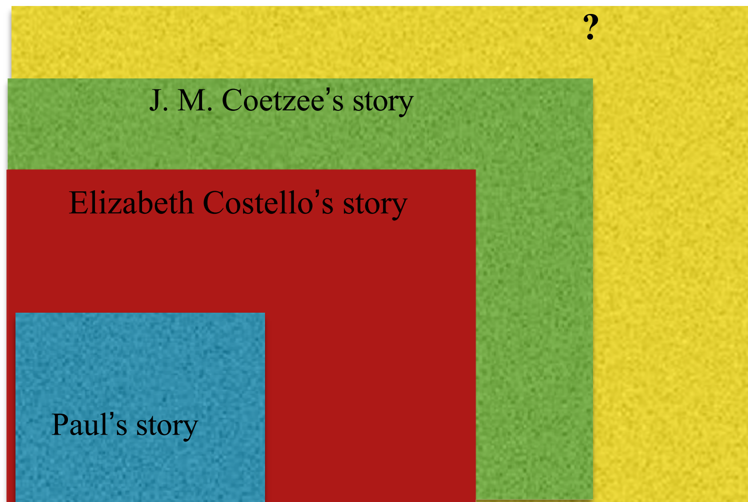
Similarly, Paul states: "'We are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we

are not being watched.' *Even if we are not being watched.* But in a certain sense they are being watched, he is sure of that, on the back of his neck he can feel it" (103; italics in original): this felt presence suggests there is no escape from being manipulated by the exterior forces, call it Elizabeth Costello or J. M. Coetzee.

Furthermore, even if the boundaries of the pre-defined realm are frequently challenged or even surpassed, such attempts appear inevitably confined within another pre-defined realm. In this context, it is Coetzee who delineates the domain of Elizabeth Costello.

This layered structure highlights how attempts to transcend boundaries are themselves situated within a recursive framework, blurring the lines between agency and authorship. While the characters' efforts may be commendable, it becomes clear that Paul's story is narrated by Elizabeth Costello, whose own story is penned by Coetzee. Thus this represents a story embedded in a story and that story in another story, stories in stories endlessly; another infinite regress that is the effect of self-reference. As Waugh suggests, "The branching and recursive structure of language, its implicit self-reference, is echoed in fiction's fascination with paradoxes of self-referentiality as metareference—its preoccupation with pointing to its own impossible existence as simultaneously word and world" ("The novel as therapy" 61).

The intermingled story case is displayed below:



It is known that Elizabeth Costello is a character in Coetzee's well known novel *Elizabeth Costello.* Thus, it can be observed that the aspiration to establish an independent selfhood is likely a naive expectation, as the puppet-like condition persists regardless of shifts in setting and plot. Once this is taken into consideration it becomes apparent that the individual is always placed in a narrative which is placed in another narrative and which refers to the absurd situation the individual is situated in.

At one point, to illustrate this "frivolous" (3) and "unstrung" (27) situation, Elizabeth expresses her unhappiness as follows: "And I am unhappy because nothing is happening. Four people in four corners, moping, like tramps in Beckett, and myself in the middle, wasting time, being wasted by time.' They are silent, all of them. *Being wasted by time*" (141; italics in original).

This significant statement by Elizabeth Costello underscores my argument regarding the characters' perpetual ventriloquism. Despite their efforts to emancipate themselves from the author's hegemonic control, they remain under

this influence. Similarly, the author's situation is voiced by another narrator. Hence, in one respect, the highlighted condition is that there is no ultimate authority exerting power over the whole narration.

By extension, assuming oneself operating outside the dominant modes of narration suggests a kind of human delusion driven by an urge both to believe in some sort of truth and to produce truth. It is through the deployment of various techniques arranging the writing process in the text itself, that both the reader and the character are provided with the clues that they are duped. This case offers a framework that challenges definitive categorizations and established orders, urging readers to contemplate the kaleidoscopic nature of things. In that sense, along with the self-referential character of the text, one begins to get a sense of the deep scepticism of Coetzee's text.

Besides, it is arguable that Coetzee, by mentioning the motto of the new world order into which both he (Paul) and Mrs Putts have been reborn, whose watchword is "Laissez faire!" (23) provides an ironic frame investigating the limits of the freedom they enjoy within a new precarious world of neo-liberal deregulation. Yet even those boundaries are defined by the government and, as the characters in a narration, the individuals are reiteratively duped by the system in which they are living.

Importantly, as such, at a time "…when American structuralism was giving way to transformational grammar, he [Coetzee] derived the broad idea that we have limited power in the cultural systems we inhabit, that language speaks through us" (Attwell, "*J M Coetzee and the Life of Writing"* 9). In life as in fiction, the self and character have limited power.

It is important to emphasize that the repeated use of the words "frivolous" (pages 3, 19, 83, 173) and "unstrung" (pages 27, 160) to describe the mental states of Paul and Elizabeth Costello suggest the general sentiment they feel: a frustration stemming from being consistently duped. When Paul explains the sense of his life that he has after the accident, he makes use of the word frivolous as in the following: "'My life seemed frivolous. What a waste" (83).

The other word is used by Paul and Elizabeth Costello too: to define Paul's condition after the accident it is stated that "the limbs are unstrung, the body topples like a wooden puppet. Well, his limbs have been unstrung and now his spirit is unstrung too" (27). In Elizabeth Costello's case the word unstrung appears when she describes her powerlessness: "I can't begin to tell you how tired I am. And not with the kind of tiredness that can be fixed by a good night's sleep in a proper bed. The tiredness I refer to has become part of my being. It is like a dye that has begun to seep into everything I do, everything I say. I feel, to use Homer's word, *unstrung*" (160; italics in original).

As acknowledged by Elizabeth Costello, the repetitive use of the words "unstrung" and "frivolous" play a key role in describing the general mental state of the puppet like condition of the main characters. This "unstrung" and "frivolous" condition of the main characters suggests the case of one not being able to realise oneself and feeling perpetually bounded and duped by the existing system.

That is, the authorial forces are shown playing games with the characters; here Elizabeth Costello playing with Paul, in fact, alludes to a

deeper literary purpose: the case of being in the grip of an authorial framework.

Based on this assumption, Paul lacks the courage to face his reflection, possibly because he knows the mirror does not show his true self. Consequently, he covers the bathroom mirror and even learns to shave without looking. His attitude can be read as a consistent hesitation in coming face to face with his "twin imprisoned" (164) because that "face that threatens to confront him in the mirror is that of a gaunt, unshaven old tramp" (164).

This scene regarding the mirror openly indicates how the fragmented self appears as a result of the ventriloquist preventing the characters from realising themselves in their own words. The reflection in the mirror is the one voiced by the ventriloquist, in this case it is Elizabeth Costello, and that reflection is perceived by him as not true to his nature. For this reason, Paul "shivers to think what the merest passing glimpse in a mirror might reveal: grinning over his shoulder, gripping his throat, the shape of a wild-haired, bare-breasted hag brandishing a whip" (164). This depiction not only emphasises the loss of agency experienced by Paul but also serves as a broader commentary on the constraints imposed by external narratives, questioning the possibility of authentic self-representation.

The idea of creating themselves is deterred perpetually despite Elizabeth Costello's attempt at removing the drape on the mirror, which might have been read as an encouraging act to stimulate Paul and make him discover his own self and to voice his own story, destabilising the prevailing discourse. However, all it achieves is to refashion the already set norms, as echoed in an expression by Paul with regards to Marijana's profession of restoration where the first rule

is to “follow the intention of the artist. Never try to improve on him” (176).

In this regard, although on the surface the character might seem to be pushing the predesignated limits and crossing the boundaries and even to have started to tell her/his story, in fact Paul’s story is narrated by Elizabeth Costello and her story by J. M. Coetzee, so the generated situation bears out the chimerical and absurd condition of the characters, which is the puppet-like condition. The character cannot transcend the realm predetermined by the author. This is because the author, too, operates within a predefined sphere.

Crucially, Paul is unaware of Coetzee, just as Elizabeth is unaware of the author writing Coetzee’s story. This substantiates the contention that neither a character nor an individual can possess or proffer a definitive comprehension of, or ascribe unequivocal meaning to, the overarching narrative or representation. The assumption is that this structure gestures to the stories intermingled with each other, displaying the delay of an absolute meaning, if there is any meaning at all.

This complexity of interwoven narratives also resonates with the characters’ attempts to assert their selfhood, which becomes a struggle not only against external forces but also against the inexorable passage of time. The attempt of the characters at establishing their self-created selfhood can also be alluded to as an effort to offer a struggle against time, the painful fact of *being wasted by time*. As such, Elizabeth Costello points to the inevitable effect of time and her frustrated and failed attempt at claiming her selfhood:

> ‘I may be exaggerating a little, but it is an apt story, apt to my condition. As I try to impress on you, our days are numbered, mine and yours, yet here I am, killing time, being killed by time, waiting—waiting for

> you.' He shakes his head helplessly. 'I don't know what you want,' he says. 'Push!' she says. (203)

As Elizabeth states, time is the central concept pushing the characters into that "frivolous" and "unstrung" state, ending up in absurdity. Emblematic of the human condition, the characters appear to be left suspended in a figurative limbo. As time progresses, efforts to realize oneself and generate any absolute meaning become increasingly obsolete. This idea running through the narration is poignantly depicted in the scene after Paul's accident: "The clock stands still yet time does not. Even as he lies here he can feel time at work on him like a wasting disease, like the quicklime they pour on corpses. Time is gnawing away at him, devouring one by one the cells that make him up. His cells are going out like lights" (11).

This grim perception of time, as a relentless and all-consuming force, sets the stage for the larger theme of human agency and control, or the lack thereof, in the novel. The generated picture is composed of puppet-like characters left hanging in mid-air. The urge to beat time is rendered obsolete. This seems to be a pessimistic picture. However, it contrasts with the concept of desire as the driving force behind humanity, as articulated by Elizabeth Costello in her conversation with Paul: "Don't underestimate the desire in each of us, the human desire, to extend a protective wing" (154).

While the framework established does not grant a character or individual the freedom to act autonomously, human desire is brilliantly described by Elizabeth Costello as a "protective wing" (154). More to the point, as Baudrillard articulates, echoing his early Situationist associations, but here

concerning the idea of reality in a postmodern world: “Take your desires for reality!” (*Selected Writings* 179) and he goes on to describe this “as the ultimate slogan of power, for in a non-referential world even the confusion of the reality principle with the desire principle is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality. One remains among principles, and there power is always right” (*Selected Writings* 179). This formulation underscores the disorienting power of hyperreality, where the boundaries between authentic experience and constructed desires blur, leading to a loss of agency and meaning in a world driven by simulacra.

The highlighted perspective is that where “man is born unfree, … world is born untrue, non-objective, non-rational” (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 47). Correspondingly where the human being has lost her/his sense of reality, the real, s/he is asked to take her/his desires for reality because “there is no objectivity. Nor any subjectivity either: a twofold illusion” (*The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 39). The main aspect of this case is that where “the confusion of the reality principle with the desire principle is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality” (*Selected Writings* 179) In a context where performance takes precedence, power masquerades as mere performance.

Consequently, the merit of metafiction lies in its ability to unveil both the act of performing and the essence of the hyperreal. In metafiction, the act of performance refers to the self-aware construction of the narrative, where the author draws attention to the storytelling process itself.

This performative aspect highlights how the story is not mere reflection of reality, but a carefully constructed illusion. The essence of the hyperreal, on

the other hand, refers to the blurring of boundaries between reality and representation, where the distinction between the two becomes difficult to discern. As Patricia Waugh notes in *Metafiction* (1984), it can be argued that metafiction exposes the workings of dominant system and grand narratives, which are similarly constructed: "In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly written'" (18-19).

This insight highlights the way in which narrative structures, whether in literature or in life, shape and constrain our understanding of reality, urging us to question the authenticity of the worlds we inhabit.

This questioning of reality, as shaped by narrative structures, finds further exploration in the character of Drago, who embodies the intersection of technology, time, and the constructed nature of contemporary existence. In relation to the central concept of time, Drago asks Paul a very critical question. This is after he realizes that Paul does not have any internet access and that the previous owner's furniture which Paul "has always meant to replace it, but has never found the energy" and "instead, over the years, he has adjusted to his surroundings, growing a little more plodding, a little more sombre himself" (178).

He asks, therefore, "Do you hate things if they are new, Mr. Rayment?" (178). The dynamic operating between the lines of this question is the unbeatable aspect of time and the changing context of meanings. Hence referring to the invincibility of time Paul explains to Drago: "I have been overtaken by time, by history. This flat, and everything in it, has been

overtaken. There is nothing strange in that – in being overtaken by time” (179). The fact foregrounded is that, beaten by time, which can be defined as history, where one’s story is written mostly by exterior forces, Paul implies clearly the imprisoning effect that time has on any individual.

He goes further and explicates that by referring to the idea of original:

> This was all, once upon a time, new… Everything in the world was, once upon a time, new. Even I was new. The hour I was born I was the latest, newest thing on the face of the earth. Then time got to work on me. As time will get to work on you. Time will eat you up, Drago. One day you will be sitting in your nice new house with your nice new wife, and your son will turn around to the pair of you and say, *Why are you so old-fashioned*? (179; italics in original)

Paul emphasizes the immutable truth about time. As his response indicates, every ‘new’ is, in reality, another endeavour to establish selfhood and to introduce new definitive meanings. The mechanism in operation, however, is similar to the idea of being late for the rendezvous with the Other, which is the working underlying the signifier-signified relationship, the everlasting delay of meaning explicated in the previous chapter.

As such, the everlasting effort of forming new absolute truths in the sense of establishing one’s selfhood is bound to fail as the possibility of providing an all-encompassing answer unveiling the whole mystery of the larger picture appears to be far-fetched. In respect to the operating central principle of time, the fundamental question of the original and origin takes the stage as whether there is an original or not and if so, what has happened to that original.

Within this debate, the idea of an original turns out to be an illusion where the possibility of an absolute meaning is out of the question and where the free-floating signifier dependent on the context, the existence of a so called

original, is exposed as an illusionary fabrication.

This philosophical exploration of the original and its illusory nature is vividly illustrated in the scene where Drago and his friend replace Paul's original Fauchery print with a modified version, inserting Drago's grandfather into the picture. Through this scene, Coetzee challenges the concept of 'the original' and questions the legitimacy of crafting one's own narrative.

In this context, the dialogue between Paul and Elizabeth Costello is significant, shedding light on core issues surrounding the concept of 'original' and the notion of crafting one's own narrative. Elizabeth Costello tells Paul that Drago's true intention is to craft his own narrative by placing his grandfather, "one of the Jokić clan from Croatia" (219-220), at the heart of "the pièce de résistance of the collection" (220). In doing so, one could argue, he wages his battle against time. Crucially, the inherent inability to attain absolute meaning engenders multifaceted avenues for narrative construction and semantic interpretation, albeit ones that eschew absolutism and recognize their contingent nature. In this instance, Drago forges a distinct signification through the deliberate inclusion of his grandfather within the purportedly original picture. In a certain sense, he constructs a narrative of his own.

Crucially, the inherent inability to attain absolute meaning allows for various narrative constructions and semantic interpretations, but they recognize their transient nature. Here, Drago crafts a unique narrative by integrating his grandfather into the supposed original image. The debate about the concept of the original further intensifies between Marijana and Paul. When Paul visits the Jokić family and inquires about his original print, Marijana replies: "What is

this thing, original photograph? You point camera, click, you make copy. That is how camera works. Camera is like photocopier. So what is original? Original is copy already" (245).

