BYSTANDER NARRATIVES: THE FICTION OF J.M. COETZEE
AND THE HOLOCAUST

by

Craig Mitchell Smith

A thesis submitted to the Department of English
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(September, 2011)

Copyright ©Craig Mitchell Smith, 2011
Abstract

J.M. Coetzee’s novels are suffused with a pervasive, though often oblique, Holocaust awareness. Direct references to the event and to the historical era to which it belongs, subtle stylistic and thematic echoes of Holocaust writing, and the recurrent mobilization of Holocaust imagery in Coetzee’s novels all contribute to suggest the significance of the event to the author’s work and thought. Providing Coetzee with a lens through which to view the contemporary situation, both local and global, the Holocaust offers Coetzee a means by which difficult and complex questions of ethics and historiographical truth may be approached. Above all, the Holocaust and its representation contribute to Coetzee’s exploration of the dilemmas of translating the traumatic lived experience of atrocity – including, but not limited to, life in apartheid South Africa – into narrative form. Taken as a whole, Coetzee’s oeuvre initially anticipates and later responds to, in characteristically oblique fashion, the narrative project(s) facing post-apartheid South Africa as the newly-democratic nation sought to make sense of its past through a variety of means, the most important of which was the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Implicitly challenging the TRC’s findings as well as its narrative assumptions, the Coetzean oeuvre accordingly invites being read as offering a continuous and evolving counter-narrative to the TRC and its construction of a narrative of the apartheid past for the post-apartheid nation. In utilizing the Holocaust, its representations, and the reception thereof to frame his response to apartheid, Coetzee implicates both in a critique of the Western model of modernity, suggesting, in the process, the importance of reconfiguring modernity in a more ethical shape.
I would like to thank the English Department at Queen’s University, as well as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the School of Graduate Studies, for providing me with the opportunity to carry out this project.


A very heartfelt thank you must go out to my supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Jolly, whose support and guidance were invaluable to me as I worked on this dissertation. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Patrick Deane, for finding the time in his busy schedule to work with me on this project.

My friends and family are due many thanks for the support and encouragement that were occasionally necessary along the way. In particular, I would like to thank my aunt, Edith Smith, for many a long ride to and from the Halifax airport during the holidays. To my mother, Theresa Smith, I owe the deepest gratitude for instilling a love of reading in me at a young age and for the unflagging support she has given me over the years.

Finally, I would like to thank Heather for putting up with me. And for the occasional pie.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... iv
Chapter 1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
Chapter 2 After Atrocity: The Holocaust, Apartheid and the Historiographic Enterprise 41
Chapter 3 Conceptualizing Guilt After the Holocaust ................................................... 94
Chapter 4 Making Amends: Problems of Reconciliation ............................................... 137
Chapter 5 Coetzee and the Limits of Liberalism ........................................................... 193
Chapter 6 Conclusion ................................................................................................... 242
Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 255
Chapter 1

Introduction

In *The Lives of Animals* (1999), J.M. Coetzee gives voice to a most controversial position through Elizabeth Costello, protagonist of *The Lives of Animals* and of the later eponymous novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In both texts, Costello gives a public lecture at a fictional university, during the course of which she articulates a position she knows to be unpopular, even, some may say, obscene: she compares the contemporary treatment of nonhuman animals – forced to live their lives in cages, murdered by the millions in what she calls “factories of death” (53) – to the Nazi genocide enacted against Europe’s Jewish population. Costello pushes the boundaries of what can be spoken in public further when she asserts that the horrors that nonhuman animals face on a daily basis constitute “an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purposes of killing them” (21).

Through Costello’s striking claims, Coetzee acknowledges and draws upon the Holocaust’s immense rhetorical and emotional power, power that by the end of the twentieth century had, somewhat paradoxically, grown stronger rather than weaker as the event receded further into the past and was followed by subsequent atrocities brought to the attention of a world increasingly more interconnected by newer telecommunications media: the killing fields of Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, genocide in Rwanda. Costello’s assertion of a contentious hierarchy of atrocity in *The Lives of Animals* draws on the emotions attendant to the Holocaust to communicate the scale of the ethical crisis she wishes to address and to force her
audience to recognize it as crisis; indeed, without referencing the Holocaust, Coetzee implicitly suggests, Costello would be unable to represent the mechanized production of animal death as “a crime of stupefying proportions” (69). And yet, even as he has Costello mobilize the affective power of the Holocaust, Coetzee also signals his desire to think through the event in *The Lives of Animals*, to grapple with the meaning it has come to possess for a global audience, and to explore how the Holocaust’s status has implications for how other events are understood and evaluated, as an event that represents to many the worst crime in human history – the ultimate, incomparable expression of humanity’s capacity for cruelty.

The Holocaust’s legacy as an “event” that “is already a horizon which orients our time” (Eaglestone 12) is thus a prominent, if subtle, concern of Coetzee’s in *The Lives of Animals*. As Brett Ashley Kaplan notes, the “Holocaust and fascism embed in the physical and mental landscapes of our era” (1), and, in this regard, *The Lives of Animals* speaks to the Holocaust’s embeddedness. Costello’s discussion of the Poles in the vicinity of Treblinka who chose not to know about the genocide taking place nearby, for instance, is deeply indebted to a vein of post-Holocaust thought that has made the conceptual category of the “bystander” one of great significance in contemporary ethical thinking, and not only in the cloistered world of academia. The widespread conceptual currency that a term such as “bystander” possesses is attributable largely to the way in which the Holocaust is, as Kaplan has it, part of our mental landscape. Similarly, the taint of guilt Costello says still marks a generation of Germans – who “are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity” (20) – points to the Holocaust’s transformative role in the way we think about a number of traditional concepts, including guilt and evil. Costello states, “[w]e may not, all of us, believe in pollution, we may not believe in sin, but we do believe in their psychic correlates” (21). For that reason, Costello explains, “[i]t was and is inconceivable
that people who did not know (in that special sense) about the camps can be fully human” (21). As Costello’s address implicitly acknowledges, a reference to “the Holocaust” is more than a reference to the brute fact of genocide, to the gas chamber and the firing squads and mass graves; it also refers to a post-Holocaust sensibility in which Holocaust references carry attendant associations about human beings and the nature of our moral and ethical makeup.

If the ideas of sin and evil seem antiquated in a context (both South African and global) that David Lurie, the protagonist of Disgrace (1999), describes as “[p]ost-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” (32), it is the Holocaust, Costello suggests, that makes possible the secularization of the rhetoric of sin and evil. Indeed, where once Christianity and its teachings provided the West with an understanding of evil, the Holocaust has become the context that frames, and provides the terms for, considerations of evil in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The overt reference to Hannah Arendt, embedded in the name of the dean of the fictional college where Costello delivers her lectures, signals Coetzee’s awareness of the challenge that the Holocaust has posed to our thinking about the nature of evil. It was Arendt, of course, who (in)famously coined the phrase “the banality of evil” in her coverage of the Eichmann trial and, in doing so, went “counter to the tradition of Western thought, which saw evil in metaphysical terms as ultimate depravity, corruption, or sinfulness” (Benhabib 174). The allusion to Arendt and, implicitly, to the work for which she is, rightly or wrongly, most well-known positions The Lives of Animals and its author as inheritors of a tradition of post-Holocaust

---

1 See Richard Bernstein’s Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation, an exploration of the concept of evil in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy that Bernstein, significantly, frames as a post-Holocaust inquiry.

2 Cf. Young-Bruehl’s claim that “the banality of evil” is the “soundbite by which Hannah Arendt has become popularly known” (1).
thinking that continues to reject the metaphysical basis for assigning the causes of and responsibility for evil.