This statement by Marijana clearly addresses issues that were raised by Jean Baudrillard in his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], which foregrounds the evanescence of the original, highlighting the "omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear—that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum" (4).

Baudrillard's postmodern views suggest that the concept of the original never truly existed, which aligns with Marijana's questioning of originality. In this postmodern age, the central query concerns the status and relevance of the original concept in contemporary contexts. Marijana's declaration, "original is a copy already," reiterates the discussed argument about the loss of the absolute and the concurrent disappearance of the original.

Building on this, the continual deferral of absoluteness results in the emergence of multiple meanings, offering other semantic interpretations. The delay of absolute meaning can be seen as an escape from the dominance of a single, definitive meaning. Here, however, the meanings are crafted by the author of the narrative, who is, in turn, directed by another. Meanings are thus shaped by the story's context. Such layers of complexity suggest a struggle against time, echoing Levinas's view that "…consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" ("Language and Proximity" 119). The

outstanding motif is being late for the absolute meaning, hence remaining always behind the times. The prevailing motif involves being late for the absolute meaning, resulting in a perpetual lag behind temporal currents. The dominant motif underscores the importance of avoiding fixed meanings, as clinging to them would prevent adaptation to the ever-shifting nature of time, a plight illustrated by Paul's situation.

At the novel's conclusion, as a gesture of gratitude for Paul's assistance in covering Drago's tuition fee, Drago constructs a bicycle. He elucidates this as a recumbent bicycle, referencing Paul's previous crashed bike and explaining, "On this model you don't pedal; you turn the cranks with your hands instead" (255). Significantly, this recumbent bike challenges Paul's perception of an original bike he used to have where he used his legs and not his hands to turn the pedals. However, as his current physical condition does not allow him to use a traditional bicycle, Drago builds one suitable to his present physical state. Drago, in a sense, adapts the previous bike to his current state.

However, Paul, disabled by his attachment to the concept of absolute truth does not know how to react as "He has never ridden one before, but he dislikes recumbents instinctively, as he dislikes prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes" (255). In a way, Paul's notion of an original bike has been inverted, and he encounters the same challenge in adapting to the concept of a recumbent bike. His approach mirrors his principal outlook on life and various matters. As the initial premise of this chapter proposed, it signifies his resistance to situating himself within the postmodern condition, which has consequently led

to his inability to accommodate the shifting context of meanings. As demonstrated earlier, it becomes evident that an unwavering commitment to a singular and exclusive absolute meaning creates impediments for him in navigating the course of his life.

Elizabeth Costello's statement that the recumbent bike "will set you free again. Free to go wandering'" (255) emphasizes the usefulness of getting adapted to the changing contexts of meanings and technologies that allow one to float freely and prevent one from becoming imprisoned in one and only meaning, thus limiting one's area for movement, just as Paul is limited physically and mentally. It becomes clear that he has no intention of adapting himself to the changing contexts of meanings: "he will never put it to use. It will go into the store room at Coniston Terrace and there gather dust. All the time and trouble the Jokićs have put into it will be for nothing" (256).

Paul's case can be read as his choice to remain in the so-called 'original' time in which he feels himself safer and more comfortable, and the point that becomes evident is that it is all about choosing between moving on to a new in which one is dislocated or to remain disabled in the old. An exemplary instance in relation to this case occurs when Drago and Paul have a conversation about the new and getting adapted to the new. Drago tells him that he has grandparents, similarly overtaken by time, living in Croatia and, he goes on to explain, that his mother bought them a computer and showed them how to use it. Hence, now, he says, "they can shop on the internet, they can send e-mails, we can send them pictures. They like it. And they're pretty old'" (179). Curiously Paul asks what he is trying to tell him. Drago insists: "So you can

choose…That's all I'm saying" (179).

Through Drago's illustration, wherein the emphasis lies on the act of choice, a consequential realization surfaces: one's agency extends solely to the decision of either adapting to the novel or rejecting it outright. That is the only room left which enables one to move on like a signifier floating freely, but of course, in a predefined area of movement. Needless to say, Paul, by choosing to negate the new, in a way, prefers to confine himself in the past. By refuting the idea of floating freely or, as defined by Elizabeth Costello, "free to go wandering" (255) Paul as a signifier chooses to signify one and only meaning.

In accordance with the argument discussed in this chapter, Coetzee's intimation of the coming condition is born out in contemporary social media, wherein the individual finds themselves engaged in a comparable endeavour of constructing their self-identity and delineating it through the interpretations proffered to them. It appears that "…we are hardwired to tell stories about ourselves and present ourselves publicly according to the image we want to build (a.k.a. *cultivating postures*). On Facebook, people tend to omit their flaws and post only positive and appealing things about themselves" (Acar 58; italics in original). The social media user aspires to forge their so-called identity. In a broader sense, the individual's pursuit of shaping their envisioned self by sharing photos on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, as well as expressing thoughts on Twitter, can be examined within the framework of achieving visibility.

This platform of social media facilitates an individual's self-realization, albeit in a repetitious manner, within a circumscribed realm predetermined by

external temporal influences, as argued earlier. It is the attempt at writing and/or telling one's own story publicly. This platform of social media enables one to realize herself/himself freely, albeit, as argued above, reiteratively, in a limited sphere, predesigned by exterior forces of the time. Hence, the endeavour to establish one's self-identity remains perpetual, with only the methods undergoing alteration over time.

From this perspective, echoing bluntly the argument discussed in this chapter, Elizabeth Costello explicates her observation about Paul: "As you speak I swear I can hear words being selected, one after the other, from the word-box you carry around with you, and slotted into place. That is not how a true native speaks, one who is born into the language" (230-231). Then Paul asks the vital question "How does a native speak?" (231), and Elizabeth says "From the heart. Words well up within and he sings them, sings along with them" (231). This moment captures the profound link between the heart and the voice.

Similar to a migrant, the character carries a word-box bestowed by the narrator, representing external forces. This compels the character to select words exclusively from this predetermined box, preventing authentic expression similar to a native. In a sense, the character resembles a ventriloquist's puppet, with their speech dictated by external forces.

Significantly, in this context, *Slow Man* exemplifies the challenge of ascribing an absolute meaning to illuminate the broader narrative. Simultaneously, it underscores the perpetual evolution of the context of meaning, which renders previously established interpretations ineffective.

It follows that the title, *Slow Man,* in a very Levinasian sense, actually refers to the state of always being late for the rendezvous with the absolute meaning. In a sense, slowness as the prominent characteristic defining the man is intrinsic to her/his nature, but it is also the most important attribute paving the way for all other meanings to survive, be it the novelty begotten by the future or the character in a narrative.

Chapter Five

"Reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power"

(Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 50).

Dusklands, which can be regarded as, effectively, J. M Coetzee's manifesto for his artistic intentions, offering revealing insight into the intellectual framework of his forthcoming works, was his debut novel, published in 1974. It is arguable that, despite *Dusklands* being a relatively short book, composed of two novellas, it is still a highly complex and densely layered piece of writing with an interweaving of multiple themes.

The two novellas appear ostensibly unrelated but, when their respective layers are disclosed, it can be observed that there are large areas of common ground, so that the novellas form interlinked circles. Coetzee, however, insisted in an interview: "If there's an archaeology of the book, then the beginnings are deep under the surface, under the soil" (Scott 95). Thus, to speak from an archaeological standpoint, digging down into the novellas gradually allows the careful reader to expose the many overlapping points of the two apparently separated but actually interlinked narratives.

Though *Dusklands* initially promises to be a book about war and the effects of colonialism, when analysed closely the narratives are held together by a shared focus on and critique of the concept of rationalism, characterized as "a philosophical attitude toward knowledge" (Nelson 3), but examined through the vehicle of a narrative whose prominent themes seem to be those of history and

violence. Nelson argues further that "Knowledge itself is partly characterized both by the subjects, or possessors, of knowledge and by the objects of knowledge, the things to be known" (3) and explains that "Rationalism, therefore, bears on ontology since it requires an understanding of the natures of these subjects and objects" (3). This connection between rationalism and ontology highlights the interdependence of knowledge and reality, suggesting that our understanding of both is shaped by the nature of the subjects and objects involved.

This understanding of knowledge and reality as interconnected serves as a foundation for exploring how Coetzee addresses similar themes in Dusklands. I will argue that the critical focus in *Dusklands* is Coetzee's understanding of the underlying philosophy of Western thinking, constituting an ontology which "as first philosophy is a philosophy of power" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 46) and "which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice" (46). Comprising two parts, respectively "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," "'The Vietnam project,' narrates an unstable humanist's mental breakdown following his questionable contribution to the American military efforts in Vietnam; the second, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' tells of the meaningless wanderings and senseless butchery perpetrated by an illiterate Boer in Namaqualand, colonial South Africa" (Castillo 1111).

The opening of *Dusklands* provides the reader with a reference concerning the central mechanism working in the background of the novel,

which, I suggest, is irony. Coetzee begins with a quotation by Herman Kahn,[69] a futurist, military strategist and systems theorist defined as "heavyweight of the Megadeath Intellectuals" (Menand "Fat Man") in the years of Cold War:

> Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize with those European and American audiences who, when shown films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Viet-Cong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet, it is unreasonable to expect the U. S. Government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their missions or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden. (no page number)

This quotation, whilst carrying specific historical reference, in fact, determines the contextual structure of the work by challenging the reader to relate it to the focus and themes of the rest of the novel. Remarkably, the decisive word that needs to be emphasized in the context of this argument is "unreasonable", as it supplies the reader with the critical coordinates relevant to the interpretation of both novellas. From this perspective, quoting a thinker like Kahn on the first page of the work, suggests that Coetzee intends *Dusklands* to carry out a provocative investigation into the philosophical constructions of rationalism and the effects of its excision of affect or emotion as excess or irrelevance.

The novel has been largely regarded by critics as a parodic work, as David Attwell, the most notable critic and scholar of Coetzee, refers to it in his essay "'The Labyrinth of My History': J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*" where he suggests that, "In Part 1, the parodied documents are the work of what Chomsky in the context of Vietnam called 'the backroom boys,' the military bureaucrats

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[69] In 1947 Herman Kahn joined RAND (standing for Research and Development) the research arm of the independent U.S. Department of the Air Force which was in control of the nation's nuclear arsenal. RAND brought technology and the military together by means of the thinkers and scholars it gathered under its roof. It became a nonprofit and nonpartisan enterprise in 1948. Its initial focal point was national security. Then it was turned into an institution as asserted by RAND "that helps improve policy and decision making through research and analysis" ("History and Mission"). Today as a nonprofit and nonpartisan think tank, it claims quality and objectivity to be its two core values.

and planners in corporations allied to the Defense Department. In Part 2, the parodied documents are drawn from archives of colonial expansion published by the Van Riebeeck Society in South Africa" (8). Additionally, Attwell claims that "Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn, the protagonists of the two novellas that make up *Dusklands*, are intelligent and crazy people in the service of imperial cultures" (*J M Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 30).

It is widely acknowledged that *Dusklands* is "a reflexive and parodic critique of colonialism and imperialism that is truly felt on the bone" ("The Labyrinth of My History" 7). However, it is also important to acknowledge, as Attwell has emphasized, that "Coetzee's struggle with colonialism and imperialism in *Dusklands* leads to questions of ontology and metaphysics; that is to say, elements of mainstream Western philosophical traditions become fictionalized as part of the 'content' of the reflecting consciousness of the narrator" (7) Moreover, Attwell further claims that *Dusklands* defies "scientific positivism, and its legacy of rationalist discourse" (9-10).

My approach will be slightly different in that, while I agree that both characters serve imperial cultures, and that "parody is the principal method of critique in both parts" (Attwell, "The Labyrinth of My History" 8) leading to "questions of ontology and metaphysics" (7), the point I aim to convey is different. Rather than simply categorizing characters like Eugene Dawn in 'The Vietnam Project' and Jacobus Coetzee in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' as "intelligent and crazy," despite displaying traits of paranoia and schizophrenia, they are depicted as rational individuals. They function within the framework of the so-called world order established by individuals often regarded as

reasonable by intellectuals, game theorists, and military strategists, such as Herman Kahn.

In appreciating that the focus of the novel's interest lies in the interrogation of the limitations of rationalism, it becomes apparent how far the mechanism of irony becomes central to *Dusklands*. In this sense as well, the intricate composition of *Dusklands* arises from a structural irony that engenders a critical lens through which the naturalized mind set it reveals is scrutinized. This is accomplished even as it grapples with Eugene's poignant and deliberate query about the responsibility for his state, asking 'whose fault' (49) it is that he exists in his current condition. It has been argued that

> While trying to find in his past an explanation for his present condition and psychotic behaviour (made obvious by his attempted murder of his son and his call for a total annihilation of Vietnam and its inhabitants), the protagonist of the first novella creates, in fact, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' thus ascribing the 'fault' with which he believes his life coincides, not only to his upbringing and, as Freud would have it, to his relationship with the mother figure we find mentioned in the last paragraphs of the novella, but also to the Coloniser mentality which, Coetzee seems to suggest in this text, has remained unchanged since the eighteenth century. (Canepari-Labib 107)

This emphasis on reason highlights not only the protagonist's personal struggles but also serves as a critique of the broader philosophical and colonial frameworks that shape his worldview. At a deeper level, however, I would argue that it is not only the "Coloniser mentality" that is addressed here, but the concept of reason and the way it works.

In the first part "The Vietnam Project", Eugene Dawn, the protagonist, is assigned as a mythographer in the Vietnam war and his duty is to write a report on propaganda for the Defense Department of America. He is married to Marilyn

and they have a son named Martin. The first part begins with Eugene's statement: "My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that" (1), which already reveals much about the corporeal and mental conflict that Eugene will undergo in the novella. The statement indicates the sense of necessity and entrapment conditioned by Eugene's status within the terms of the existing system that leaves him no room to think/act outside of the taken for granted structure of thought.

However, it is not only the thinking system that he is shackled by, but also the history burdened by colonial and bloody periods of conflict that he has inherited and that weighs so heavily on him. Additionally, this statement, it can be suggested, functions metafictionally to point to him being a fictive character created by Coetzee, and therefore with no other possibility of being except that which Coetzee intends for him, that is, "a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone else's order…trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means of escape" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 120). In that sense, *Dusklands* represents an attempt to interrogate the totalising structures of rationalism and history which function to confine individuals to a limited and regulated space of existence, like characters in a preordained plot.

The second part, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" focusses on Jacobus Coetzee, an 18th century elephant hunter who is looking for adventures in South Africa. He is in a conflict with the Hottentots, and at the end of the narrative destroys the village by setting fire to the homes of the natives. Jacobus defines himself as a "tamer of the wild" (77) and remarks that "I continued with my exploration of the Hottentots, trying to find a place for them in my history"

(97), suggesting history's vexed and manipulative status, or what Linda Hutcheon understands as a "mode of 'totalizing' representation" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 62),

> the *process* (hence the awkward 'ing' form) by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified—but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them. It is this link to power, as well as process, that the adjective 'totalizing' is meant to suggest. (62)

This process of manipulation and control over historical narratives underscores the inherent tension between authority and truth, highlighting how writers, through their interpretations, both shape and obscure the realities they present. Building on this notion of 'totalizing' representation, it can be contended that through the distortion of the original documents in the novellas —the translator's preface, afterword, notes, and the second part's appendix—*Dusklands* not only constructs a metanarrative that parodies the hegemonic structure of Western thought but also reveals how historical writing, or historiography, serves as a narrative mode shaped by the inclinations of dominant authorities. As Linda Hutcheon notes: "Postmodern texts consistently use and abuse actual historical documents and documentation in such a way as to stress both the discursive nature of those representations of the past and the narrativized form in which we read them" (87).