Striking though her position in *The Lives of Animals* is, Costello’s references to the Holocaust are relatively peripheral both to the main narrative of the text and to the text’s critical reception. Throughout the narrative, Costello concentrates primarily on the failure of Western philosophy to articulate a desirable ethics for interacting with nonhuman animals and on poetic representations of animals. Critics, for their part, have tended to focus on the way that the text contests the species barrier and, secondarily, on a range of other questions— the relationship between Coetzee and his creation, the “relationship between ethical and fictional discourses” (Attwell “Life and Times” 25) – that render the Holocaust itself marginal to the discussion. And yet, even though Costello keeps her overt Holocaust references to a minimum, and even though, proportionally, Costello spends significantly more time discussing the poets and the philosophers than she does the Holocaust, her comparison remains strangely central to *The Lives of Animals*. It is a comparison that is likely to stay with the reader, and importantly works to provide the narrative with a circular structure: Costello initially compares the meat industry to the Holocaust quite early in the narrative and, in her final conversation with her son, John, again likens the production of animal death to the Nazi genocide. “[E]very day,” Costello states, people “exhibit” and “offer” her “[f]ragments of corpses that they have bought for money” and it is “as if I were to visit friends, and make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, ‘Yes, it’s nice isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of’” (69). Beginning and ending *The Lives of Animals* with this highly contentious comparison, Coetzee renders it simultaneously, if paradoxically, peripheral yet central to the text.
It is my contention that the peripheral yet central position that the Holocaust occupies in *The Lives of Animals* applies equally to the Coetzean *oeuvre* as a whole. As such, this discussion of Coetzee’s writing positions itself within a nascent but growing body of criticism that is only now beginning to take stock of the importance of the Holocaust to Coetzee’s creative and critical imagination. I agree with Kaplan when he states that “Coetzee’s commentators have generally overlooked the Holocaust as a central, if often implicit theme in his work”3 and share his sense that Coetzee’s writing displays the author’s “career-long interest in the Holocaust” (145).

Kaplan and I part ways, however, when it comes to his argument that Coetzee “engages with the Holocaust to demonstrate subtly the workings of global complicity” (141). Though I agree that the Holocaust provides Coetzee with a vehicle that enables him to speak to global complicities of various kinds, this is only one piece in a much larger puzzle. It is my argument throughout the ensuing pages that the Holocaust, its representation, and the means by which it is known, popularly and academically, are important to Coetzee’s writing for a wide range of reasons, reasons that include but exceed the desire to demonstrate global complicities. What is undeniable, however, is that although Coetzee’s writing engages with the Holocaust most overtly in *The Lives of Animals*, there are signs of his efforts to grapple with the event and its meaning in a sustained and variegated manner scattered throughout his wider body of writing.

Beginning with Coetzee’s first published fiction, his interest in the Holocaust, specifically, and the Nazi era, generally, has been apparent. In *Dusklands* (1974), Eugene Dawn notes of the man who tries to steal his briefcase, “I would not mistake the face. I know it well:

---

3 Kaplan offers a number of explanations for the relative critical neglect of this aspect of Coetzee’s writing. In the first place, critics write from a postcolonial perspective, not a Jewish studies perspective. Secondly, “there are Holocaust references without a clear reason as to why the event figures so largely in Coetzee’s oeuvre.” Finally, “there is a resistance to seeing the deep connection between the European event and racism in apartheid-era South Africa” (146).
not that one, then the genre to which it belongs. It belongs in long-focus crowd photographs…in the Nuremberg films, scowling, low-browed, longing to be out of the light and back among the cool damp cell bricks” (47). Into a narrative centering on a disturbed propagandist working on a report meant to facilitate American imperial ambitions in Vietnam, Coetzee inserts an apparently incidental reference to the famous post-war trials of prominent Nazi war criminals. The seeming off-handedness of Dawn’s reference, however, is belied by Coetzee’s repeated references to the era in subsequent works. For instance, in Coetzee’s next published fictional offering, In the Heart of the Country (1977), Magda, the colonial spinster whose consciousness drives the narrative, recalls the Nazi era, like Dawn before her, when she refers to her father as an “epileptic Führer” (10), overtly and anachronistically calling Hitler to mind. In Life & Times of Michael K (1983), Colonel van Rensburg says of the novel’s protagonist that he looks “like someone out of Dachau” (146), while in Age of Iron (1990), Mrs. Curren represents her decision to remain in South Africa at a moment of intense internal conflict as a refusal to join the “company of tennis players and crooked bankers and generals with pocketfuls of diamonds departing to set up retreats in the quieter backwaters of the world” where they will “exchang[e] Sunday-afternoon visits with the sons and daughters of Barbie, Eichmann” (128).

Importantly, Curren’s passionate defense of her decision to remain in the country of her birth contains one of several references to the infamous Adolf Eichmann that can be found in Coetzee’s writing: in one of Coetzee’s most well-known essays, “Into the Dark Chamber” (1986),

---

4 The exact temporal setting of Coetzee’s novel is difficult to pin down. Susan Gallagher suggests that the novel “spans the period of approximately 1870 to 1960” (83). This estimation is not without its drawbacks, but even if we accept Gallagher’s assessment, the reference to Magda’s father as an epileptic Führer is noticeably out of place in a novel that studiously avoids reference to events that do not take place on the farm that provides the novel’s setting.

5 The references here are to Adolf Eichmann and Klaus Barbie, two Nazi war criminals who fled to South America to escape post-war justice.
Coetzee writes that “the Nuremburg trials and, later, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem presented us with a paradox in morality: a stupefying disproportion between the pigmy stature of the men on trial and the enormity of the crimes they had committed” (364); while in the genre-bending *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the writer-protagonist, J.C., brings up Eichmann in the context of his discussion of the “intuitive appeal of ordered-set thinking” evident in Eichmann’s Israeli judges’ attempts “to produce a sentence harsher (“worse”) than death to pronounce upon [him]” (206). Seemingly, then, an important feature of Coetzee’s wider Holocaust-related concerns, the figure of Adolf Eichmann is one to which Coetzee repeatedly returns as Eichmann, and, implicitly, his most important commentator, Arendt, provide the author with a particularly disturbing challenge to be worked through in his writing.

At a certain point, the ubiquitousness of Coetzee’s Holocaust references becomes apparent to readers attentive to them. In *Disgrace*, the protagonist, David Lurie, replicates, in an understated way, Costello’s Holocaust comparison when he conceives of Bev Shaw’s euthanizing of the dogs in her care as a form of “Lösung” (142); Lurie’s self-conscious recourse to the German language – “always to hand with an appropriately blank abstraction” (142) – to provide an adequate euphemism for what transpires in Shaw’s clinic quite deliberately recalls the Nazis’ use of the term “Endlösung” to mask the brutal reality of the so-called “Final Solution.” To an even greater degree than is the case with *Disgrace*, the references to the Holocaust in *Elizabeth*

---

6 Interestingly, Coetzee himself uses the very word – “stupefying” – that Costello uses in her final conversation with John in *The Lives of Animals*. It would be stretching the point to suggest that this shared word choice can be used to identify Coetzee with his creation; nevertheless, the use of the word stupefying by both author and character suggests, at the very least, a shared sensibility vis a vis the fact of suffering. In an interview printed in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee articulates something of this sensibility when he responds to David Attwell with the following: “Let me add entirely parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world and not only human suffering” (248). In this regard, Coetzee’s self-analysis brings him very close indeed to Costello, whose statement “I no longer know where I am” (*Lives* 69) suggests her experiencing of something akin to Coetzee’s “being-overwhelmed” by the fact of suffering (*Doubling* 248)
Costello are particularly prevalent. Containing the entirety of *The Lives of Animals* as its third and fourth “Lessons,” the text also references the Nazi era in Lesson Six, “The Problem of Evil,” via Costello’s talk on Paul West’s novel about the Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler and, especially, in the text’s eighth and final lesson, “At the Gate.” In this final lesson, Costello finds herself in an overtly literary afterlife, one that she thinks of as coming “straight out of Kafka,” even if it is Kafka “reduced and flattened to a parody” (209). International literary modernism thus provides one set of terms through which Costello attempts to understand her situation, but Costello also employs an alternative frame of reference when conceiving of the dormitory that houses her: “She could be in any of the gulags…She could be in any of the camps of the Third Reich” (197). The Holocaust continues to frame Costello’s experience when, considering the

---

7 Another reference to Stauffenberg can be found in the later *Diary of A Bad Year*. In the essay, “On National Shame,” the writer-protagonist J.C. wonders if there has “perhaps already been a Stauffenberg plot” in the United States directed against key figures in the Bush administration (41).