In this regard, it points to ways in which both characters, displaying paranoiac and schizophrenic characteristics, make imaginary contributions to their narrations and this foregrounds the way in which history, like the personal narratives of Eugene and Jacobus, consists of narratives formed out of and

constituting distorted and partial realities. Inevitably, what is excluded, intentionally and unintentionally, is that which might disrupt or break up the stories that provide the coherent and unified components of dominant metanarratives.

With respect to the similar mode of history writing and fiction, Coetzee makes the point that "one believes sincerely in the truth of what one is writing at the same time that one knows it is not the truth" (*The Good Story* 76). Tellingly, Coetzee foregrounds the highly contentious status of history and notes:

> I have lived as a member of a conquering group which for a long while thought of itself in explicitly racial terms and believed that what it was achieving in settling ('civilising') a foreign land was something to be proud of, but which then, during my lifetime, for reasons of a world historical nature, had to sharply revise its way of thinking about itself and its achievements, and therefore to revise the story it told itself about itself, that is, its history. (78)

In this respect, by ignoring the stories of those who it thereby constitutes as Others, such rational metanarratives inflict the violence of totalization that operates through the logic of the same. In *Dusklands*, it appears that

> The immediate targets of parodic critique are some of the scientific discourses that have evolved in the Enlightenment; these discourse in one way or another concerned with enlarging empirical knowledge, are the principal means whereby the narrators attempt, on behalf of their cultures, to manage their world and achieve self-affirmation and mastery" (Attwell, "The Labyrinth of My History" 11).

This critique highlights the way in which Coetzee's narrators, through their engagement with Enlightenment discourses, reveal the limitations and dangers of an empirical worldview that seeks to dominate both knowledge and

the natural world.

Building on this critique of Enlightenment discourses, the characters' mental states—paranoia and schizophrenia—serve as a lens through which Coetzee explores the psychological effects of a world dominated by these epistemological frameworks. The key point that begins to emerge in this brief summary is how the paranoiac and schizophrenic features of both characters allow insight into this process: rather than being the actual stories of these characters, the narrative opens up the possibility of these being entirely imaginary stories provided by Eugene and Jacobus.

In a similar vein, Patricia Waugh puts it, "like Beckett's *Watt*, for example, where the frame shifts and you don't know whether the protagonist is intentionally involved in an act of recollection, whether he's perceiving something in the real storyworld, or whether it's in his imagination" ("Modernism and Madness: Louis Sass and Patricia Waugh in Conversation" 7). T his blurring of boundaries between reality and imagination echoes the central ambiguity in Coetzee's narrative, where the characters' perceptions of their own stories become indistinguishable from the fantasies they construct.

From this perspective, I argue for the significance of the self-debunking quality inherent in the exposed thinking system. In this context, the key themes of war, violence, reality, and history—central to this chapter—will be analysed in relation to how they are presented through the self-debunking nature of the exposed thinking system, as conveyed in Coetzee's narrative. It is this quality of his narrative that subverts the apparently operative structure in a pervasively ironic

manner.

Paranoiac and Schizophrenic Qualities in Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee

In fact, when closely scrutinized, it can be recognized that Eugene, presented as a too rational, albeit well-read character, also displays paranoiac and schizophrenic symptoms.

More suggestively, I would assert that both characters, in fact, perform an excess of self-consciousness and that is what determines the very structure of the entire narrative. It seems that Coetzee, in making use of a character presenting paranoiac and schizophrenic characteristics, aims at challenging and criticizing the insistent structure of rationality. The ironic aspect of this case is that rationality as a concept is disabled through its own tools. That is how Eugene, as a character, generated by and functioning in the system, ends up in a defunct situation. In this respect, *Dusklands* can be seen to lay bare the concept of rationality by providing a framework that renders it obsolete.

In claiming that both Eugene and Jacobus are representative of an excess of self-consciousness, I mean that not only their personal world, but the World itself, are revealed as based on and informed by their singular perspective on it and, like “many schizophrenics” being “indeed solipsists, ‘scholars of one candle’ who experience themselves as the quasi divine centre and foundation of the All” (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 302), rationalism is ironically exposed as a mode of the solipsistic that reveals Eugene and Jacobus as delusional characters even as they congratulate themselves on their clarity of thought.

In fact, the essential point that is developed in this work is central to both Foucault's and Sass's analysis of the relations between reason and madness. Eugene and Jacobus serve as emblematic figures of rationality that become obsolete in Coetzee's *Dusklands*. But Eugene and Jacobus are also characters constituted to allow the reader insight into the paradoxical workings of Enlightenment reason.

As Foucault suggests:

> The marvellous logic of the mad which seems to mock that of the logicians because it resembles it so exactly, or rather because it is exactly the same, and because at the secret heart of madness, at the core of so many errors, so many absurdities, so many words and gestures without consequence, we discover, finally, the hidden perfection of a language… The ultimate language of madness is that of reason, but the language of reason enveloped in the prestige of the image, limited to the locus of appearance which the image defines. It forms, outside the totality of images and the universality of discourse, an abusive, singular organization whose insistent quality constitutes madness. Madness, then, is not altogether in the image, which of itself is neither true nor false, neither reasonable nor mad; nor is it, further, in the reasoning which is mere form, revealing nothing but the indubitable figures of logic. (*Madness and Civilization* 95)

As Foucault puts it, the mad make use of the language of reason, as in the case of Eugene and Jacobus, and that is why they sound so reasonable and justifiable.

However, when Eugene and Jacobus are examined closely, their latent mental disorder becomes apparent and it seems that Coetzee intentionally draws on the clinical characteristics of schizophrenia as well as the understanding of the schizoid personality as a mode of solipsism analysed by psychologists such as Sass.

Moreover, when both characters' narrativized accounts are reconceived

in the light of this heretofore critically unacknowledged perspective, it becomes obvious that the novella as a whole can be read beyond the orthodox accounts preoccupation with colonization as simply the operation of force and violence.

The most outstanding quality providing the orientation for this argument is that both characters' language is entirely self-centred and self-oriented: they literally see themselves as the centre of everything. As Sass explains: "The solipsist begins by believing that the profound realness of his own experience testifies to the centrality of his role in the universe: 'When anything is seen (really *seen*), it is always I who see it,' is Wittgenstein's statement of this realization" (*The Paradoxes of Delusion* 67).

As noted earlier, however, nowhere in the novella is it asserted or observed that the characters' minds are disordered but, like Foucault and Sass, Coetzee foregrounds and interrogates the relationally identified mechanisms of madness and reason that also serve to obscure the operation of madness *as* reason. As Sass states: "Madness … is neither the psyche's return to its primordial condition, nor the malfunctioning of reason, nor even some inspired alternative to human reason. It is, to be sure, a self-deceiving condition, but one that is generated from within rationality itself rather than by the loss of rationality" (*The Paradoxes of Delusion* 12).

Under this aspect, this chapter will explore the relation between characters and the narrative in order to trace the dubious status of history and the understanding of the Other as existing "in the tale principally as a background on which force is exerted" (Castillo 1111).

This exploration of the Other as a passive figure in history sets the stage

for examining how Coetzee's characters, in their self-deception, engage with and contribute to these larger historical and narrative dynamics. I suggest that Coetzee's presentation of his central characters' "self-deceiving condition" prompts us to reconsider the status of objectivity, reality, and the ideal of knowledge and truth by suggesting ways to defy reason in an effort to break down the myths of the Western culture.

To begin with, as Sass suggests,

> The most prominent characteristics of schizoid persons are an apparent asociality and indifference, often combined with introversion. Seldom do such people feel in harmony with their bodies or with their environment, and typically, their emotions do not flow in natural and spontaneous way; instead they seem forced or stiff, and others may find them cold and unfeeling, perhaps overly cerebral or calculating. (*Madness and Modernism* 77)

These traits provide a useful framework for examining Coetzee's portrayal of Eugene. Eugene works as a mythographer on the 'New Life Project' which is in Eugene's superior's charge, the man (ironically and self-reflexively) named Coetzee, and he mostly spends his time at the Harry S. Truman Library, the 1st presidential library in Missouri.

He does not appear to have any friends and mentions only a library assistant named Harry as an associate in the library: "He is brought to the library in the mornings and fetched home in the evenings in an unmarked Order of Our Lady the Virgin microbus" (6).

Eugene, working at the Harry S. Truman Library with a library assistant Harry, can be read as a significant reference to the U.S. President, Harry S. Truman, as the expression 'our Lady the Virgin' is related to Harry S. Truman's wife Bess, the First Lady of the US. According to information acquired from

the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, she "was christened Elizabeth Virgina, but throughout her life was called Bess" ("Biographical Sketch of Mrs. Harry S. Truman"). It is also widely known that Harry S. Truman was regarded "as a devoted husband and father" (Savage 9). In a letter to his wife, he describes his intense love for and admiration for her: "You may not have guessed it but I've been crazy about you ever since we went to Sunday school together. But I never had the nerve to think you'd even look at me" ("Letter from Harry S. Truman to Bess Wallace, June 22, 1911").

However, Truman's legacy is also marked by contradictions, particularly his racist beliefs, as revealed in the same letter:

> I think one man is just as good as another so long as he's honest and decent and not a nigger or a Chinaman. Uncle Wills says that the Lord made a white man from dust, a nigger from mud, and then threw what was left and it came down a Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I. It is race prejudice I guess. But I am strongly of the opinion that negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America. ("Letter from Harry S. Truman to Bess Wallace, June 22, 1911")

Knowingly therefore Eugene explains how "Perhaps, seeing the neat script- strings that issue from my pen seeing my orderly books and papers, my quiet white- shirted back, Harry knows, in his way, that I can be admitted to his stacks without fear" (6). The depiction 'white-shirted back' and his admittance 'to his stacks without fear' is evidently a reference to Harry S. Truman's racial prejudice.

A further interesting detail that we learn about Truman and the influence of his wife on him is how David Susskind, an American producer of TV who had interviewed Harry S. Truman many times, but was never invited to the Truman's house, learned the reason why when he interviews Bluma

Jacobson, wife of Eddie Jacobson, who did business with Truman, explaining that "the home belonged to Bess Truman's family, the Wallaces, who never had Jews inside. Since Bess managed the family home, neither did the Trumans" (Battaglio 94). Bess Truman's anti-Semitic attitudes are clearly observed to have had a significant influence on her husband.

There are two issues that seem relevant to this argument. The first is that Eugene mentions only Harry as his friend, with whom he has no communication at all, and which can be related to his asociality or schizoid withdrawal, regarded as one of the 'negative' symptoms of schizophrenia. But this is also a clue to the unreliability of the narrator, a sign of his imaginary contribution to the narrative, as the characters he mentions throughout his narrative are represented superficially or two dimensionally and only from his limited perspective.

The second significant issue is that Coetzee, by invoking the image of and reference to the President, Harry S. Truman, provides the reader with an insight into the actual politics and power relations of the era, an alternative story to the official history, that challenges its integrity.

Eugene, the narrator, as mentioned above seems to be telling a story blended with partly real and made-up events and people. His wife Marilyn, for instance, almost certainly in part references well known facts related to the public image and perception of Marilyn Monroe: "Marilyn is a disturbed and unhappy woman" (9), "Marilyn is a trusting soul with no one to trust" (9). We also learn that she travels to San Diego for therapy in order to find psychological support. Additionally, Eugene, referring to Marilyn's

psychological state of mind, explains that he is "weary of this mental patient with hair in rats'-tails sprawling around my home, sighing, clasping her hands, sleeping round the clock" (11).

This is the era of the late 1950s to early 1960s, when Marilyn Monroe, famously the "blonde bombshell", was regarded as a figure of sex who epitomized everything that was abhorrent to moralists and those standing against the freedom of sexual expression. Regarding happiness, Marilyn Monroe, in an interview of 1962, stated that, "I was never used to being happy, so that wasn't something I ever took for granted. You see, I was brought up differently from the average American child because the average child is brought up expecting to be happy" (Meryman). In the same interview concerning trust she insists that "I don't think people will turn against me, at least not by themselves. I like people. The 'public' scares me, but people I trust". Marilyn Monroe also visited a therapist called Dr. Ralph Greenson who "called her borderline paranoid schizophrenic in a letter to Anna Freud" (Banner 382).

In another instance, Eugene is suspicious of his wife as cheating on him with another man after he finds a nude picture of Marilyn where "She reclines on a black satin Playboy sheet, her legs crossed … her neck and shoulders locked on the camera in an amateur's bold rictus for concentration… 'Help me!' squeaks the picture, a frozen girl caught in a frozen moment by a freezing eye" (13). The description of the picture corresponds closely to a photograph of Marilyn Monroe taken in 1949, aged only 22, when, impoverished, she agreed to model nude for $50 (Marcus "Marilyn Monroe's Never-Before- Seen Nude

Calendar Photos Surface After Six Decades"). Besides, Eugene's statement—"I know my wife well, having contributed much to her making" (12)—strongly suggests again that Marilyn is conceived as an imaginary character that he has created and incorporated into his story.

A further expression that follows "Vietnam, like everything else, is inside me" (14) can be regarded as a reference to his story being made up by him and that everything that is being told is taking place inside his mind. What holds significance is that Eugene incorporates key figures of the era into his narrative, portraying them in a superficial manner. He utilizes names and characteristic traits that appear to be deliberately fabricated, aiming to evoke a sense of contrivance. There are no other characters in his narrative. In this regard, Coetzee employs depictions and references to prominent political and media figures of the era as a means to capture the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. This approach enables readers to enhance their comprehension of the formative influences of the time, along with the political, sociological, and psychological context that has shaped Eugene's existence.

He finishes his phrase as follows: "and in Vietnam, with a little diligence, a little patience, [is] all truths about man's nature" (14). The statement directs attention toward war and violence as avenues through which the concept of reason is ultimately subjected to critique. For Levinas, "War is not only one of the ordeals—the greatest—of which morality lives; it renders morality derisory. The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason" (*Totality and Infinity* 21). The observation throws light on the way in which Eugene, depicted

as a paranoiac and schizophrenic character, represents an individual generated by the self-deceiving mechanism of reason occupying and a produce of a system that allows him to legitimize his contributory acts of violence to the Vietnam war through his legitimized profession of mythography.

Building on this, the system within which Eugene operates not only shapes his perception of violence but also reflects broader political and social structures that justify such acts. The causes that precipitate the initiation of war are products of a system shaped by and embodying power relations, along with political and social injustices. This system ultimately advances the notion that 'war is the cipher of peace,' and as Michel Foucault puts it, it "divides the entire social body, and it does so on a permanent basis" (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 268). Correlatively, the discourse Eugene voices in 'the Vietnam Project' is tainted with a perpetual effort "of establishing a truth that functions as a weapon. For a subject speaking such a discourse, the universal truth and general right are illusions or traps" (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 269).

This relationship between violence and reason will be examined, more particularly, in the next section, from the perspective of the later Levinasian writing of Judith Butler, as well as that of Emmanuel Levinas himself.

In addition to references to Marilyn Monroe and Harry S. Truman, there are other relevant allusions that run through 'The Vietnam Project.' One such reference is to a persona called Henry, taken from *77 Dream Songs* (1964), by the American poet John Berryman. While discussing the books coming out on topics such as "the suburban sadists and cataleptic dropouts with Vietnamese skeletons in their cupboards" (10), Eugene suggests in reciting the lines by

Berryman that "like huffy Henry I never did hack anyone up: I often reckon, in the dawn, them up: nobody is ever missing" (10).