8 There is something to be said for Coetzee’s abiding interest in (Soviet/Stalinist) Russia. Costello’s implicit likening of the gulags and the concentration camps – itself a deeply problematic comparison, as the German intellectual debate of the 1980s that came to be known as the Historikerstreit showed – speaks to Coetzee’s interest in the roughly contemporaneous Hitler and Stalin eras in Germany and Russia, respectively. Indeed, as Costello’s earlier comparison of Hitler to “Koba the Bear” – a nickname for Stalin – who is “[Hitler’s] older brother and mentor, by any measure more murderous, more vile, more appalling to the soul, [but who] has almost dwindled away” would suggest (*Elizabeth Costello* 159), Coetzee’s writing displays the author’s determination to remember an element of that era that has, over time and as the Holocaust has come more and more to be a determinant feature in twentieth-century history, become obscured.

Coetzee’s fascination with Russia takes many forms in his fictional and critical writing. In *Boyhood* (1997), for example, Coetzee describes young John’s “[p]refering the Russians to the Americans” and his “loyalty to the Red Star” which “sets him absolutely apart” (26). Though Coetzee is quick to undermine the potential ideological implications of this confession, undercutting his younger self’s Marxist credentials by explaining that young John prefers the Russians “because he likes the letter r, particularly the capital R, the strongest of all the letters” (27), the fact remains that such an exercise in autobiographical representation highlights the extent to which mid-century Russia holds a fascination for the adult author. Essays collected in *Giving Offense* (1996) – “Osip Mandelstam and the Stalin Ode,” “Censorship and Polemic: Solzhenitsyn,” and “Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor” – all demonstrate Coetzee’s abiding interest in Soviet Russia and the Soviet Bloc, as does his piece on “The Essays of Joseph Brodsky” in *Stranger Shores* (2002). Of course, beyond his interest in the Stalinist period of Russian history, Coetzee’s admiration for the work of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is also evident: both figure prominently in Coetzee’s critical writing and Dostoevsky even appears as the protagonist of Coetzee’s *Master of Petersburg* (1994).
woman who admits her to the dormitory, she “hesitates to call her the Kapo just yet” (198). Though Costello’s hesitation refuses complete identification between the story’s setting and the world of the Holocaust, Costello’s reference to a familiar and complex figure from a range of Holocaust testimonies and fictions reinforces the importance of the Holocaust to his literary imagination.

The Holocaust can be seen to assume a position of similar importance in Coetzee’s non-fictional output as well, for, as Kaplan notes, Coetzee’s contributions to the *New York Review of Books* focus “often on Jewish and/or Holocaust authors” (142). Philip Roth, whose *The Plot Against America* Coetzee discusses in an essay initially printed in *The New York Review of Books* and later collected in *Inner Workings*, is one such contemporary author whose importance to Coetzee is undeniable: even more significantly, perhaps, though this element of Roth’s novel is not a key feature of Coetzee’s discussion, Roth’s confabulation of an imaginary childhood in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt lost the 1940 presidential election to the anti-Semitic isolationist Charles Lindbergh on the eve of America’s entry into the Second World War imaginatively recreates an America in which the first steps on the “twisted road” to an American Auschwitz are possibly taken. As Coetzee’s choice of Roth’s novel to review might suggest, then, if only implicitly, it is not just the American author’s Jewishness that is significant, but also his interest in the Holocaust as an event of continuing, even increasing, importance in the

---

9 The Kapo was one of the denizens of Primo Levi’s “grey zone,” a term Levi used to describe the moral ambiguity of life in the camps.
10 The term “twisted road” comes from a debate in Holocaust historiography between the intentionalists, who believe that the Holocaust was the result of deliberate planning on Hitler’s part, and the functionalists, proponents of the “twisted road” theory, who argue, instead, that the Holocaust resulted from a series of smaller scale plans that arose in the face of particular situations as they developed during the changing course of the twelve year history of the Third Reich. If *The Plot Against America* conjectures that, contrary to what many Americans would like to believe, wartime America was a place where the Holocaust, or something like it, might have happened, it does not do so by suggesting that such was the goal or the plan of prominent American anti-Semites.
consciousness of America’s Jewish population. That Roth’s novel also powerfully challenges the comforting idea that mid-century America could never have been the site of something resembling the Holocaust is also significant given Coetzee’s reluctance to accept the notion of German exceptionalism. If the Holocaust looms large in Coetzee’s fiction, and it does, it is not because the event represents to the author an incomparable atrocity, but rather, because of the parallels it has with other events and the avenues for understanding that it therefore offers.

The signs of Coetzee’s Holocaust interests are not restricted to the overt references to the event that can be detected throughout Coetzee’s writing, but instead manifest themselves to an even greater degree in both the style and content of Coetzee’s writing. For instance, Kaplan observes that fire is “a central theme for Coetzee” (151); given the remarkable consistency with which Holocaust references appear in Coetzee’s writing, the fire imagery Coetzee frequently employs is replete with connotations of the Holocaust. The recollection of the ovens used to incinerate the corpses of murdered Jews implicit in Coetzee’s fire imagery demonstrates the degree to which Coetzeean landscapes, as Kaplan has it, are spaces “overlaid with Holocaust postmemory” (144).\(^{11}\) The literary references – Dantean, Kafkaesque – that are also part of Coetzee’s landscapes, which might otherwise suggest the metaphysicality of Coetzee’s concerns, accrues physicality precisely through this act of overlaying them with Holocaust postmemory.

Holocaust imagery in Coetzee’s fictions extends beyond the author’s use of fire imagery. It is arguably in Coetzee’s third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), that the imaginative importance of the Holocaust – as an historical event carrying with it a stock of deeply resonant images – becomes clearer. In the novel, the magistrate of an unidentifiable outpost on the

---

\(^{11}\) Kaplan offers an explanation of postmemory, citing Marianne Hirsch’s description of “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experience of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5).
outskirts of a fictional Empire imagines a violent solution to the problem of the prisoners who have been placed in his care by Colonel Joll:

It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were eliminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert…to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in…and, leaving them buried there forever and ever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions. (24)

While the magistrate’s words do not evoke the Holocaust exclusively, the mass grave he envisions the prisoners digging for themselves is clearly reminiscent of the mass graves that Eastern European Jews were forced to dig for themselves by the Einsatzgruppen in the early years of the war. Indeed, the imagery of a group of prisoners digging their own grave is a constitutive element of Holocaust postmemory that has helped define the event for many in the decades that have followed.

Significantly, it is an image that recurs in Life & Times of Michael K, where, in a rare representation of K’s thoughts, Coetzee depicts him reflecting on his time in Jakkalsdrif, a labour camp with Holocaustal overtones\(^\text{12}\) to which he is sent for a while: “if they really wanted to forget us forever, they would have to give us picks and spades and command us to dig; then, when we had exhausted ourselves digging, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down” (94). In what cannot but be seen as a significant pattern, the (now familiar) imagery of the

\(^{12}\) Significantly, in this novel, the South African landscape of the novel is littered with camps of various kinds. As was the case with the imagery of the mass grave Coetzee employs, the Holocaust connotations are not the only connotations available as there is an ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the camps. For Susan Gallagher, Jakkalsdrif “ironically resembles the notorious British-run concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War” and so undercuts Afrikaner narratives concerning the suffering of Afrikaner women and children by likening K’s suffering to theirs (154). Conversely, Dominic Head writes that “[t]he Jakkalsdrif labour camp is obviously Foucauldian, an anti-nomadic device to harness the utility of a homeless multiplicity” (J.M. Coetzee 103). Gallagher and Head are both persuasive, but each misses the more obvious point: the language of “the camps” is typically employed in relation to Nazi concentration camps. In conjunction with other elements of Life & Times of Michael K that reference the Holocaust, the Holocaust implications are inescapable.
mass grave appears for a third time in *Age of Iron*: Mrs. Curren, the dying protagonist whose letter to her absent daughter comprises the entirety of the text, “think[s] of the prisoners standing on the brink of the trench into which their bodies will tumble. They plead with the firing squad, they weep, they joke, they offer bribes, they offer everything they possess…The soldiers laugh. For they will take it all anyway, and the gold from their teeth too” (26). While the immediate context for Curren’s thoughts is her sense that she must face the truth of her own impending death, the language she employs clearly calls the Holocaust to mind, particularly in light of Coetzee’s previous uses of similar language and imagery.

The Holocaust imagery in *Life & Times of Michael K* doesn’t end with K’s residence in a labour camp or his imagining of a mass grave. It extends to include yet another important Holocaust image when the medical officer, whose consciousness drives the novel’s second section, reflects on the camp’s newest arrivals: “All the time we were playing games here, and spending time with girlfriends, and philosophizing about life and death and history, these men waited in cattle trucks parked in sidings under the November sun” (159). A prominent feature of many Holocaust testimonies, the cattle cars used to transport Jewish prisoners to the camps is etched in our minds as an integral part of the Holocaust. As a novel which combines the imagery of camps, mass graves, and cattle trucks, *Life & Times of Michael* contains perhaps more Holocaust imagery than any of Coetzee’s other novels. Published in 1983 and set in South Africa’s near future, it may be the first of Coetzee’s novels to suggest, directly, that the South African situation is comparable to the Holocaust; or, if such an assertion goes too far, that it is possible to imagine a South Africa wherein the horrors of the Nazi camps might be replicated, or even, might be in the process of being replicated.
Arguably, the Holocaust operates as a ghostly presence – an unspoken subtext – underlying Coetzee’s novels in other, subtler ways as well. *Dusklands*, a novel that, in David Attwell’s terms, engages in a “revolt against rationality” (“‘Labyrinth of my History’” 30), takes deliberate aim at the Cartesian Self. Insofar as the text’s first section demonstrates that the hyper-rational mind is a psychotic mind, it not only challenges the division between rational and irrational that is constitutive of post-Enlightenment modernity but also partakes of a twentieth-century concern to re-evaluate and challenge human rationality and the legacy of its often uncritical elevation. As such, the text implicitly recalls the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, who, in their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, argued that “reason has become irrational precisely because of its attempts to expel every non-rational moment from itself” (Jarvis 13-14). At the same time it also anticipates the work of later inheritors of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s thought, such as Zygmunt Bauman, for whom the Holocaust was not a departure from centuries of the development of modern rationality, but its culmination: the Holocaust, according to Bauman “was a characteristically modern phenomenon that cannot be understood out of the context of cultural tendencies and technical achievements of modernity” (xii).

A similar understanding of (Western) modernity arguably underwrites *Dusklands*. Where Bauman argues that “the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic forms of institutionalization…made Holocaust-style solutions not only possible, but eminently ‘reasonable’” (18), Coetzee demonstrates the implication of the “spirit of instrumental rationality” in a larger historical narrative of Western modernity that takes as its focus centuries of Euro-American imperialism ranging from the eighteenth century to the present, which also implicitly includes the Holocaust. Indeed, in *Dusklands* Coetzee is concerned to indict the modern Western privileging of (a particular form of) reason on a number of grounds simultaneously. As a
“military specialist who made definite contributions to the science of warfare” (45), Dawn asserts that “the problem of victory is technical” (28). It is in this conception of the encounter with the Vietnamese Other as a technical problem to be solved by technical means, including the “defoliation of crops and jungle” and “aleatoric shelling” (29), that Dawn reveals himself to be a figure of rationalism, which, according to Val Plumwood, should not be “mistaken for reason” but, rather, “is a cult of reason that elevates to extreme supremacy a particular narrow form of reason and correspondingly devalues the contrasted and reduced sphere of nature” (4). Through Dawn’s acknowledgement that “[h]ad [he] lived two hundred years ago [he] would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization” (31–2), the narrative lays the groundwork for seeing him as a twentieth-century incarnation of Jacobus Coetzee, the eighteenth-century frontiersman in South Africa whose narrative comprises the second part of Dusklands. In visiting vengeance on the Namaqua, Jacobus similarly reveals his own rationalism, that “arrogant and insensitive form of [reason]” that exhibits a “monological logic [that] leads to denials of dependency on the Other in the name of a hyperbolic autonomacy” (Plumwood 5, 4). Dawn’s involvement as a technician of war in a conflict whose casualties include humans and the wider natural environment of which they are a part, combined with his representation as a modern version of the colonial adventurer, confirms Horkheimer and Adorno’s point in Dialectic of Enlightenment that “all rationality to date has been entangled in some way with social domination and the domination of nature” (Jarvis 24). In Dusklands, then, Coetzee suggests that colonialism, environmental devastation brought about by the reduction of the natural world – including nonhuman animals – to a condition of devalued Otherness, and the Holocaust are all part of the same (hi)story of Western modernity.
What becomes apparent, then, from the outset of Coetzee’s writing career, is a complicated and ambivalent understanding of the Holocaust as an historical event that offers Coetzee a shorthand signifier around which to orient the larger historical processes with which he is concerned, while his writing simultaneously, consistently and profoundly repudiates notions of Holocaust exceptionality. If, as Wayne Klein puts it, the orthodox understanding of the Holocaust denies the implication of the wider Western tradition in the Holocaust, in that governments and historians (not to mention the wider Western populace) tend to adopt a Manichean view in which Nazism is “an evil completely external to the political, economic and ideological traditions of the West” (71), Coetzee’s writing belongs to a tradition of thinking about the event that refuses to view the event as a German, rather than a Western, problem or as a break from, rather than a continuation of, Western history.

Aspects of Coetzee’s writing that have tended to be attributed to his literary precursors can be re-read in light of the particular version of a post-Holocaust sensibility that runs throughout his fictions. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and “At the Gate,” for instance, the emphasis on the bureaucratic agents of empire and on the bureaucratic machinery of governance, even in what appears to be the afterlife, is unquestionably Kafkaesque. Such an emphasis, however, is also resonant with the Holocaust as it is conceived in the popular and literary imagination. Colonel Joll, the magistrate’s antagonist and rival in *Waiting for the Barbarians* whose particular form of brutality is made possible by the bureaucratization of violence within the Empire he serves, is a member of the Third Bureau, a special police force serving the Empire with extra-legal powers reminiscent of the Gestapo and whose name is evocative of both the Third Reich and apartheid South Africa’s infamous Bureau of State Security (BOSS). Though Joll and the Empire he serves find their literary precursors in the writing of
Kafka, concepts such as the bureaucratization of violence can be said to have become widely meaningful only after the Holocaust, with the emergence of a notion of the desk-killer and the increasing awareness of the existence of a secretive police force operating behind the scenes in many nations including Coetzee’s native South Africa.

The Holocaust arguably haunts the edges of many of Coetzee’s novels, even those in which Holocaust resonances might not be expected. For Kaplan, a novel like Foe (1986), whose eighteenth-century setting, overtly metafictional style and content, thematic obsession with authorship, and paradigmatically postcolonial concern to write back to a canonical European text – in this case, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe – could hardly be more removed from the Holocaust and yet, Kaplan argues, it relates quite closely to a set of concerns central to the

Holocaust. Foe, Kaplan writes,

would seem at first glance far from the Nazi killing fields, [but] it in fact offers a series of meditations on the imperial project, including the means of subjugation, the impossibility of conveying trauma, the precarious nature of witnessing, and the interrelations between human and animal central to Coetzee’s approach to the Holocaust specifically and genocide generally. (161)

Foe thus “obliquely evokes the Holocaust” (Kaplan 145), in a manner I suggest is characteristic of much of Coetzee’s writing.