Henry is the protagonist of *77 Dream Songs*, in which he represents a "multi- dimensional character who speaks in first, second, and third person" (Hickey 34). It has been suggested that the figure of the schizophrenic appears to inspire "Berryman's ingenious use of language" (34). Furthermore, with reference to the creation of Eugene, Berryman's purpose in *77 Dream Songs* has been argued to consist in "the development of *personae* and a letting go, a transcendence of self through the creation of an expansive autobiographical drama" (Hahn 118). By extension, through Eugene's quotation of Henry, the foundation is laid for additional substantiation of the argument that the characters within his narrative are meant to be interpreted as a fusion of his imaginative constructs and actual reality.

Larry P. Vonalt suggests that in his use of the "ambiguous pronoun" (464), "Berryman believes that 'a commitment to identity can be 'preserved,' and, as a result, the 'poet himself is both left out and put in' the poem" (464). Similarly, this suggests that Coetzee, via the other characters that Eugene has fabricated, points to this authorial control of the narrative, emphasizing the metafictive quality of the novel. Berryman's Henry functions to support the claim that Eugene's narrative is fictitious and this again foregrounds the metafictive dimension of the text.

In a similar way, as Attwell suggests, "the fictional 'Coetzee' who surfaces as Eugene Dawn's supervisor is actually an alter ego that Coetzee was trying to expel from himself" (*J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing Face-to-*

Face with Time 37). It can be argued that there are two reasons for Coetzee's emergence in both parts. The first is to imply the inherited mind set and history of Eugene's ancestors, as Coetzee, in an interview, himself states: "*Dusklands* grew out of my interest in eighteenth- century South Africa, … out of my interest in the colonization of southern Africa and the role of my ancestors in that colonization" (Scott 85).

Second, Coetzee points to the authorial voice by means of the recurrent use of his name that continually and ironically reveals that it is neither Eugene nor Jacobus who are in control. Significantly, viewed from this perspective, one can assert that Coetzee alludes to the self-deceptive functioning of reason, as discussed earlier. Both characters firmly believe and "experience themselves as the quasi divine centre and foundation of the All" (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 302), remaining unaware of their external molding and origination. Ultimately, they emerge as ciphers and extensions, ultimately deceived by their apparent author, Coetzee himself.

Another important historical figure alluded to in "the Vietnam Project" is Martin Luther King who stood opposed to the war and, in his speech on Vietnam delivered in New York City in 1967, harshly criticized the US government for the cruelty inflicted on the Vietnamese people. He put it forcefully that

> We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops. We have cooperated in the crushing of the nation's only non-Communist revolutionary political force, the unified Buddhist Church. We have supported the enemies of the peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men. ("Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence")

His speech delivers a moral and ethical interrogation that deeply questions the US's devastating role in Vietnam. Coetzee, ironically naming the undertaking in Vietnam as "The New Life Project," reveals how extreme acts of cruelty are camouflaged when positioned within what is presented as a reasonable framework of justification.

The following quotation by King overlaps with Eugene's mental state of mind: "This business of burning human beings with napalm,…of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love" ("Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence").

In accordance with King's expression, it cannot be denied that Eugene's perspective is nurtured by such cruelty:

> We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies, tearing out their livers, hoping to be washed in their blood; but they screamed and gushed like our most negligible phantoms. We forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women; but when we came back we were still alone, and the women like stones. (18)

He believes that he is "the man of the future paradise" but "Before paradise comes purgatory" (27), implying that the suffering he is going through is a consequence of his state of mind and of the necessity of psychic pain and suffering to final redemption. The assumption is deeply culturally embedded, particularly in Christian ideas of redemption and perhaps no more axiomatically illustrated than in the journey taken before arriving at paradise as represented in Dante's *Divine Comedy* [1471]: one is purified of sins before entering heaven.

In a similar vein, the religious attitude and its underpinning narratives emerge as one of the most profound elements informing the discourses and expectations of war.

Eugene's attitude towards his son, Martin, can also be positioned in this context. It can be observed that this relationship is limited and troubled as when Eugene refers to the atmosphere at home, stating "I must have peace, love, nourishment, and sunlight; those precious mornings when my body relaxes and my mind soars must not be laid to waste by whining and shouting between Marilyn and her child" (8). He refers to their mutual son as "her child" (8). This not only highlights his general tendency to objectify others but also underscores his disconnection from his family and from real life.

Interestingly, an impression is invoked of his narrative being fabricated by him, a solipsistic world projected onto the real. However, he has the idea that Martin regards him as his role model: "He is proud of his father and wishes to be like him" (35). Yet, this cannot be tracked anywhere in the novel. Consequently, it is arguable that this is again his own projection and/or wish-fulfilment.

His mind set functions by making judgements and Martin too is not excluded from his judgements: "Children will not grow up if they are treated like children. With me Martin is quite the little man" (35) and "I like to see a child eat well. Martin's appetite is usually poor, another effect of his mother's coddling" (35). His patriarchal contempt for the effects of mothering, marked by violence, might be contrasted with Martin Luther King Jr.'s compassionate and conscientious approach to the Vietnamese people—qualities that patriarchal

discourse often associates with femininity.

Thus, Eugene, with regards to the Vietnam war, considers himself to be a man who has “a duty toward history that cannot wait” (29); referring to the bombings he proclaims “Let us show the enemy that he stands naked in a dying landscape” (29). The analogy with the relationship of Martin Luther King and the American State at that time is evident. Eugene kidnaps his son and takes him to the Loco motel, evoking the motel in which King was killed, and where he has difficult moments in dealing with his son: “When he is too loud I shut him up in the bathroom. Perhaps I am harsh; but I am in no mood for irrational behavior” (38).

This idea of being too loud invokes King’s bold statements on civil rights and his brave stance toward injustice, characterized officially as “irrational behavior”, in an echo of the mindset of the States at that time or as ‘unreasonable’ in the formulation of Herman Kahn quoted at the beginning of the novel.

King’s attitude is deemed ‘irrational’ and ‘unreasonable’ because it does not align with the perceived circumstances of the historical era or the state discourses. These discourses create what are seen as reasonable and rational frames, ultimately promoting war and violence. Foucault’s discussion of war is again relevant here: “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital” (*The History of Sexuality* 137).

In this context, anyone like King, seen to oppose the state, was to be

regarded and stigmatized as a traitor. Eugene stabbing his son takes on greater significance in the context of a state whose rationality is premised on silencing dissident voices such as represented by Martin Luther King, metaphorically, the country's son. Martin Luther King was assassinated at Lorrain Motel in Memphis in 1968. His assassination led to huge controversy and lack of clarity concerning the identity of the murderer. A public investigation was conducted as King had numerous enemies and the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's hatred of King was hardly a secret (Melanson 17). There are also numerous CIA documents that flag Martin Luther King as a danger to the national security "particularly to the Vietnam War effort" (17). The parallels with Eugene's son Martin and his relationship to his father become even more compelling in this respect.

Coetzee's practice of referring to fictive characters from other texts, like Henry, but also alluding to real people, like Marilyn Monroe, Martin Luther King and briefly to Harry S. Truman, discloses the shifting aspect of the work, but it also manages to reconstruct a model of the era as one of disintegration: neither Marilyn Monroe, who can also be read as a representative of how women were perceived in that era, nor Henry, with his connections with Berryman's shapeshifting and crazy protagonist, can be considered to be integrated characters. Both are associated with intense psychological distress.

Building on this idea of psychological distress and fragmented identities, *Dusklands* is neither completely fictive nor based only on real events and people, but is itself a blend of fiction and reality, a fictive composite drawing on

characters and events of the period that also presents an anatomy of the philosophical underpinnings that promote the lies, read as truths, of the era. Through this structure of juxtapositions Coetzee generates a world where the borderline between reality and illusion becomes hard to discern. This construction reveals Eugene's state of mind as well, that is, the transgressions between illusion and reality occur so swiftly that it becomes hard to follow these transformations of the real. The narrative has a hallucinatory quality, yet when read through the lens of both the schizophrenic and the paranoiac, it reveals the fabricated nature of not only his narration but also the purported truths of the era.

What is therefore also foregrounded is the importance of an alert, distanced and careful act of reading, one that is central to metafictive historiographic texts. As Coetzee acknowledges "The past, individual or collective, is always messier and more complicated than any account we can give of it. We make up an account of the past so that we can pack the past away and not be bothered by its messiness any more" (*The Good Story* 76). Eugene has some insight and appears at times rationally aware of his mental condition. He makes reference to Charlotte Wolff, the author of *Psychology of Gesture* [1945], to explain the signs of anxiety he observes in himself as in the following: "I am also unable to rid myself of the habit of stroking my face. Charlotte disapproves of this tic, which she says betokens anxiety" (5). Ironically, he is aware of his situation and is even able to define it, but cannot escape it despite his sense of being a 'case'.

In this conncetion, ss Hutcheon reminds us of the parodic quality of the

metafictional: “As form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 101). Eugene’s general attitude of identifying and giving meaning to everything but not being able to take action against the problem, suggests entrapment in a kind of mimetic representation of his own times (the same might be said too of the more graphic representation of the fragmenting body of Saleem in Rushdie’s 1981 novel on Indian Independence, *Midnight’s Children*). It follows that Coetzee, through Eugene, “both legitimizes and subverts” the exposed thinking system that he parodies.

In the same context, Angela Woods notes that Daniel Paul Schreber[70] “seems condemned to exist in a kind of time loop at its threshold, forever striving to assert his rational faculty—to God, his physicians and readers—but disbarred from the pleasures of mental security” (107). Like Schreber, it can be asserted that Eugene is in a constant struggle to affirm his rationality in the eyes of his interlocutors, but likewise is “disbarred from the pleasures of mental security.”

In relation to the paranoiac and schizophrenic symptoms described earlier, emotional blunting is another of the distinct qualities that can be observed in Eugene. He carries “twenty-four pictures of human bodies” (10) in his briefcase and describes three of these in detail. The manner in which he portrays the pictures is pivotal in several respects, as it reveals much about his state of reduced affect, numbing, and emotional blunting. In the first photograph he

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[70] A German judge who was diagnosed as schizophrenia and wrote a book about his mental illness. His work *Memoir of my Nervous Illness* (1903) became instrumental in the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

describes a sergeant forcibly having sexual intercourse with a Vietnamese child. Eugene prefers to name the picture, 'Father Makes Merry with Children' (13). Even choosing such a title marks his inability to draw on feelings concerning this intrinsically unacceptable act of violence that has supposedly been rendered acceptable or at least normativised under conditions of warfare.

In relation to the effect of photos on people, Susan Sontag has argued that war photographs do not have a deep impact on the conscience, one that is normally understood to trigger moral agency: "What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow" (14). In Eugene's case, the names mentioned, of significant historical figures, function as emblems that enable for the reader the comprehension of the existing political consciousness of the era, making visible the forces that have shaped Eugene's state of mind.

The second picture represents two smiling sergeants holding severed heads of Vietnamese men. Eugene comments on the faces: "these faces are as well-defined as the faces of sleepers, and the mouths decently shut. They have died well" (15). How can he conclude that those men, so dismembered and decapitated, have died well? More specifically, he continues his comments with the following comparison: "One's heartstring may be tugged by photographs of weeping women come to claim the bodies of their slain, a handcart bearing a coffin or even a man-size plastic bag may have its elemental dignity; but can one say of a mother with her son's head in a sack, carrying it off like a small

purchase from the supermarket? I giggle" (15-16). The way he approaches and comments on the pictures reveals his disturbed state of mind.

Needless to say, the mind set of Eugene proves to be a reflection of the existing discourse of the state promoting war and that is why "it is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 137).

It is evident from these examples that Coetzee explores how, under the guise of maintaining world peace during the Cold War, violence can be normalized and human rights abused. This justification extended even to the execution of Vietnamese people, including children, believed to support Communism.[71] Likewise, in this context, Judith Butler notes that "when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalises their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living'" (31).

Tellingly, Coetzee points to the operating framework in which these acts take place, supported by ways of rational thinking.

Eugene's own statement hints at his narrative containing imaginary content as follows:

> On evenings when the sober edge of reality is sharpest, when my assembled props feel most like notions out of books (my home for example, out of a La Jolla décor catalog, my wife out of a novel that waits fatefully for me in a library in provincial America) I find my hand creeping toward the briefcase at the foot of my desk as toward the bed of

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[71] Louis Menand argues in his article "What Went Wrong in Vietnam" about the American military engagement in Vietnam that: "Political and military leaders misunderstood the enemy's motives; they misread conditions on the ground; they tried to beat unconventional fighters with conventional tactics; they massacred civilians" with the aim of preventing Vietnam turning into a Communist state.

> my existence but also, I will admit, as toward an encounter full of delicious shame. I uncover my photographs...I tremble and sweat, my blood pounds… Surely I whisper to myself, if they arouse me like this I am a man and these images of phantoms a subject fit for men. (15)

Focusing on his statement, it follows that he himself experiences the confusion between reality and illusion, reflecting his troubled state of mind. More to the point, through his statement, his perspective takes on a critical mode too as he implies his own fictive status, evincing Coetzee as his author.

"[I]ndividuals who experience paranoid delusions report that others are trying to harm them, either emotionally or physically" (Tsuang et al. 7). Similarly, Eugene reports that Coetzee, his boss, wants to harm him: "as I stepped out of my car outside the library, a stranger tried to snatch my briefcase...But I am not the kind of person who lets things go. 'Sorry', the man murmured (Why should he say that? Was it part of his training?)" (47). Eugene's interpretation displays how he misapprehends an ordinary man passing by as "

> Indeed, paranoid thinking can be viewed as, in some sense, an almost obvious, logical development—in a world where everything seems cryptic but never vague, where things seem illusory but never insignificant; a world where all events feel interpretable, so that nothing can seem accidental and everything therefore appears to be somehow consciously intended" (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 61).
>
> He then explains how he became familiar with such people noting,
>
> I would not mistake the face. I know it well: if not that one, then the genre to which it belongs. It belongs in long-focus crowd photographs, enlarged till the blur of its cropped hair and black eyeholes emerges among the thugs and agents circling the back of the crowd; in the Nuremberg films, scowling, low-browed, longing to be out of the light and back among the cool damp cell-bricks. (47)

Similarly, his pointing only to films and photographs as his source of

reference, reinforces the sense of aestheticized distance from what he experiences as a constructed real that protects from recognition of the actual political act of that constructivism.

Eugene admits though that he is a sick man. He regards his body as an enemy and believes that his body makes it difficult for him to work on the Vietnam project: “My creative spasm comes only in the early hours of the morning when the enemy in my body is too sleepy to throw up walls against the forays of my brain” (6). He thinks in Cartesian terms of a mind and body clash, that his body is objecting to the acts of his mind.

Similarly, as Sass explains “Schreber would claim that his body was undergoing all sorts of serious injuries and radical transformations: internal organs ‘were torn or vanished repeatedly’” (*The Paradoxes of Delusion* 45). Furthermore, the case of Eugene experiencing deterioration in his health could be read as a sign of the missing aspects of the “Vietnam Project”, that is, the not included, the left out aspects of the victims: “Vietnam has cost me too much… Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding” (32).

His words can be interpreted as his awareness of a toxic social structure that he cannot fully acknowledge but that is being played back ironically and critically through his author, Coetzee’s, mimicry. The clash, the dualism of mind and body, is the Cartesian basis for rationalism and the situational frame of which he is a part, that is the Project and all the mind set of that Project to which he has ascribed to within the context of having “a duty to-ward history that cannot wait” (29).