Slow Man (2005), Coetzee’s first “Australian” novel, which is, like Foe and The Master of Petersburg (1994) before it, a meditation on authorship, also makes oblique reference to the Holocaust: Marijana, protagonist Paul Rayment’s Croatian caretaker, makes reference to the shopkeeper who wants to prosecute her daughter for shoplifting as “some Jew” (167). Marijana’s identification of the shopkeeper as a Jew interested only in money is a clear manifestation of a centuries-old anti-Semitic stereotype. Describing her word choice as “a slip from my tongue” (168), Marijana’s off-handed remark speaks to the cultural framework that she believes she shares
with her employer who, with a last name that rhymes with the French word *vraiment*, similarly has ties to Europe and its anti-Semitic history. Marijana’s assumption of a shared sensibility leads her to believe, incorrectly, that Rayment will not object to her anti-Semitism; yet, it is this undesirable element of European history, transplanted outside of Europe, that indirectly points to genocide as its outcome.\(^1\) Though Rayment does not refer to the Holocaust in questioning what makes Marijana refer to the shopkeeper as a Jew, the discomfort he clearly feels with her anti-Semitism is haunted by his awareness of the genocide. A similar awareness underlies David Lurie’s conversation with Petrus in *Disgrace*, during the course of which Petrus, noting the expense of girl children, “rubs [his] thumb and forefinger together” (130). The narrative voice, focalizing through Lurie, records his reaction: “A long time since he saw that gesture. Used of Jews, in the old days: money-money-money, with the same meaningful cock of the head” (130). Lurie’s awareness of “that snippet of European tradition,” of which Petrus is “presumably…innocent” (130), combines with his later reference to the “*Lösung*” (142) that is expected of Bev Shaw to suffuse the text with an understated but undeniable Holocaust awareness. *Disgrace* is a novel that is in no way *about* the Holocaust, as *The Lives of Animals* is, but the shadow that the Holocaust casts over the novel serves to contextualize its primary thematic concerns and to suggest thematic and historical parallels.

---

\(^1\) Accounts of the Holocaust that posit a relatively simple causal relationship between traditional European (or German) anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, like Daniel J. Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, often meet with a great deal of skepticism from historians and sociologists; however, though simple causal explanations tend not to be completely compelling, the role of traditional anti-Semitism cannot be simply overlooked either. Moreover, simple causal explanations often don’t meet academic standards, but it would be a mistake simply to ignore the fact that they often enjoy popular success, as was the case with Goldhagen’s book. As Dominick LaCapra explains in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, the “fantastic popular success” of Goldhagen’s book puts professional historians, especially those who are experts on the Nazi genocide, in a “double bind” in that for them the work “is not worth serious scholarly attention” but has received favorable attention from some intellectuals who are “opinion makers” (115-16).
Indeed, insofar as one of *Disgrace*’s primary concerns has to do with the place of English in the “New” South Africa, the novel demonstrates the influence of post-Holocaust thinking about the implications of the event on language itself. Lurie, we are told, would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

Lurie’s ruminations on the English language continue when he later thinks of it as “tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can be relied on, and not even all of them” (129). As is so often the case with Coetzee’s writing, his literary precursors are detectable in Lurie’s thoughts concerning the English language’s shortcomings. For both Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, language itself is failing: all Beckett’s Molloy “know[s] is what the words know,” “icy words” with “icy meanings” that seem similarly to have lost their articulations and articulatedness (Beckett 31). Similarly, as Elizabeth Costello notes while discussing a story by Kafka in “Realism,” the first lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, a dilemma that Kafka’s writing confronts readers with concerns the fact that, for Kafka, “the word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems” (19). In the writing of the two authors who are arguably Coetzee’s most important precursors – though a case could certainly be made for Dostoevsky – a manifest depiction of a failing, decrepit language or an underlying assumption of a linguistic breakdown can be detected.¹⁴ And yet, despite the Beckettian and Kafkaesque parallels that present themselves, Coetzee, unlike his modernist precursors, makes a point that has less to do with language in

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, Coetzee concludes *Elizabeth Costello* with a “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon,” which refers intertextually, in complicated ways, to Hugo von Hoffmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon” (1902); Hoffmannsthal’s letter stands at the head of the early twentieth-century *Sprachkrise* – literally a crisis of language – that contextualizes what is an underlying, rather than manifest, sense of a language that is failing in Kafka’s writing.
general than with a specific language – English – in a specific context – post-apartheid South Africa.

By avoiding the universalism of his modernist forebears, Coetzee treats language in a manner that is consistent with the linguistic concerns of Holocaust writing. Speaking to the inability of English to capture the specific truth of South Africa, Coetzee has Lurie repeat a familiar refrain in Holocaust writing. In his testimonial account of his experiences in Auschwitz in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi addresses the failure of language directly:

> Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger’, we say ‘tiredness’, ‘fear’, ‘pain’, we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born: and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and the knowledge of the end drawing nearer. (123).

If Levi’s testimony is riven by a simultaneous urge to bear witness to his (and others’) experience of the camps and a profound skepticism about his ability to do so based on the limitations of the language on which he draws, Lurie’s doubt concerning the English language’s capacity to relate the truth of the apartheid experience echoes Levi’s. 15 Literary critic Lawrence Langer, speaking to a whole range of survivor accounts, explains that “access to the event (as well as distortion of it) is intimately allied to the language, the terminology, the very nuances of words that we use to give it substance”; in the end, though, “[v]ocabulary mocks the event, while the event mocks our vocabulary” (*Versions of Survival* 188, 9). As a language rigidified and unreliable in South

15 At a first glance, Levi, writing in 1947 at the tail end of the modernist era, seems closer to the modernist mode of thinking about language found in writers like Beckett and Kafka. Levi is unequivocal in asserting that no language is capable of representing the experiential truth of the camps and in this regard his point seems universalist in its leanings; however, Levi points to an inadequacy of all languages in the face of one specific historical situation, and in this regard, at least, is closer to Coetzee than to either Beckett or Kafka.
Africa, English vocabularies similarly mock the truth of the country’s past, Coetzee suggests, thus demonstrating their unfitness to describe its present and most undoubtedly its future.

When it comes to the Holocaust, the claim has been made, most famously by George Steiner, that the failure of language is not simply a matter of historical or experiential veracity, of vocabularies incapable of conveying the truth of the event, but is also of an ethical nature as well. In *Language and Silence*, Steiner writes

> the German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism. It is not merely that a Hitler, a Goebbels, and a Himmler happened to speak German. Nazism found in the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery. Hitler heard inside his native tongue the latent hysteria, the confusion, the quality of hypnotic trance. (“The Hollow Miracle” 121)

Similarly, Lurie’s thinking about the English language has much to do with the language’s complicity in the crimes of colonialism and apartheid, as a manifestation of a particular kind of colonialism: like the German language, for Steiner, the English language stands implicated, in *Disgrace*, in the history of savagery and gross injustice that it would purport to represent. Of course, if this is the case, Lurie’s (and Coetzee’s) silence on the implication of Afrikaans in the apartheid past is striking, for, in a post-apartheid context, it is the language which more readily offers itself up for interrogation. Such a silence is not, however, indicative of a willful refusal to acknowledge the similar implication of Afrikaans on the author’s part; rather, I would suggest, that Lurie’s reflections on the English language have more to do with Coetzee’s audience, in the form of his imagined reader, who will encounter a text written, as is the case with the entirety of Coetzee’s fictional *oeuvre*, in English. If, as I argue above, Coetzee refuses to see the Holocaust as separate from the larger historical narrative of Western modernity, he similarly

---

16 The one exception to this rule is the South African edition of *In the Heart of the Country*, in which the narrative is written in English with the dialogue in Afrikaans.
refuses, in Disgrace, to deny the implication of the English language in the same past and the same crimes in which Afrikaans is implicated.