He has lost the thread of reality and has gone astray in the maze of his imagination, trying to figure out what is good and evil as that line is blurred and destabilized by the clash of the values imposed by the culture he was born into and the atrocities taking place in the Vietnam War in the name of establishing peace. Indeed, Eugene exhibits characteristics reminiscent of the schizophrenic, who, as Sass notes in *Madness and Modernism*, "often seems to be caught in an insoluble dilemma, driven to search for the self yet likely to destroy it in the act of searching" (237).

The central flaw in his approach is that he regards himself as in charge of Good and fighting against Evil, in the belief that he is "the man of future paradise" (27). It is evident, however, that as "the man of future paradise," he is experiencing serious moral injury.

It is useful to focus for a moment on the expression of moral injury as it "comes from participating in events that violate soldiers' morality or, as the Department of Veterans Affairs describes it: 'failing to prevent immoral acts of others, or giving or receiving orders that are perceived as gross moral violations' ("The Moral Injury of Pardoning War Crimes").

That is why he has dreams where he cannot avoid the images of the war he has acquired through the pictures and the films about Vietnam as where he describes the haunted condition of his mind "The faces come back, they loom before my inward eye, the smiling teeth, the hooded gaze; I stretch my hand, the ghosts retreat, my heart weeps in its narrow slot. I check the window; but in this dream it is never dawn" (34).

His state of mind deteriorates and he ends up actually kidnapping his

son in the fourth part of the "Vietnam Project." In a way the novel also questions diagnostic categories of madness—the paranoiac and psychotic state might be seen as a consequence of living in a culture with a skewed idea of the rational that is built on the premise of Cartesian dualism and the dissociative relation with the body that ensues becomes the basis for what has been termed since the 1980s as post-traumatic stress disorder.

The clash between mind and body serves as a reflection of the problematic nature of myth-making, which does not align with reality. Eugene openly acknowledges this frustration. According to his account there was a crucial problem in their attitude towards the Vietnamese people. As we are made aware, Eugene, in particular, makes it clear that the only thing they (the US) were able to offer was "weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew of between ourselves and our objects" (17). This suggests that they have entered the conflict as the superpower imposing military rule with only one instrument in hand, namely the means to subdue the population with force, not diplomacy, peace-making, or even negotiation.

Eugene's reflections on Vietnam are framed by the larger political currents of his time, showcasing how historical memory and personal trauma intertwine. However, the dehumanizing narratives, which code the Vietnamese as absolute enemies through myth-making, create a gap between the actual Vietnamese as human beings and the so-called "dark-eyed gods who walk our dreams" (18). As Eugene would experience, this gap forms the basis of his body and mind clash after having witnessed that the Vietnamese people were not the "dark-eyed gods" he expected to meet for real.

The central theme that comes to the fore is that despite his uneasy state of mind, Eugene, stuck with the myths and information provided by the state functioning as restrictive frames, cannot go beyond his ancestors' legacy and in a sense finds himself following his ancestors' footsteps. Apparently,

> In a sense, Dawn's rationale merely follows the logic of Jacobus's expedition 200 years earlier. Engaging in warfare already entails a disregard for human life. Under the terms of warfare, the nation is willing to sacrifice a certain number of individuals for the sake of 'greater good'. Coetzee challenges the ethical foundation of this utilitarian calculation and asks us how one person's life can be considered more expendable than aother's. (Ng 425-426)

It is observable that Eugene's statements are contradictory in that he acknowledges the cruelty inflicted on the victims but at the same time, ironically, deflects blame from himself and foregrounds the supposedly insufficient capacity of the victims to welcome them as simply in accordance with the paranoiac perception of individuals who "reason that if they got angry it was because they were provoked, that is, others are to blame for how they feel and for what they said and did" (Kantor 11). Eugene defines himself as a man of books and is dependent on the knowledge he acquires from these books.

But inevitably, by means of this clash, that is the clash between the mind and body, the status of knowledge is questioned too. More specifically, here, I subscribe to Jean Baudrillard's view that "knowledge itself is part of the illusion of the world" (*The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 42). It is because "a fragment of the world, human consciousness, arrogates to itself the privilege of being its mirror. But this will never produce an objective truth, since the mirror is part of the object it reflects" (41). Baudrillard's statement suggests that human

consciousness is intertwined with the world, and the world is similarly entwined with human consciousness.

Consequently, any attempt to claim oneself as a mirror of the world, producing an objective reality, appears nonsensical. As Baudrillard notes, “For things are given to us only through our representation” (39). From this perspective, the notion of an objective reality appears to be merely a construct or illusion.

In the case of Eugene, whose perspective is rooted in the knowledge gleaned from books he has read and movies he has watched, there exists a clash between his body and the illusions that trap him. Succinctly put, one could argue that Eugene increasingly distances himself from reality, becoming disconnected from the actual world and, in a sense, becoming lost in the aforementioned gap. Eugene constructs his own reality based on perceptions that have been nurtured and reinforced by the very contexts that shaped him—through the books he reads and the movies he watches. However, these perceptions cannot capture the authentic truths of experience.

This disconnect may be the root of the conflict Eugene feels: a tension between his deep-seated belief in the structures of knowledge that surround him and the growing realization that this knowledge might be illusory. The discourses that shaped this knowledge operate as the constitutive dynamic in this construct. As Canepari-Labib observes, beginning with his first novel—which addresses the politics of cultural domination in eighteenth-century South Africa and the USA during the Vietnamese war—Coetzee critiques the inherent power of language. He suggests that when such language is adopted by an

entire class, country, or race, it can lead to the tangible horrors that humanity has historically witnessed (107).

When analysing the two parts of the novel it can be observed that human consciousness reflecting its own constructed world absorbs the human being ad infinitum into an infinite regress of paradoxes of self reference as is the case with schizophrenic experience: "'The whole world turned in my head. I was the axis,' was one schizophrenic's way of expressing his centrality in the universe" (Sass, *The Paradoxes of Delusion* 50). The second part of the narrative takes place in the eighteenth century but, similarly, the character experiences the ineluctable Angst, which in Heidegger's understanding is "an '*uncanny*' feeling" (176) and "here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Da-sein finds itself involved in with Angst initially finds expression: the nothing and nowhere" (176) in the pursuit of truth and "search for totality" (178).

However, as noted by Baudrillard, "the belief in objective reality is the illusion of finding an original cause for phenomena and hence of inserting the world into the order of truth and reason" (*The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 47). Ultimately, as with Eugene, he finds himself trapped miserably in the world of truth and reason he has created. This might be compared with the effect of an installation by the French artist Yoann Bourgeois. The installation is called the 'La Mecanique de l'Histoire' (The Machanics of History) at the Panthéon in Paris.

(Photo by Geraldine Aresteanu)

Here, four performers dressed in the same colour climb a staircase, individually fall onto a rotating trampoline, and then jump back onto the rotating staircase. This performance is delivered repeatedly. It leaves the impression of human beings smashed among the cogs of history and then being regenerated by history, ad infinitum. The power of the installation lies in its capacity to display the vicious circle locking and generating the human being ad infinitum. It is so striking that right at the time the performer reaches almost the top of the staircase, presumably representing the end of life, he falls onto the trampoline and the one behind him goes through the same process. It seems to represent the human being's self-created world of knowledge where s/he is locked into and generated by the system, the machine, at the same time.

This installation corresponds with Jacobus's statement "I am a tool in the hands of history" (106), highlighting the aspect of being shaped inescapably by the forces of the present era. Thus corresponding perfectly with Baudrillard's argument that "The exact hypothesis is that man is born unfree,

that the world is born untrue, non-objective, non-rational" (*The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 47). It can be inferred that the subject is positioned within a framework, wherein the meaning is delineated by the dominant powers. This operational framework not only informs the subject's consciousness but also shapes their perspective. As Judith Butler argues:

> How I am encountered, and how I am sustained, depends fundamentally on the social and political networks in which this body lives, how I am regarded and treated, and how that regard and treatment facilitates this life or fails to make it liveable…I am already in the hands of the other when I try to take stock of who I am. I am already up against a world I never chose when I exercise my agency. (*Frames of War* 53)

However, the main problem that engenders the totalising approach, it can be argued, is the underlying philosophical ontology. Ontology, as the philosophical study of being, foregrounds the perspective of the I with regards to existence and how we come to know that things exist. However, quoting Levinas, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology" (*Totality and Infinity* 43) and, moreover, as the relation is performed as ontology through annulling the 'existent' so as to conceive it, "It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same. Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I" (45- 46).

This philosophy underlying the existing frames in which the attitudes of Eugene and Jacobus have been formed, Coetzee seems to suggest, needs to be challenged and inquired into critically. Hence when Eugene claims assertively "I know the world" (11), he is in fact not aware that he is in an intense and deep miscomprehension of it. Coetzee elucidates

the existential plight of individuals grappling with an ever-evolving tapestry of contextual frames. Additionally, his statement highlights the ontological perspective strikingly.

Significantly, through the two novellas that represent distinct eras and characters, Coetzee skillfully epitomizes and problematizes the cycle of rational thinking. This cycle, self-created, perpetuates itself endlessly. Coetzee's use of his name in the first part and in the second part revealing a Beckettian vision of a not changing human condition, achieves a sense akin to that represented in the installation discussed above where four same dressed performers go through respectively the same process, on and on.

The never-ending struggle is generated, however, as a consequence of the despair at ever completely exposing or "confronting uncertainty and radical illusion," so "we invent the easiest solution, reality" (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* 48). In a similar manner, Eugene makes the remark that: "People who believe in themselves are worthier of love than people who doubt themselves. People who doubt themselves have no core. I am doing my best to fashion a core for myself" (2). However, on the contrary, he gets lost in the maze of forming a core for himself. It is this uncertainty that can be considered the primary factor influencing an individual's attitude. Like Eugene and Jacobus, "The solipsist begins by believing that the profound realness of his own experience testifies to the centrality of his role in the universe: 'When anything is seen (really *seen*), it is always I who see it,' is Wittgenstein's statement of this realization" (Sass, *The Paradoxes of Delusion* 67; italics in original).

The point I want to emphasize is that individuals construct their own reality to overcome the Angst induced by uncertainty and indefiniteness. Or as is the case with the schizophrenic, “By focusing on the subjectivized quality of an unreal world, a world constituted by oneself, the patient manages to escape the anxieties inherent in experiencing the limits of one’s actual knowledge and power” (Sass, *The Paradoxes of Delusion* 49). When analysing both novellas, it becomes clear that there is a constant drive to place things within specific frameworks. This suggests that it is the underlying inclination to escape from uncertainty that leads to the anxious condition.

In this context, Eugene, as a mythographer, takes a prominent role in generating the necessary framework, that is the discourse that is aimed at annihilating the Vietnamese. Jacobus is driven by a concern similar to when he claims that he is the one enabling the natives to survive the journey, exclaiming, “My Hottentots and my oxen had given me faithful service; but the success of the expedition had flowed from my own enterprise and exertions…They saw me as their father. They would have died without me” (64). He attributes to himself great importance as their superior. In the existing framework, Jacobus’s urge is to differentiate himself from the Hottentots. In doing so, Coetzee foregrounds the medium of managing difference and defining one’s place by putting the Other into a specific frame.

In this regard, Jacobus’s statement is illuminated with reference to Baudrillard’s argument with regards to the understanding of otherness and difference:

> To master the universal symbols of otherness and difference is to master the world. Those who conceptualize difference are anthropologically superior - naturally, because it is they who invented anthropology. And they have all the rights, because rights, too, are their invention. Those who do not conceptualize difference, who do not play the game of difference, must be exterminated. (*The Transparency of Evil* 133)

Here Jacobus's effort is focused on secluding himself from the Hottentots as he begins to appear to look like them. His ditty is an attempt to distinguish himself from the Hottentots, illustrating Baudrillard's argument with regards to the Other: "Racism does not exist so long as the other remains Other, so long as the Stranger remains foreign. It comes into existence when the other becomes merely different - that is to say, dangerously similar" (129). He brilliantly points out the danger that "This is the moment when the inclination to keep the other at a distance comes into being" (129).

Furthermore, the striking aspect of this situation is that by declaring what he is not, he faces the paradox of potentially embodying everything he deeply detests. Hence, his motivation to kill the tribal people. In a way, by killing those people, he assumes that he has annihilated the probability of their shared humanity. He desires to maintain the image he has of himself and therefore cannot tackle the probability of the existence of diverse kinds of being. It is not that I am claiming that the Hottentots are only a reflection of his mind set, which would be an example of identitarian thinking, but rather they are the Other and not a diverse formation of the self. As Levinas observes: "I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power" (*Totality and Infinity* 198). It is this that requires investigation,

for Jacobus falls into the error of considering the Hottentots as existing in his reflection; in the light of the concept of alterity, however, this assumption is debunked.

In a similar manner, Eugene as a mythographer represents the mechanism of reflecting the Other through the self as for instance when Eugene explains that "Having proved to our sad selves that these were not the dark-eyed gods who walk our dreams, we wished only that they would retire and leave us in peace. They would not. For a while we were prepared to pity them, though we pitied more our tragic reach for transcendence" (18). As Eugene realizes, the Other is out of reach and the self is entrenched in a deep reiterative misconception.

Accordingly, the Levinasian aspect needs to be considered with regards to "you shall not commit murder" (*Totality and Infinity* 199). This perspective brings about the improbability of killing the Other, because what Jacobus thinks to have killed is merely his own reflection of the Other and not the Other. As noted by Baudrillard, "The very scale of the efforts made to exterminate the Other is testimony to the Other's indestructibility, and by extension to the indestructible totality of Otherness" (*The Transparency of Evil* 146).

Religion is another framework that assists Jacobus in situating himself in a 'proper' frame, one that might connect him with power and authority. Furthermore, it allows him to seclude himself from the Hottentots: "The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity" (57). So he continues to emphasise the main point: "We are Christians, a folk with a

destiny" (57). This stance justifies the ongoing insults to the Hottentots, as they are perceived to fall outside the prevailing framework, turning them into outcasts. However, the institutionalized nature of religion is revealed as just another solution devised to escape uncertainty. That is why Jacobus treats the Hottentots with contempt while talking about their relationship with religion: "The Hottentot is locked into the present. He does not care where he comes from or where he is going" (57-58).

The Namaqua people, on the other hand, do not have a monotheistic religion. Their perception of God as a creator can be detected in the song they sing; "I know, deprived of me, God could not live a wink; he must give up the ghost if into naught I sink" (83). In the song, the core assumption concerning the self-Other relationship is evident. And it is precisely this that makes the working of colonialism visible. The coloniser needs the colonised, evincing the master-slave relationship, in order to retain his position. When this relationship is destroyed, as happens in Jacobus's story, Jacobus loses his position and expresses his frustration as follows; "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?" (98). However, the Namaqua people do not have such a perception. What comes into view is how the frame in which one is situated creates one's network of relationships. In the case of Namaqua people, Jacobus is just a foreigner, a guest who is provided shelter and care during his illness.

Derrida's challenging concept hospitality can be applied to this situation. In this instance, for the Namaqua people, Jacobus is "The welcomed

guest [hôte] is a stranger treated as a friend or ally, as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy (friend/enemy, hospitality/hostility)" (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 3). Derrida's concept of unconditional hospitality is based on Levinas's philosophy. Derrida argues that as put by Critchley, "*Totality and Infinity* can be read as an immense treatise on hospitality where ethics is defined as a welcome to the other, as an unconditional hospitality" ("Five Problems" 178).

However, from Jacobus's perspective, he is the master, owner, possessor of knowledge and understanding of difference, making him the so-called holder of power. Consequently, his stay concludes in discord due to his misinterpretations and inherent prejudices against the local people.