Stylistically, even, there are signs of the influence that Holocaust writing holds for Coetzee. As an event that has challenged the grounds of its own representation, the Holocaust has given rise to a literature of gaps, silences, and traumatic re-utterances, all of which are characteristic of Coetzee’s writing. Insofar as each addition to Coetzee’s oeuvre can be said to return to a similar set of concerns, if from different angles, Coetzee’s writing, taken as a whole, exhibits patterns similar to authors considered to be “Holocaust writers,” a list that would include, amongst others, Levi and Elie Wiesel. Collectively, Coetzee’s fictions respond to and evoke the experience of (multiple kinds of) trauma. Moreover, the now famous injunction against representing the Holocaust, made by authors and thinkers as diverse as Theodor Adorno, George Steiner and Elie Wiesel – all of whom, Berel Lang observes, “allowed themselves” license to represent the event (18) – seems likely to have had a profound influence on Coetzee’s aesthetic practice. In an article that takes stock of Coetzee’s early fiction, Rosemary Jolly notes that the “concern to avoid fictional representations of violence that have a tendency to seduce both author and reader through a fantasizing activity marked by its pornographic interest is evident in the novels of J.M. Coetzee” (“Gun as Copula” 44). This concern – which has been prevalent in debates about Holocaust representation – has remained a feature of Coetzee’s aesthetic throughout his career, finding critical expression in “Into the Dark Chamber,” where Coetzee observes the creative allure of the torture chamber for the author – “it is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se” – but also notes the problem with “making [the state’s] vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy.” Coetzee explains: “[f]or the writer the deeper problem is not to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to
produce representations of them‖ (364). As Coetzee’s focus on the torture chamber shows, the aesthetic dilemma he articulates is by no means the exclusive preserve of the Holocaust; nevertheless, it is perhaps with the Holocaust, its representations and the reception thereof that this particular form of aesthetic dilemma – which is at the same time an ethical one – came into exquisite focus.

The acknowledgement of the difficulty of writing or speaking of traumatic experience – a frequent thematic concern of Holocaust writing that gets mirrored in its style and form – also appears in Coetzee’s writing, most notably in Age of Iron where Mrs. Curren, when confronted with the violence taking place in the townships, finds herself unable to verbalize her response. She tells Mr. Thabane that “[t]o speak of this…you would need the tongue of a god” (99). Curren’s inability to speak of what she sees is reminiscent of the “trope of unutterability” that Andrea Reiter calls a “well-known rhetorical device” in Holocaust testimony (18). Coetzee’s fiction is replete with characters – the barbarian “girl,” Michael K, Friday, Vercueil, and Lucy Lurie, especially – who either cannot or will not share their experiences, particularly with those well-meaning and interested interlocuters – ranging from the magistrate, to the medical officer, Susan Barton, Mrs. Curren and David Lurie – who have no access to these characters’ traumatic experiences outside that which they are willing to give. The desire to learn what these traumatized characters have undergone, voiced most forcefully by the medical officer in Life & Times of Michael K when he implores K to “talk, make your voice heard, tell your story!” (140), parallels closely the often intrusive desire to know Holocaust survivors’ stories expressed by many around the world.

Coetzee’s fiction, throughout, is thus suffused with a profound Holocaust awareness, one that subtly informs and inflects his wider range of thematic concerns. Specific and explicit
references, implicit thematic continuities, and stylistic parallels all point to the event’s continuing hold on the author and suggest its underlying but undeniable significance; indeed, the repeated Holocaust references and parallels collectively position the event as central to Coetzee’s imagination. Having established the extent to which the Holocaust figures in Coetzee’s writing, the nature of his interest in the Holocaust still needs to be worked through, however. At some level, the cumulative effect of Holocaust references in Coetzee’s fictional and critical writing is the subtle encoding of his work as knowingly post-Holocaust. By this I mean not only that Coetzee’s writing follows the Holocaust, in the sense of coming after it historically, but also, and more importantly, that its sensibility is so thoroughly informed by the author’s awareness of both the event and its manifold historiographic, epistemological, ethical, and political implications that it tacitly invites being read as, in part, a response to the event that is at the same time regionally localized and international in its scope. The persistence with which references to the Holocaust recur in most of Coetzee’s individual fictions demonstrates how consistently it has been a lens through which Coetzee understands the national and international contexts in which he lives and writes; it provides the lens through which he formulates an ethical position for himself as a South African author whose work circulates in an international literary marketplace. Accordingly, a critical study of Coetzee’s fictions that foregrounds the centrality of the Holocaust to Coetzee enables a richer understanding of his work, pointing the way to increased appreciation of the author’s sense of his identity as an artist writing within and about South Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty first.

Making Sense of Apartheid, Making Sense of the Holocaust: The Implicit Comparison

The timing of Coetzee’s writing The Lives of Animals allows the text’s Holocaust interests to be understood in terms of the context of the text’s production. Delivered as Coetzee’s version of
Princeton’s 1997-98 Tanner Lectures and published in 1999, a few short years after Nelson
Mandela’s electoral victory in South Africa’s first truly democratic elections brought an end to
the apartheid regime, *The Lives of Animals* was written at a time when Coetzee’s native country
was attempting simultaneously to come to terms with its past, to explain how apartheid could
come into being and survive for decades, and to move forward in the post-apartheid era. It is
surely, then, significant that Coetzee wrote *The Lives of Animals* while South Africa’s Truth and
Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was engaged in its duties. The TRC’s responsibilities were
many, but primary was the urgent need, in the context of the early years of the “new” South
Africa, to construct a national report on apartheid for the emerging nation. The TRC’s mission
in this regard was twofold: it was charged with gathering information from both apartheid’s
perpetrators and its victims in order to compile a narrative of apartheid and its crimes;
simultaneously, it was to provide a forum for the healing of wounds. As such, the TRC was both
designed to write the history of apartheid-era South Africa – that is, to write a history of atrocity –
and to facilitate the construction of a post-apartheid national identity. According to Richard
Wilson, the TRC “was a transitory and fleeting statutory body” that was “poised in time between
the apartheid era and the post-apartheid epoch” (14). Operating during a transitional period in
South African history, the TRC produced a narrative (both in its formal final report and, in a more
inclusive sense, involving live national television coverage and daily reportage) that was
concerned with a limited and specific range of issues most directly relevant to the transitional

---

17 The TRC was comprised of three main committees: a committee on Human Rights Violations (HRVs); a committee on political amnesty and a committee on reparations. Significantly, the only body within the TRC with any power other than the power to make recommendations was the amnesty committee, which could grant amnesty from criminal or civil prosecution for crimes of a political nature on the condition of full disclosure.

18 In *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*, Mark Sanders argues that “the public hearings, which were broadcast nationally on television and radio, are likely to be what South Africans most remember of the Truth Commission” (148).
period in the nation’s history. The narrative project in which the TRC was involved, then, underwrites *The Lives of Animals*, in that Coetzee’s fictional narrative addresses many of the same issues that were of central importance to the TRC.

Costello’s comparison in *The Lives of Animals*, while superficially obscuring Coetzee’s South African context, proves an apt fictional response to contemporary South African concerns, enabling Coetzee to consider apartheid as an injustice akin to, and of the same scale as, the Holocaust. The TRC’s efforts to construct a narrative account of the apartheid past – one that went beyond merely detailing what happened, itself a massive undertaking, to explore difficult questions of guilt and responsibility, to suggest routes to national reconciliation and to contribute to that goal by “entrench[ing] a new public morality” (Attwell and Harlow 2) – can be read as a subtext to *The Lives of Animals*, where the comparison between the Holocaust and the treatment of animals also becomes an implicit comparison between the Holocaust and apartheid. As the TRC’s efforts to make retrospective sense of the apartheid past might suggest, there are important links to be made not only between the Holocaust and apartheid but also between the post-Holocaust and post-apartheid conditions. Connections between the Holocaust and apartheid, post-Holocaust and post-apartheid concerns, and the centrality of both in *The Lives of Animals*, support a reading of the text as being key to the Coetzeean oeuvre.

In making a claim for the centrality of *The Lives of Animals*, I immediately encounter a pair of potential objections that I wish to anticipate. On the one hand, such a positioning flies in the face of the conventional critical wisdom that would place *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, and *Disgrace* at the centre of the Coetzean canon. On the other hand, given that *The Lives of Animals* is contained within the later *Elizabeth Costello*, the more logical choice of texts to elevate to a position of centrality would appear to be the latter novel.
I will speak to the second objection first. While it is undeniable that *Elizabeth Costello*, as a longer text that presents its readers with a more wide-ranging set of interpretive avenues for discussion, including those offered by *The Lives of Animals* which it contains, and that this might enable a reconceptualization of Coetzee’s writing in light of his Holocaust interests, I maintain, along with Dominic Head, that “*The Lives of Animals* is worth considering separately from *Elizabeth Costello*, because its emphases are obscured in the longer work” (*Cambridge Introduction* 81). Indeed, it is precisely because the longer *Elizabeth Costello* has to do with a range of issues largely unrelated to the Holocaust at the same time as it contains *The Lives of Animals* that it cannot serve as the more effective starting point for an exploration of the place of the Holocaust in Coetzee’s work. As for the trio of texts which conventionally occupy a position of centrality in Coetzee’s writing, there can be little doubt that that position is well-earned: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, and *Disgrace* are all exceptionally rich texts that have proven more than capable of standing up to the sustained, ongoing critical discussions that each has engendered. Thus, in making a claim for a greater recognition of the importance of *The Lives of Animals* to Coetzee’s *oeuvre*, I seek not to displace any of the canonical Coetzean novels from their position of centrality, but, rather, to suggest the ways in which a positioning of *The Lives of Animals* alongside these other works carries with it the advantage of enabling a greater understanding and recognition of a heretofore relatively under-analyzed aspect of Coetzee’s writing, namely, the role that the Holocaust plays in framing Coetzee’s fictional response to South African and wider postcolonial realities.

Indeed, Coetzee implies that, if the mere mention of the Holocaust carries with it a set of associations – conceptual, historical, and emotional – whose impact is immediate and widespread, the Holocaust and its attendant associations may be integral in making sense of apartheid,
especially for an international audience. In that the Holocaust was a complex historical occurrence with wide-spread implications for how the global community thinks about a range of epistemological and ethical issues, its applicability to the similarly complex South African context is, for Coetzee, unquestionable. Certainly, J.M. Coetzee was not the first, or only, individual to suggest that apartheid was in some sense comparable to the Holocaust, either during the apartheid era or in the early years of the post-apartheid era. Coetzee’s fellow South African novelist André Brink, for instance, made similar connections explicitly. In a letter written to South African president P.W. Botha in 1986, Brink warns Botha “there may be some small solace, too, in knowing that certain historical patterns do recur. Not only the darkness, but the light as well. Nuremberg may indeed come round again” (23). Brink’s invocation of postwar and post-Holocaust justice reveals the similarity of his views concerning white South Africa’s crimes against the country’s non-white population. Nevertheless, Coetzee’s recognition of the comparability of the Holocaust and apartheid arguably plays itself out in his fiction in a more sustained and critically rigorous way than is the case with Brink. Of the fiction produced during the apartheid era, Coetzee’s writing is perhaps unique in the manner in which, precisely through its mobilization of the Holocaust, it concerns itself with South Africa’s post-apartheid future. This is not to say that its uniqueness proceeds from its imaginative depiction of a possible post-apartheid future, as, amongst Coetzee’s contemporaries writing in Afrikaans and in English, Karel Schoeman and Nadine Gordimer both attempted to imagine, in Promised Land and July’s People, respectively, what post-apartheid South Africa might look like; rather, Coetzee’s apartheid-era writing stands apart in that it consistently engages

---

19 In Reconciliation through Truth the authors make frequent comparisons between apartheid and the Holocaust. They write, “[a]partheid was the organizing principle of the old South Africa; it was a principle around which large numbers of people actively rallied, as they rallied around anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany” (149).
with the narrative project(s) and dilemmas facing the post-apartheid nation. In this regard, Coetzee’s apartheid-era and post-apartheid writing are remarkably similar: for if the challenge of narrativizing the (crimes of) the apartheid era fell, officially, to the TRC, Coetzee’s post-apartheid writing evinces a concern to perform subtle interrogations of the official narrative(s) produced via the TRC proceedings and in its final Report.

It is my argument throughout that, taken as a whole, Coetzee’s *oeuvre* constitutes a continuous but evolving engagement with the TRC, its narrative output and historiographic and narratological assumptions: Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction engages with the *idea* of the TRC (or its imagined/imaginable equivalent), while his post-apartheid fiction needs to be read in a South African context in which the TRC is an actuality that demands scrutiny. Crucially, it is the Holocaust, and Coetzee’s insistence upon the relevance of the epistemological, ethical, and narratological issues it raises to post-apartheid South Africa, that provides one of the most important bridges between his apartheid-era and post-apartheid era writing and which serves to structure his response to South Africa and the need for its traumatic past to be documented and narrativized.

*Coetzee and South Africa*

Coetzee’s reputation as an author has, in part, and particularly during the apartheid era, been affected by the extent to which his audience has perceived Coetzee to be an author

---

20 Cf. Michael Green’s suggestion that a significant body of apartheid-era South African fiction engages in writing the “pre-history of post-apartheid” (7). Such a reading is, I suggest, *particularly* apt when it comes to Coetzee.

21 It would be a mistake to assume that, although it takes the form of a single report, the TRC’s final *Report* takes the form of a unified, non-contradictory narrative. Due to the nature of the TRC, with its three committees and the multiple individual narratives that needed to be gathered, condensed and combined, its final *Report* contains conflicting and sometimes contradictory narrative elements.

22 Though Durrant’s analysis goes in a different direction, he makes a similar claim when he argues that Coetzee’s apartheid-era novels anticipate “the crucial mourning work of the TRC” (“Bearing Witness to Apartheid” 430).
committed, or uncommitted, to representing South African reality and responding to contemporary South African concerns. Indeed, during the early part of his career, Coetzee was often criticized for producing novels whose historical or geographic distance from the contemporary South Africa, in conjunction with their obvious *literariness*, suggested his unwillingness to attend to the material realities of apartheid South Africa in a politically meaningful way.\(^23\) In “The Idea of Gardening,” Nadine Gordimer’s review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Gordimer famously gave voice to this particular view of Coetzee, writing that his first three novels displayed Coetzee’s “desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write” (139). The allegorical style of Coetzee’s early writing struck Gordimer, and readers inclined to share her assumptions, as fundamentally evasive in terms of its representation, or lack thereof, of South African realities. Displaying a distaste or, less generously, disgust for the subject matter of a wide range of contemporary South African fiction, and the reality that it was commonly understood to represent, Coetzee’s writing proved all the more frustrating in the eyes of those readers inclined to evaluate it critically because of the political, though not ideological, sympathies they perceived in his work. That frustration was perhaps best captured in a review of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that proclaimed the novel “will be enthusiastically assimilated into the very system that it (vaguely) condemns. In the end it is not a disturbing book, and ultimately it challenges nothing. Coetzee is a fine writer. It’s a pity he isn’t a bolder one” (qtd in Du Plessis 117). Such was the crux of the hostile reaction to Coetzee’s writing in its earliest phases, a reaction, it is worth noting, that was in stark contrast to Coetzee’s increasing acclaim within the academies of the West: that Coetzee’s aesthetic craftsmanship

\(^{23}\) See the essays of Michael Vaughan and Peter Knox-Shaw for this type of neo-Marxist criticism.
condemned the author, at best, to political irrelevance and, at worst, to tacit complicity with the politics that his fictions only obliquely condemned.