A further grand narrative impacting on Jacobus's thinking system is his understanding of property. He compares Dutch girls to Bushman girls. Importantly, he highlights that

> Dutch girls carry an aura of property with them. They are first of all white flesh but also so many morgen of land and so many head of cattle and so many servants, and then an army of fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters. You lose your freedom. By connecting yourself to the girl you connect yourself into a system of property relationships. Whereas a wild Bushman girl is tied into nothing, literally nothing. (61)

He continues his explanation with how in his understanding of property the Bushman girl is rendered dysfunctional:

> She may be alive but she is as good as dead. She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her, she has them shot down like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away. She is completely disposable. She is something for nothing, free. She can kick and scream but she knows she is lost. That is the freedom she offers, the freedom of the abandoned. She has no attachments…" (61)

His statement clearly expresses the frame in which his mind set has taken shape. This, at the same time, reveals the totalizing and disregarding manner of his approach that leaves no room for the Other to survive while attaching considerable meaning to himself within the terms of the system created through Western identity thinking.

In the second part, an outstanding master-slave relationship can be observed. Jacobus needs the recognition of the native people as a means to gain meaning, within the ontological frame, that he exists. But this relation is based on domination and possession. When recognition fails, he loses his “white skin” (99), that is his superiority and domination, symbolically. He becomes an empty symbol, but the moment he reaches his own settlement, he regains all his lost power and authority. Especially on his second journey to the Great Namaqua, when he kills the Hottentots he marks his own existence, as he explains: “Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality” (106).

However, the paranoid and schizophrenic undertone emerges in his attempts at legitimizing his action: “All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? God’s judgement is just irreprehensible, and incomprehensible” (106). It can be observed that, as a “tamer of the wild” (77), he is offered ‘plausible’ reasons by the existing frame he is part of as contributor and agent, to annihilate the Hottentots. It becomes obvious that the working mechanism behind his perspective and thinking system is rooted in the paranoid and schizophrenic pattern underlying ontology. Thus, in this

connection, it is evident that the Other occupies a vulnerable status in this self-justifying system. As Levinas puts it: "To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over things, this freedom of 'moving force,' this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder" (*Totality and Infinity* 303).

Jacobus's perception is evidently faulty as the reader becomes aware that he assesses every act wrongly. The Namaqua people have taken care of and healed him. His assessment is based on hostility and fear—the paranoia—that he misconceives their hospitability and is insistent on the idea that the Namaqua people want to harm him. On the contrary, as Derek Attridge puts it in the light of Derrida's use of the term hospitability, it is arguable that the Namaqua people treat him in line with the concept of hospitability as follows:

> To be hospitable, then, is to be *inventive* in one's relation to the Other. Or, to be more precise, to the singular Other, to the Other's singularity, 'the singularity of who arrives'... For hospitality does not simply require an open door; it requires that the other's *specific* needs be taken care of. The event is always singular, which is to say that it exceeds all possible norms and rules and programmable expectations. ("*Hospitality"* 15; italics in original)

However, for Jacobus, who regards himself as the core of everything and "A world without me [him] is inconceivable" (107), they were "Lacking all initiative, they stood about with glazed eyes and sucked their pipes. A people without future" (118) or when he states that "Boredom is a sentiment not available to the Hottentot: it is a sign of higher humanity" (85). Jacobus's statements gesture to his problematic mind set.

More suggestively, his statements make it clear that these people are

"politically irrelevant" (Agamben 139) and he considers himself the "foundation of the All" (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 302), allowing him to pronounce sentence of death over them (101) as "people of limited intellect and people of limited being" so: "They died the day I cast them out of my head" (106).

It is important to bear in mind that his statements echo the assumptions of a biopolitical "power of life and death" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 135). From this perspective, one might contend that Jacobus is exercising sovereign power. With regards to the colonies as not organized and civilized states, "In the conqueror's eyes," Achille Mbembe asserts "*savage* life is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension" (77; italics in original).

Jacobus, with the same mind set and approach to the Namaqua people, acts within a context which shapes an understanding that "the sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity" (78).

In one instance, when the Namaqua people offer him some kind of local medicine he believes it to be poison:

> They had introduced poison into me. Yet could I be sure I had been poisoned? Had I not perhaps been sickening for a long time, or simply been unused to Hottentot fare? If they had poisoned me, had they poisoned me with a penetrating, a telling, an instructional poison, on the principle of to every man his own meat, or, unfamiliar with poisons, had they underdosed me? But how could savages be unfamiliar with treachery and poison? But were they true savages, these Namaqua Hottentots? Why had they nursed me? Why had they let me go? Why had they not killed me? Why had their torments been so lacking in

system and even enthusiasm? (97)

His explanation embodies his paranoid state of mind as "The schizophrenic's delusional beliefs are, in the typical case, unshakable; and no logical argument or empirical evidence is capable of undermining the patient's commitment to them" (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 274).

It is his tendency to judge every act from within his own cultural frame of meaning. However, at one point, this habit leads him to make assumptions that everything has a definite meaning. In other words, his vantage point starts functioning as the so-called supreme and absolute authority. His discourse is shaped by Western values as he himself clearly intuits: "The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes" (97).

The second part, with respect to its formal construction, consists of Jacobus's Narrative, the translator's preface, an Afterword, and an Appendix. When analysing Jacobus's account, one can observe that Coetzee presents Jacobus's actual experiences. However, the Afterword depicts Jacobus differently, stating, "Among the heroes who first ventured into the interior of Southern Africa… Jacobus Coetzee has hitherto occupied an honourable if minor place" (108).

In Jacobus's account we learn about his individual truth; in the Afterword it is the historical truth that is stated. To emphasize this discrepancy, I think that it is important to be reminded of Levinas's argument that "Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that

is, by the survivors" (*Totality and Infinity* 228). In a similar manner, Coetzee, by providing two different accounts, highlights the disregarded aspect of the Namaqua people, the Hottentots and the animals. As in Jacobus's account, the Hottentots are assassinated, yet in the Afterword it is stated that "from our ivory towers we have smiled indulgently too at the credulous hunter who reported to Governor Rijk Tulbagh that fable of long-haired men far in the north which led to the dispatch of Hendrik Hop's fruitless expedition of 1761-62" (108).

Here it becomes obvious that there are key aspects intentionally disregarded in framing the historical narrative; similarly, Eugene, regarding the Vietnam villages, points out that "Atrocity charges are empty when they cannot be proved. 95% of the villages we wiped off the map were never on it" (22). At one point, interestingly,

> The divergence between personal experience and official record can be seen in the way that murderous details about Jacobus' expedition are pointedly glossed over by the 'author' J.M. Coetzee in his Afterword to Jacobus' *Relaas*. History – and we must remember this is a history written by a descendant of Jacobus – conveniently abstains from any reflection on the psychology of a person driven to seek out and conquer new territory, preferring instead to remember Jacobus as a hero and an 'extraordinary man.' (Ng 423)

It suggests that neither the people killed in Vietnam nor those in South Africa can claim to have existed at all for, like all disappeared, they were never accepted as existing in the first place. Significantly, in accordance with the case, as Giorgio Agamben puts it in *Homo Sacer - Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) the politically irrelevant "becomes only 'sacred life,' and can as such be eliminated without punishment" (139).

Two aspects of this carry an ethical burden. The first pertains to the

writing of history, as illustrated in the earlier example where the Hottentots are overlooked. The second addresses the value of lives of those who, due to historical circumstances, cannot claim or recognize the worth of their own existence.

With regards to history writing Linda Hutcheon proposes that "Historiography too is no longer considered the objective and disinterested recording of the past; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 64). In light of this explanation, one might suggest that history writing has evolved into a tool for shaping the past according to the perceptions of the current power structure. In that sense, *Dusklands* endeavours to challenge the status of history writing.

This insight concerning the elements that enable one's life to be assessed as valuable or countable plays a great role in comprehending the cruelly working mechanism, as Judith Butler brilliantly suggests: "We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (*Frames of War* 38). That is why the executed Hottentots do not find a place in the Afterword as their lives have never been counted.

At a deeper level, it can be asserted that the ethical burden ignored by history is brought to the fore. This misleading quality of history shaped by the survivors in power suggests that history is a distorted and manipulated version

of past realities. Additionally, when Coetzee is asked about the relation between history and fiction in an interview conducted by Joanna Scott he explains that "there can be rivalries of various kinds but when the crunch comes, the relation between history and fiction is still a rivalrous one" (100-101). Thus Eugene's narration can be evaluated as an alternative text to history which reinforces the argument of history being as fictive as a novel.

Another contextual confusion occurs with regards to history's probable misleading and constructed quality in terms of Jacobus's return narrative. He sets off with his servant Klawer and, on their way back, they have to cross a ford. On page 93 he explains that "the violence of the current at once snapped the knots that bound us and swept Klawer over the shallows into deep water." So he dies. However, on the following page, another version is given and in that version they manage to cross the ford, but Klawer develops a fever and coughs badly. Jacobus tells how "his muscles stiffened and gave him too much pain to move" and he decides to leave him behind, comforting himself by asserting: "Thus was our pact closed. I did all for him that was necessary. I threw a windbreak, I collected firewood and whatever edible growths I could recognize" (95).

Through this metafictive technique, Coetzee not only creates an effect of confusion and complexity but also reveals the fictive quality of the work. The reader is confused and most probably goes back and reads the previous part again to figure out the problem. Tellingly, Coetzee emphasises the fictional aspect of the work, leaving the reader perplexed and forever uncertain about how Klawer died. As Linda Hutcheon states: "Postmodern fiction … exploits and yet simultaneously calls into question notions of closure, totalization, and

universality that are part of those challenged grand narratives" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 70), suggesting how,

> we need a rethinking of the social and political (as well as the literary and historical) representations by which we understand our world. Maybe we need to stop trying to find totalizing narratives which dissolve difference and contradiction (into, for instance, either humanist eternal Truth or Marxist dialectic). (70)

As such, by inserting purposeful mistakes into his literary text, Coetzee attempts to disrupt the understanding of a totalizing approach underlying a unified and coherent structure. More specifically, he explores the constructed nature of history writing through his fragmented, inconsistent storytelling, which includes deliberate errors like Klawer's double death, all aimed at fostering uncertainty and perplexity. Hence, both versions of Klawer's death count. In this sense, "To challenge the impulse to totalize is to contest the entire notion of *continuity* in history and its writing" (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 66; italics in original).

Beyond the concern with language and narrative structure, however, the text also foregrounds the visual: the picture and the camera. The pictures Eugene carries in his bag are taken from a single perspective—the photographer's—and not constructed from various viewpoints. What is emphasized is that the subjects in the picture are not as they appear; rather, they represent the missing or excluded perspectives.

In these terms, as Foucault suggests,

> Literature is not language approaching itself until it reaches the point of its fiery manifestation; it is rather language getting as far away from itself as possible. And if, in this setting 'outside of itself,' it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding back but a gap, not

> a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion. (Blanchot and Foucault 12)

Similarly, photography's language, it can be argued, goes far away from itself to reveal many gaps concerning what it is representing, and in a way implying that the subject represented is the not-represented, the not-included perspectives. Additionally, in this regard, as Hutcheon suggests, "photos are still presences of absences. They both verify the past and void it of its historicity. Like writing, photography is as much transformation as recording; representation is always alteration, be it in language or in images, and it always has its politics" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 91-92). This duality underscores the complexity of representation, where what is captured in photography is never a complete or objective reality, but rather a selective portrayal that inevitably omits certain perspectives.

On this view, it follows that the ditty, "Hottentot, Hottentot/I am not a Hottentot" (95) suggests that Jacobus is what he supposes he is not to be. The perplexing factor is that the excluded or unrecognized perspectives define what someone or something truly *is*. Jacobus, in a very obsessive manner, asserts that he is not a Hottentot. By contrast, he denies his negative qualities by attributing them to the Hottentots with the intent of conserving his ideal image of himself as follows "I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light what is dark" (106).

The assumption is that "The self is always constructed in relation to the Other, within the context of a social totality, making the achievement of an autonomous or essential identity entirely illusory" (Dovey 24). One could

suggest that the struggle with the Other can also be interpreted within the context of the inferiority complex. This is where the self projects its negative qualities onto the Other, creating its perception of the Other through mechanisms of paranoiac solipsism. However, this fallacy of attributing negative qualities to the Other as a means of distancing oneself not only acts as escapism but also serves as an attempt to control these negatively perceived qualities by alienating them. Differently put, the struggle turns out to be the struggle of the I with its own self.

This can be related to the paranoiac and schizophrenic state of mind, generating a world which is subverted by its very own tool. In a similar manner, while explicating the parallels between Wittgenstein and Schreber, Sass notes that there is “not a primitive or Dionysian condition but something akin to Wittgenstein's notion of a disease of the intellect, born at the highest pitches of self-consciousness and alienation” (*The Paradoxes of Delusion* 12). More to the point, Sass insists that “Madness, in this view, is the endpoint of the trajectory consciousness follows when it separates from the body and the passions, and from the social and practical world, and turns in upon itself; it is what might be called the mind’s perverse self- apotheosis” (12).

This approach opens up the perspective of the Other being out of reach of the self, corresponding to the Levinasian point of view: “Whatever be the extension of my thoughts, limited by nothing, the Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable—he is infinite and recognized as such. This recognition is not produced again as a thought, but is produced as morality” (*Totality and Infinity* 230).

Similarly, one could argue that history is what is not presented or told; put simply, history is what is concealed or ignored. Like the photos Eugene carries in his bag, it is a distorted reality. Thus it is what is not presented.

Within this context, as Levinas argues, "Existence in history consists in placing my consciousness outside of me and in destroying my responsibility" (*Totality and Infinity* 252). From this viewpoint, to shed light on the eradication of "my responsibility," I believe that the camera, referenced by Eugene in the initial segment, serves a similar purpose. Specifically, it acts as a mechanism for "placing my consciousness outside of me and in destroying my responsibility" (252).

In this sense, the "camera" (16) operates as an instrument of objectification concerning the Vietnamese people. One might contend that the camera exerts a determinative influence over their fate, insofar as it delineates their existence — albeit through a distorted narrative lens. The film he watches is a product of the Ministry of National Information, implying that the visual representation is constructed and curated by governmental entities.

That is, as Butler suggests,

> if state power attempts to regulate a perspective that reporters and cameramen are there to confirm, then the action of perspective in and as the frame is part of the interpretation of the war compelled by the state. The photograph is not merely a visual image awaiting interpretation; it is itself actively interpreting, sometimes forcibly so. (*Frames of War* 71)

By extension, people acquire a conception about the war based on the film, which has the power to shape the perspective of its viewers. More suggestively and importantly, as in the case of the photographs, this is what I

would call 'selected reality' by which I mean that the not-recorded and the left out perspective of a film and photo have been eliminated intentionally with the aim of generating a partial truth and reality. As highlighted by Butler "the frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. It tries to do this, and its efforts are a powerful wager" (XIII).

For this reason, the power of film and photography lies in their capacity to manipulate truth and reality. So, the twenty-four photographs Eugene carries in his briefcase as war documents, tell more than what is disclosed in the pictures. The reality is distorted and broken because "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (Sontag 18).

As strikingly noted too by Susan Sontag:

> Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it is. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph" (17; italics in original).

What is most significant for the purposes of this argument is the problematic approach of that philosophy that foregrounds the I as this paves the way for the disregard of the Other. From a Levinasian approach, where ethics is considered the primary philosophy, the perspective of the 'I' assumes a distinct significance. In this view, the 'I' inherently acknowledges the inaccessibility of the Other, and as a result, is cautious of his/her judgments concerning the Other. This establishes a relationship characterized by the uncertainty and indefiniteness inherent to the condition of the Other.

In one sense, it could be argued that Coetzee, the author, endeavours to

conceal the Other by relegating him/her to a realm of uncertainty, darkness, and obscurity. This, in a sense, creates an area where the Other is infinite, untouched, and protected by and from the totalising gaze and language of the same.

Furthermore, in relation to the second part titled "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the appended descriptors "edited, with an Afterword, by S.J. Coetzee" and "translated by J.M. Coetzee" serve as ironic illustrations of the monopolization of history writing, particularly emphasized through the recurrent use of Coetzee's own name. Moreover, this reinforces the suggestion of the one-sidedness of history writing, but also gestures again to the paranoid case, the question of solipsism, that I have been arguing throughout this chapter.

The formation of the second part is centralized around the name Coetzee as can be seen above and that generates a strong image of a paranoid individual making up stories in his mind believing them to be real stories as those suffering from paranoia "endow each little component of their self-created nonreality with a precision and luminosity otherwise unimaginable" (Kantor 15).

Furthermore, Jacobus, in his own words, also underscores the case that he acts on history's focus: "In each game the challenge was to undergo the history, and victory was mine if I survived it" (99). For Jacobus, Coetzee attaches great importance to himself:

> It was I who planned each day's march and scouted out the road. It was I who conserved the strength of the oxen so that they should give of their best when the going was hard. It was I who saw that every man had food. 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. (64)

The repetitive use of the “It was I” phrase underscores the egocentric nature of his narrative at large, while also underlining its paranoid undertone as similarly expressed by a patient “If you do not keep in touch with me, you will perish” (Sass, *Madness and Modernism* 303)

Jacobus’s attitude towards the Namaqua people has been antagonistic throughout but the antagonism is directed only by Jacobus to the Namaqua people and not by the Namaqua people towards Jacobus. In this respect, there is a strong implication that it is the underlying thinking system that creates this antagonism.

As clearly explained by Sass “Being, we might say, was shown to depend on Knowing—almost as if the external reality we experience were but a projection of the sovereign mind (*Madness and Modernism* 328). Yet, precisely because of this, it can be argued that within this construct, the relationship of the self with the world, and particularly with the Other, assumes an unstable character. This instability becomes evident in the way the self constructs its identity through antagonism, projecting its insecurities onto the Other.

Ultimately, the thinking system of Jacobus allows him to verify his antagonism. The dynamic instigating this troublesome attitude bears a resemblance to the thinking system of paranoid people as will be exemplified in the following discussion.

Jacobus was dismissed from the Great Namaqua by the Namaqua people after he bit a child’s ear as a result of misunderstanding the children’s willingness to play with him. The Namaqua people expostulate asking him;

"Have you no children of your own? Do you not know how to play with children? You have mutilated this child!" (91). However, Jacobus regards their manner of behaviour as humiliating and he definitively rejects their perspective, telling them that it was not his fault.

The reaction of Eugene to the Namaqua people's behavior exemplifies a broader theme, one that intersects with the nature of paranoid delusions and the justification of harmful actions based on false beliefs, as "paranoid individuals often do act on their false beliefs because they are convinced that they are justified in doing so. They...put others down, destroy property, happily defeat imagined rivals, or harm or maim presumed adversaries" (Kantor 14). This connection highlights the way in which irrational behaviors are often justified within specific ideological systems.

Building on an argument that questions the rationality of Western thinking, this chapter has sought to develop a critical perspective on the totalizing attitude of ontology in general. Coetzee's use of two characters, Eugene and Jacobus, featuring paranoiac and schizophrenic characteristics, exposes the self-debunking quality of the thinking system that has formed them. By the same token, the manipulative power of history, war, and the camera has been questioned.

Coetzee highlights not only the unavailability of the Other, but at the same time scrutinizes subjects that pose challenges to moral and religious matters. His work reshapes notions of uncertainty, indefiniteness and darkness by displaying them as ways of escaping the totalizing gaze of history, same and self.

In this context, one might assert that the Other is shielded from the aggressive and destructive tendencies of the self by being placed within a realm of uncertainty and darkness. In this sense, when asked what theatre is for, Coetzee states that where some works "reinforce the myths of our culture, others dissect these myths. In our time and place, it is the latter kind of work that seems to me more urgent" (Wood 14). Drawing inspiration from a Levinasian style of thought, Coetzee effectively reinterprets the concepts of uncertainty, indefiniteness, and darkness. He challenges the entrenched ideals of certainty, definitiveness, and the pursuit of knowledge and truth as means to illuminate all.

In doing so, Coetzee suggests ways to question reason itself, thereby deconstructing the myths of Western culture.

Conclusion

"The death of the hare is the logic of salvation" (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 79).

"To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom"

(Levinas, Totality and Infinity 85).

The perplexing relation between the self and the Other has been the starting point of this study. It is a complex topic that has fascinated numerous twentieth century philosophers in the tradition of existentialism and phenomenology, as well as prominent literary writers such as Beckett and Murdoch. What they share is an urgent desire to explore an understanding of the self that is bound up with its relation to others and the Other.

Nevertheless, this aspiration to achieve a comprehensive understanding of entities within the world, as perceived through the self's experience, may concurrently engender an inexorable ambition to maintain an epistemological grasp of the Other. Two distinctive philosophical approaches have reflected on this dilemma in ways relevant to this thesis.

Firstly, that of Martin Heidegger, the German first wave phenomenologist who asserts that "In the explicit hearing of the discourse of the other, too, we initially understand what it is said: more precisely, we are already together with the other beforehand, with the being which the discourse is about" (153). However, on the contrary, Emmanuel Levinas, the French philosopher whose work is also related to phenomenology, existentialism and specifically ethics, asserts that "To know amounts to grasping out of nothing or reducing it

to nothing, removing from it its alterity" (*Totality and Infinity* 44).

These differing perspectives of Heidegger and Levinas are both centred on the question of human capacity to know and comprehend the Other. While for Heidegger, exploring the question of being, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the Other, for Levinas, however, that is not the case for as we have seen throughout this thesis, "I of myself account for every object; I contain them. The idea of infinity is not for me an object" (*Totality and Infinity* 211). Heidegger, though, of course, insists too on the importance of the idea of death in realising one's "potentiality-of-being-a self" (283): "One's own potentiality-of-being becomes authentic and transparent in the understanding being-toward-death as the *ownmost* possibility" (283; italics in original).

In contrast, Levinas believes: "When I seek my final reality, I find that my existence as a 'thing in itself' begins with the presence in the idea of Infinity. But this relation already consists in serving the Other. Death is not this master. Always future and unknown it gives rise to fear or flight from responsibilities" (*Totality and Infinity* 178-179). He distinctly opposes Heidegger's strong emphasis on death as the catalyst to realize one's "own potentiality-of-being" (283).

Levinas's philosophy is alternatively framed differently, centred on the infinite responsibility for the Other, also referred to as Infinity: "The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our *nature* and developed by our existence" (*Totality and Infinity* 194; italics in original). Levinas further

asserts that

> Speech proceeds from absolute difference... Absolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language. Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus. The terms, the interlocutors, absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute within relationship. Language is perhaps to be defined as the very power to break the continuity of being or of history" (194-195).

Significantly, in Heidegger's perspective, the relation with the Other takes on an ontological dimension, whereas Levinas's perspective evidently emerges out of a primarily ethical ground. Thus, having set the procedural framework for this dissertation mainly on a Levinasian philosophy with regards to the concept of the Other, my analysis, similarly situated on this ethical ground, has set out to address this Levinasian aspect in J.M. Coetzee's work.

It is worth noting that the statement made by Jacobus in *Dusklands* after killing the hare insightfully conveys the troubling approach to the Other, for "The hare dies to keep my soul from merging with the world" (79-80).

In the light of the Levinasian philosophy of the Other, this phrase can be regarded as the dynamic motive behind the widely questioned self-Other relationship discussed throughout this study.

As previously indicated, the endeavour to delineate one's position frequently culminates in a state of frustration. This predicament arises due to its perpetual nature, characterized by an unceasing process of infinite regression, rendering it ultimately a futile pursuit. The illusion that the self possesses the capability to attain knowledge of itself or the Other ultimately manifests as a mere reflection of the solipsistic perspective.

The concern of this study has been to destabilise totalising discourses of

the self, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's substantial and insightful point of view with regards to the self-Other relationship in ethical terms and demonstrating that perspective by working it through the fictions of J.M. Coetzee. By providing a reverse aspect with regards to a Western philosophy that largely prioritises the viewpoint of the self and identitarian thinking, Levinas vehemently promoted the neglected and suppressed perspective of the Other, justified in the assertion that "The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology" (*Totality and Infinity* 44).

Instead, he put forward how "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as the calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). Tellingly, for Levinas, then Ethics "is critique; it is the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself" (Critchley, *The Ethics* 5; italics in original).

J.M. Coetzee's *oeuvre* can be regarded as providing an exquisite example of a literary writer working through and towards an understanding of issues that are at the core of Levinas's philosophy. It is widely recognized that "Levinas' preoccupation with the ethical relation to alterity is read as a recurrent theme in Coetzee's fiction" (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 69). While Levinasian concepts offer valuable insights into aspects of Coetzee's works, especially concerning the ethical relationship to the Other, Coetzee's narratives explore broader socio-political, historical, and existential themes that may not be entirely encapsulated by Levinasian ethics alone. As, for example in Coetzee 's

allegorical novel *The Childhood Of Jesus* (2013), filled with metaphysical questions about identity, purpose, and meaning, is full with encounters between self and the Other. Simón's responsibility towards David, despite not being his biological parent, and the community's response to David's distinctiveness, resonate with Levinas's themes of ethical responsibility to the "Other." However, the novel also looks into existential and metaphysical questions: What makes a mother? What defines purpose and identity? While Levinasian ethics can explore the interpersonal dynamics, the broader philosophical and allegorical dimensions of the novel extend beyond Levinas's primary concerns. The idea is that while theory can be illuminating, texts often operate in realms that exceed or diverge from strict theoretical confines.

It might be suggested further that there is a reciprocal and entangled relation in the literary fictional and the philosophical writing emerging in their juxtaposition that amplifies movingly the insights of each. Levinas's thinking pushes boundaries by means of challenging a rigid concept of perception with regards to the Other and the relationship between the self and the Other. Coetzee's writing functions as an intensely argumentative engagement with Levinasian thinking that in itself broaches new realms of enquiry, so that fiction becomes a philosophical instrument.

In Coetzee's writing, the text, as an alternative iteration of the Other, functions twofold. First, its structure and formation resist interpretation and do not open up at all in the terms of conventional hermeneutics. The reader is left perplexed most of the time.

It is well to acknowledge that this uncertainty prompted by its structure

has been read here as the unavailability of the Other, that is, opposing the all-encompassing attitude of the self. Put differently, it has been argued that the state of reducing the Other to the same is eliminated. It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that in his writing this condition of uncertainty is employed as a mode of resistance.

In all the texts studied in this dissertation, Coetzee bravely works out a peaceful point of opening into a debate begun when G.W.F. Hegel first highlights the priority of the self when he describes the relationship between the self and the Other, arguing that the self and the Other must take up a struggle in an effort to arrive at an objective truth through which freedom is earned. What is being suggested is that the fundamental essence of self-consciousness is more than simple existence, but "that it is only pure *being−for−self*" (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 114). Hegel emphasizes the concepts of self-assuredness and the phenomenon of struggle, which gives rise to a willingness to risk life, ultimately leading to the attainment of freedom. The central point in his argument is '*being−for−self*'.

However, in the writing examined in this study, it has been observed that Coetzee extends a critical attitude towards certainty and the deep-rooted and now mostly taken for granted Hegelian point of view on struggle by which freedom is earned. Needless to say, Coetzee's approach poses a challenge to established and self-justifying systems of thought and belief that attach priority to the self. "Coetzee's writing," as Jane Poyner mentions, "suggests that private thoughts are not, as commonly held in Enlightenment discourse, free from policing" (171) and that they "are subject to doubt"

(171).

In much of the Western philosophical tradition, the Other is posited in a conceptual frame where the relationship between the self and the Other is founded on terms of mutual hostility. On the other hand, the Levinasian approach celebrated in Coetzee's writing embraces an ethical stance that addresses conceptions of uncertainty, giving priority to the Other, celebrating life, questioning the freedom that is earned through a fatal struggle, and being 'for the Other': any idea of certainty in the meeting with the Other is denied, and the self—and the self of the reader—is constantly required to question its point of view. This theme runs throughout Coetzee's writing.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, for instance, the habit of eating meat[72], regarded as part of ordinary human life and regarded as acceptable to the extent that is has become naturalised, is challenged by Elizabeth Costello when she asserts that "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without and, self-generating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them" (65). An ethical shift is achieved through a process of defamiliarization where the naturalised processes of consumption shifts into a frame of Nazi atrocity: her intervention is resisted of course and she is received by her liberal interlocutors with contempt.

As proposed in the introduction, literary works can be viewed as avenues

[72] Though Coetzee explores ethical ways of looking into the habit of eating meat, today the habit of eating meat has become one of the critical issues central to global warming as animal agriculture has great impact on the environment contributing to the production of greenhouse gas heavily. (See "UN Report: Plant-Based Diets Provide 'Major Opportunities' to Address Climate Crisis")

for cultivating awareness of the emotions and experiences of others, rather than merely serving as tools to enhance the faculty of comprehending other beings. In the framework of Levinasian thought, this understanding is often perceived as a form of control. The literary work, instead, serves as a catalyst, fostering the reader's awareness of alternative perspectives in perceiving and engaging with the world. Coetzee's writing adeptly addresses the Other by deliberately and consistently withholding the reader's desire for closure.

In each of the examined works, a discernible pattern emerges wherein, at the juncture when the reader perceives a comprehensive understanding of the text, this sense of achievement is deliberately subverted. This disruption occurs through the deliberate application of techniques designed to interrogate assumptions or provoke a disconcerting effect upon complacent assumptions.

In this context, aligning with the Levinasian perspective, the reader experiences a persistent inability to fully comprehend the work. Every endeavour to unveil a comprehensive or enlightening explanation of events or characters results in frustration. The idea of infinity emerges as the responsibility towards a work that is never fully accomplished.

The author is faced with a similar case, for responsible writing is also one of failure, as Michael Marais suggests:

> It has failed because of its inability to accommodate, no matter how partially and temporarily, the otherness with which it deals. In its refractoriness to textual accommodation, this alterity is, quite simply, absolute. And through this failure, the writer's responsibility is rendered infinite...The responsibility of the writer is rendered infinite by the impossibility of the task assigned him or her by his or her encounter with alterity. ("Accommodating the other" 100- 101).

It follows, moreover, that Coetzee, by avoiding the imposition of any

verdict or the voicing of a specific perspective as dominant, aims at discomforting as well as disconcerting his reader. His literary *oeuvre* works to remind us of neglected aspects and overlooked realities, other possible ways of looking. The reader is kept at a specific distance and hindered in attempts even to possess the text figuratively. The feeling of uncertainty is the shaping force throughout Coetzee's work.

Hence, it has been argued that the concept of uncertainty adds significantly to the formation of an ethical relationship with the Other. Additionally, in terms of the structure and form of his writing, Coetzee blocks the reader from empathising with his characters—a vital technique in maintaining the condition of perplexity in the reader.

Significantly, Coetzee not only cautions his readers about the elusive nature of meaning within the literary text, but also consistently highlights its inherently constructed nature. In emphasising the metafictive qualities of his work, Coetzee aims at displaying the constructed nature of the systems that underpin and shape beliefs, thereby destabilising all attempts at totalising interpretation.

As Patricia Waugh rightly contends in her seminal book *Metafiction* [1984], "Such novels supposedly expose the way in which these social practices are constructed through the language of oppressive ideologies, by refusing to allow the reader the role of passive consumer or any means of arriving at a 'total' interpretation of the text" (13).

With regard to 'making sense', being rational is a quality that Coetzee approaches with suspicion. It is because the search for a meaningful and

reasonable framework removes the rationale and ground for interrogating the matter further. Instead, Coetzee's fiction sets out to explore the relationship between the reader and the literary work by emphasising and foregrounding the necessary distance between the reader and the work that needs to be preserved. In disregarding that distance, the reader attempts to get closer to the text in order to empathise with the character, with the intention in so doing of grasping the work through a comfortable affective relation.

However, in Levinasian terms, this movement can be read as a consequence of the mindless attitude that operates to reduce everything to the same.

In the first chapter, Coetzee's challenging novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), was analysed with regards to the ambiguities of its genre and form.

As a literary work, the form of this novel has received particular attention for it "requires, and rewards, at least a second reading, but even then its import remains ambiguous, partly because of the way it mixes and transgresses generic conventions" (Lodge). The novel's hybridity resists reduction to any of the conventional sub-genres of the novel, its form discloses its resistance to narrative structure, and the claims and counter claims asserted in each chapter never assume through Hegelian resolution or synthesis any definite conclusions.

In this construction, the representation of the main character Elizabeth Costello is purposely not achieved. It is a notable fact that Costello's undefined position as a character has been assessed as another kind of destabilisation of deterministic and totalitarian structures. Similarly,

the novel's non-specific genre challenges deterministic frameworks and evades conclusive assertions. Through its eight lessons, the work unveils the constricting and constrained essence of structures in a broader sense.

Essentially, upon closer examination, the case under scrutiny pertains to the precarious situation of unquestioningly accepting the absolute truth propagated by established structures. In this connection, similar to Levinas's idea about the Other calling the self to responsibility, it has been put forward that the work is calling the reader to responsibility by not revealing and surrendering itself readily to conventional expectations.

Coetzee's *oeuvre* works to remind us of the limiting structure of conventional shapes and presents the uncertain and ambiguous state of narration as an alternative mode to issue a challenge to prevailing discourses and to break up regularities by escaping their limitations. Once again, the primary focus is on how the defiance of formal and generic expectations prompts the reader to confront their own responsibility toward the work. This pertains to its distinctiveness and uniqueness. It has been posited that the work and its creator are intertwined, as literary language encourages contemplation beyond structural confines and facilitates the recognition of diverse perspectives on life.

Evidently, Coetzee's literary texts represent the unavailability and irreducibility of the Other as a text and Coetzee's own text denies a definitive glossary through its resistance to the attribution of a specific frame of reference. The next chapter on *Disgrace* (1999), considered Coetzee's controversial film-adapted and Booker prize awarded novel. The case highlighted in *Disgrace* is again that of responsibility for the Other and

the concept of "pardon" (283) in Levinas's work *Totality and Infinity*.

First and foremost, a commonly misunderstood aspect is that the self often believes itself to be free and subsequently acts based on this perception. However, as put forward by Levinas, the self is a hostage of the Other and "to welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom" (*Totality and Infinity* 85). The prominent discussion has been that "The welcoming of the Other is ipso facto the consciousness of my own injustice—the shame that freedom feels for itself" (86).

In *Disgrace,* Lurie's inability to experience shame for his freedom highlights the enduring dominance of the self, which concentrates power in Lurie's identity as male, white, and privileged. Significantly, this interpretive framework has been provided in order to explore the problematic and far-reaching consequences of not feeling shame for the freedom which has been abused in Lurie's case.

In light of Levinas's approach, it has been asserted that Coetzee refrains from speaking for the Other, aiming to make space for the unrepresented and overlooked in his novels. This is a principal characteristic fundamental to his works. Consequently, the Other is granted the agency to either share or withhold their story, resisting the self's—in this instance, Lurie's—attempts at sense-making. This approach aligns with Levinas's perspective, as he notes, "A face has a meaning not by virtue of the relationships in which it is found, but out of itself; that is what *expression* is." ("Freedom and Command" 20).

Drawing from Levinas's concept of pardon, I contend that Coetzee seeks to pave a path to the infinite by challenging the attitudes of the past, as

exemplified by characters like Lucy's ancestors and Lurie. More specifically, Lucy represents a break from the entrenched attitudes towards the Other, as demonstrated by her defiance of Lurie for "pardon acts upon the past, somehow repeats the event, purifying it... pardon conserves the past pardoned in the purified present" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 283).

My argument posits that fostering a change in attitude towards the Other can serve as a signpost for the future—symbolizing hope, rupture, and infinity. Lucy exemplifies this by transcending not only the confines of the past and history but also the predetermined structures embodied by figures like Lurie and her ancestors.

The third chapter, on Coetzee's film adapted (2019) novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) focussed on ways in which Coetzee uses the novel to analyse the relation between body, torture and language. The thesis argues that this novel is deeply concerned with the body as a battleground where power is exerted, leading to the mental and physical torture of an individual. This deprivation robs the individual of their voice or, in Levinasian terms, their "*expression*" (*Totality and Infinity* 51; italics in original).

Coetzee, by focussing on the act of torture, explores themes that push the boundaries of morality, religion and law. In *Waiting for the Barbarians,* Coetzee addresses these aspects of torture and totalizing discourse, and, drawing upon Levinasian thought, he interrogates the arbitrary functioning of both. Furthermore, what is revealed, as Foucault has also claimed, is how torture "made the body of the condemned man the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied, the anchoring point for a

manifestation of power, an opportunity of affirming the dissymmetry of forces" (*Discipline and Punish* 55).

Coetzee foregrounds the "dissymmetry of forces" and points out the missing ethical aspect by means of the unilateral communication between the magistrate and girl. In the novel, the relationship between the magistrate and the girl is constrained, with the voices and language of the girl and the prisoners effectively silenced due to the dominant discourse employed by both the magistrate and the empire.

The pivotal aspect of Levinas's ethics is the preservation of distance between the self and the Other. This relationship is fundamentally rooted in the concept of asymmetry, which establishes that distance. In this respect, for truth to come to being, this asymmetry has to be assured as "Truth…does not undo 'distance,' does not result in the union of the knower and the known, does not issue in totality" (*Totality and Infinity* 60).

Significantly, Coetzee illuminates the operations of torture and totalizing discourse, highlighting the arbitrariness of both. He poignantly reveals that totalizing discourse can be as destructive to language and as painful as torture itself.

In this context, one could argue that Coetzee seeks to investigate the relationship between body and language, the ethical dimensions of the interaction between the self and the Other, and the notion of freedom.

The subsequent chapter explores *Slow Man* (2005), focusing on the complex issues surrounding the experience and perception of time. By problematizing time, it has been argued that the title *Slow Man* refers to a

deeper trajectory, examining the relation of Paul to the grand narratives of modernity that are informed by the idea of the original, the great hero, and absolute truth.

The outstanding aspect with regards to time is the main character's incapacity for adopting to the 'new,' meaning the future, defined by Levinas as "the emergence of the always new, of the unequal" (*Time and the Other* 132). Ostensibly, his adherence to the grand narratives of the past and his complacent attitude towards time stem from his inability to envision the "radically new and unforeseeable" future (Bergson 18). However, it seems crucial to point out that the way the future has been discussed in this novel reveals the common perspective it shares with Levinas's understanding as, for Levinas too, "The other is the future" (*Time and the Other* 77).

Remarkably, the absence of an ultimate frame and an absolute foundation opens up the possibility of new vistas for conceiving the future, which also represents the Other. For it is shown how it is finally not viable for a character (or an individual) to come up with any framework for understanding or conceptualization or representation of the future. In *Slow Man*, what is foregrounded instead is the idea of the permanent potential of change, rather than the drive to establish a static selfhood.

Quite prominently, by making use of Levinas's concept of time (founded on Bergons's understanding), it can be asserted that the future, like the Other, is unequal and "is unceasing creation" (Bergson 17). Engaging with Levinas's assertion that "...the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us" (*Time and the Other* 77), it is argued that Coetzee challenges the

conventional perception of time as a measurable entity. Instead, the mechanism at play in *Slow Man* parallels the concept of 'being late for a rendezvous with the Other'. This process underpins the relationship between the signifier and signified, exemplifying the perpetual delay and deferral of meaning.

Consequently, the persistent endeavour to construct novel absolute truths in the pursuit of solidifying one's sense of self is inherently destined for failure. This is predicated on the notion that the feasibility of proffering a comprehensive interpretation capable of elucidating the totality of the pervading mystery remains highly questionable.

Essentially, in this sense, in a Levinasian manner, *Slow Man* presents the reader with the situation of the unlikelihood of an essential meaning illuminating the larger picture, but at the same time highlights the unceasingly changing frame of meanings disabling those previously held or asserted. It follows that the title *Slow Man* refers to a state of always being late for the rendezvous with the absolute meaning, echoing what Levinas clearly states when he avers how "…consciousness is always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor" ("Language and Proximity" 119).

In this regard, it is notable that reading a narrative functions "though it seems like the present, because it is now to us, it is tensed as the past, in what the French call the preterite, a tense otherwise known as the past perfect or the past historic" (Currie 5). That is, the reader, in a similar way, is always 'late for the rendezvous with' the character in the narrative as what appears to be the present for the reader is in fact the past: in other words, "it is somebody else's present related to us in the past tense" (Currie 5).

Hence, the argument posits that the nonsynchronous flow of the character's timeline and the reader's perception ensures that the reader is 'always late for the rendezvous' with the character. Strikingly, the concept of time and the case of being slow discussed in this chapter, serve to expose the workings of enclosed and totalizing perspectives, which interrupt the act of moving beyond the existing paradigm. In this context, slowness—identified as a defining characteristic of the individual—appears to be not just an intrinsic quality, but also a crucial element that allows for the emergence of other meanings, whether they relate to the promise of the future or to a character in a narrative who exists ahead of the reader's time.

In the final chapter, which focuses on *Dusklands* (1974), Coetzee is argued to use this novel—comprising two separate stories, 'The Vietnam Project' and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'—to critique rationalism, particularly the foundational mechanisms of ontology. Here the major literary device employed is irony. The characters Eugene Dawn from 'The Vietnam Project' and Jacobus Coetzee from 'The Narrative of Jacobus' Coetzee exemplify the mind set of the state and empire.

It has been put forward that Coetzee effectively places rationalism and rational thinking at issue by displaying the self-debunking quality of its thinking systems. Relevant to the entirety of Coetzee's oeuvre, the argument presented in this novel critically examines how the foundational philosophy of Western thought is rooted in an ontology that, as a primary philosophy, embodies a philosophy of power (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 46).

The chapter seeks to demonstrate how both characters, Eugene and

Jacobus, can be seen to have paranoiac and schizophrenic features, a perception that turns both stories into more interesting and intriguing accounts as it reengages the idea of unreliable narration to focus on the probability that the stories are taking place in their minds rather than being true accounts of what has taken place.

The self-debunking nature of the examined thinking systems becomes apparent when they attempt to validate their actions with 'reasonable' justifications. This alludes to instances where control over the concept of "controlled hallucination" is lost. Both characters, shaped by this same system, find themselves rendered obsolete as the system inevitably turns against itself.

Evidently, the epistemological underpinnings of Western thought and its approach to subjects necessitate a re-evaluation, pivoting towards a more ethically-informed perspective. This theme of ethics and the ethical displacing of ontology is evident in Levinas's challenging assertion that, "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (*Totality and Infinity* 304).

Beyond this recognition, it is contended that the constructs of uncertainty and darkness have been strategically employed as instruments to break away from the totalising gaze of history, the familiar, and the self. As this thesis has argued throughout, Coetzee is attempting to reshape the notions of uncertainty and darkness by focusing on their capacity to preserve and make room for the Other.

Moreover, it is claimed here that Coetzee has managed to challenge the deep-seated positive perception of certainty and bringing everything to light by highlighting the disregarded aspect that is the way in which such predictive

certainty begets destructive and aggressive consequences. More suggestively, the inspiring underlying thought with regards to uncertainty and darkness is as follows: "The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place, we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery" (Levinas, *Time and the Other* 75). The acceptance of mystery, connoting uncertainty and darkness, becomes a necessary and fundamental means of constituting the relationship with the Other.

This study has sought to explore the self-Other relationship in Coetzee's oeuvre by addressing subjects on ethics deriving from Levinas's thinking. In the analysis of Coetzee's fiction, it has been observed that the most remarkable feature is the textual resistance to intelligibility.

By embracing the Levinasian perspective of the Other, as well as the concepts of uncertainty and ambiguity, Coetzee's literary work is asserted to transcend conventional fictional and cognitive paradigms. In doing so, it exposes the hypocrisies and limitations inherent in dominant systems of thought. This stance is rooted in Levinas's assertion that 'saying' " does not consist in giving signs…in translating thoughts into words and consequently in having been first *for-oneself* and *at home with oneself*" (*Otherwise than Being* 48; italics in original). Yet, this perspective holds true when the perception as a 'controlled hallucination', —a term that has become prominent in recent cognitive science studies—is acknowledged, significantly suggesting that it paves the way to understanding the inaccessibility of the external world in its

true form.

In this connection, the concepts of being responsible as a writer and as a reader as part of the reader-text relationship have been examined with respect to how to deal with or accommodate alterity. It has been argued that neither the character nor the literary work as Other in a Levinasian sense are within the scope of the reader's grasp.

Coetzee's ongoing—and sometimes criticized—preference for metafictional modes of writing that generate uncertainty and ambiguity as modes of resistance to totalisation, functions by laying bare the constructed nature of any narrativized account. From this perspective too, it has been asserted that the literary work offers more and beyond what language can capture, as in the idea that "Infinity is not the 'object' of a cognition (which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates), but is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 62; italics in original).

The language of Coetzee's fictions similarly *conceives meanings* beyond what mere linguistic can *represent*. In this sense, Coetzee's work, inevitably, by means of its impenetrable ambiguities and its recursive nature, manages to elude and unsettle our way of thinking, leaving the reader frustrated, and rendering dominant structures obsolete. Differently put, there is a strong sense that Coetzee's work says multiple things without saying one thing, but demanding infinite responsibility from the reader.

Through this, the ethical relation enacting infinity and an opening to the

future—that is the Other in a Levinasian sense—takes shape as a way of relating to reality by way of both feeding the sense of uncertainty and suspending absolute and definitive judgements.

In this context, one could argue that this ethical relation functions like a "controlled hallucination," allowing us to perceive reality in a manner that is filtered through our ethical commitments and open to ongoing reinterpretation. Ultimately, within this formulation, the relationship between the self and the Other may have the potentiality to transcend the enclosed, self-justifying and entrenched structures it has been desperately paralyzed by for so long.

To conclude, I subscribe here to Gerhard Richter's—one of the most notable artists of our time—view on art, in accordance with my argument in this dissertation that:

> Theory has nothing to do with a work of art. Pictures which are interpretable, and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures. A picture presents itself as the Unmanageable, the Illogical, the Meaningless. It demonstrates the endless multiplicity of aspects; it takes away our certainty, because it deprives a thing of its meaning and its name. It shows us the thing in all the manifold significance and infinite variety that preclude the emergence of any single meaning and view. (32/33)

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