To some extent, the frustration exhibited by Coetzee’s harshest critics had much to do with the identity Coetzee appeared, to them, to be fashioning for himself. Coetzee’s obvious debts to European high modernists, especially Kafka and Beckett, suggested a link, to some readers, between the author’s aesthetic inheritance and his self-identification as an international, metropolitan author; correspondingly, his literary and, by extension, universalist thematic concerns were, for these readers, indicative of a writer uncomfortable with the label of a “South African” author. Viewed in this light, Coetzee was vulnerable to suggestions not only of political irresponsibility and irrelevance, but also, implicitly at least, of artistic opportunism: drawing on the realities of apartheid-era South African life for aesthetic inspiration and emotional impact, Coetzee appeared, to some readers, to be translating the particularity of South Africa, its present and its history, into falsely facile universalist texts designed to cater to an international literary market. In a different way, a novel such as *Foe* that overtly draws on the metropolitan literary theory with which its author is so obviously comfortable, did much, perhaps more even than the highly allegorical *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to sustain this portrait of Coetzee as an author uninterested in “narrow” South African political issues.

In recent years, however, the critical evaluation of Coetzee’s place as a South African author engaging with contemporary South Africa has changed greatly. According to Sam Durrant, it was in the early nineties, with the publication of critical books on Coetzee by Susan Gallagher and David Attwell, that critics began to (re)place Coetzee in the specifically South
African literary tradition to which, they argued, he belongs.\textsuperscript{24} Durrant writes that, “[i]n order to
defend Coetzee against the influential neo-Marxist dismissal of Coetzee within South Africa”
critics like Attwell and Gallagher “endeavored to rehistoricize Coetzee’s fiction by emphasizing
its discursive relevance to the time and place within which the novels were produced” (“Bearing
Witness” 431). In \textit{J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Writing} (1993), David Attwell’s
characterization of Coetzee’s fictions as a kind of “situational metafiction,” in particular, offered
a vision of Coetzee’s work, from within South Africa, as more politically-committed to South
African realities than had heretofore been recognized in the prevailing critical climate. As Patrick
Hayes explains, Attwell “established Coetzee’s political seriousness by revealing the extent of his
engagement with the specificities of South African political culture” (\textit{J.M. Coetzee and the Novel}
1).

In \textit{Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing} (1996),
Rosemary Jolly similarly makes a case for Coetzee’s political efficacy, classifying his writing,
along with that of André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach, as “South African dissident writing”
(xiv). This classification contextualizes Coetzee’s writing by indicating the extent to which it
grounds itself in South African concerns in order to indict apartheid and the concepts that
underpin it; rather than politicizing Coetzee’s aesthetic practice, Jolly points to the ways in which
his apartheid-era writing consistently took on a politically adversarial stance. Derek Attridge, on
the other hand, points to how Coetzee’s novels can be viewed as ethically, rather than politically,
constructive when he writes that they “can be read as a continued, strenuous enterprise in figuring

\textsuperscript{24} I think that Durrant is essentially correct in attributing this shift to Gallagher and Attwell, especially;
however, Theresa Dovey’s \textit{Lacanian Allegories} (1988) also makes an argument about Coetzee’s
commitment to challenging dominant discursive traditions in South Africa and elsewhere. The first
monograph published on Coetzee’s writing, Dovey’s book remains a useful guide to understanding the
ways in which Coetzee might be engaging with South Africa, its politics and discursive legacies in ways
that may not be apparent at first glance.
alterity, a project which is at once highly local in its engagement with the urgent social and political problems of South Africa and widely pertinent in its posing of the question of otherness and its relation to language, culture and knowledge” (“Literary Form and the Demands of Politics” 204). The value of this rethinking of Coetzee’s relation to place rests in its ability to reconcile Coetzee’s obvious debts to metropolitan modernist aesthetics and postmodernist and post-structuralist theory with the author’s commitment to South African social concerns. My own thinking about Coetzee is thus indebted to the critical shift initiated by Attwell and Gallagher, and continued by Jolly, Attridge and, of course, many others. Coetzee’s writing, in my understanding, can always be shown to be deeply engaged with South African issues and life.

Coetzee’s dissident writing and his figuring of alterity are both profoundly shaped by the place the Holocaust occupies in his imagination. Indeed, Coetzee’s repeated references and allusions to the event, in his apartheid-era writing, suggest the urgency with which the situation was imbued; their continuing persistence, after the end of apartheid, serves to suggest the relevance of retrospective attempts to grapple with the Holocaust, its meaning and its implications in a national and international context in which the event continues to loom prominently. While by no means denying the grounding of his texts in a specifically South African context, these references and allusions ultimately point to Coetzee’s self-positioning as an author in and of a globalized culture, and a culture that, in its turn, provides Coetzee with a range of tools for responding to more local concerns. Coetzee expresses his response to his South African context through metropolitan-influenced aesthetics, but those aesthetics are themselves shaped by an overt consciousness of the Holocaust as an event that makes complicated challenges to aesthetics, ethics, politics, and historiography, to name a few. Moreover, they signal Coetzee’s awareness that his writing emerges in an international context that has been shaped by the events of the
Second World War and that his writing circulates as a consumable commodity in an increasingly globalized culture that can be considered “post-Holocaust” in the sense that the Holocaust functions as a watershed moment in the history of the West.\(^\text{25}\)

Throughout his career, then, Coetzee mobilizes the Holocaust in such a way that it informs and inflects his response to the South Africa before him. Because Coetzee’s novels often focus on characters that resemble Coetzee in important ways and center on themes of guilt, complicity and shame at the same time as they mobilize a host of Holocaust references, allusions and echoes, I suggest that Coetzee’s writing can be categorized as a kind of (South African) *bystander fiction*. Writing *from* the position of bystander, Coetzee speaks *to* the experience of being bystander to the crime of apartheid and the criminal activities carried out in its defense and, particularly in his later fictions, to a range of other crimes as well. Crucially, his fictions address themselves to their local and global audiences self-consciously from a position whose conceptual origins rest in the attempts that have been made to make sense out of the Holocaust. In his important works of Holocaust historiography, *The Destruction of the European Jews* and *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders*, Raul Hilberg delineates the complex and variegated nature of the actors involved in the Holocaust.\(^\text{26}\) If this schematic division leaves itself open to the

---

\(^{25}\) In “Postmodernism and the Holocaust”, Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg write that “it is often those thinkers who are identified with poststructuralism, deconstruction, or postmodernism, who are most insistent on the centrality of the Holocaust to the experience of modern humankind” (1). The authors continue, “The seminal thinkers of postmodernism…have each insisted that the Holocaust marks a break in the trajectory of the West, one which provokes us to rethink the implications of the project of modernity” (2). With this in mind, Milchman and Rosenberg suggest that postmodernism itself may be said to begin only after the Holocaust. In that Coetzee’s writing is clearly influenced by post-modernist thought, the traces of this influence that appear in Coetzee’s fiction can arguably contribute to a case being made for reading Coetzee’s work as “post-Holocaust.”

\(^{26}\) In Hilberg’s analysis, the tripartite division of the actors involved is further divisible: bystanders, for instance, were not comprised of one uniformly homogeneous body, but, rather, consisted of what he calls helpers, gainers, onlookers, and messengers (*Perpetrators Victims Bystanders* 212-24).
criticism that it overly simplifies the complex realities of the roles played by participants in the Holocaust, it has, nevertheless, remained a fixture of Holocaust discourse.

It is not just, then, that there are a variety of Holocaust parallels that Coetzee brings to our attentions, but, rather, that the Holocaust, its multitude of representations in various genres and media, its pedagogical and political deployment, and its enshrinement in global (post)memory have provided the terms with which other events might be rendered (more) comprehensible. Insofar as Coetzee’s writing can be said to read apartheid South Africa and its representation through the lens of the Holocaust and its representation, it does so from a position that is knowingly bound up in what it seeks to represent.

It is as bystander fiction, then, fiction which of necessity views issues of responsibility, guilt and innocence as inevitably complicated by the inability to divide the participants in morally Manichean terms, that Coetzee’s writing approaches the complicated question of ethics in a post-Holocaust landscape. If morality as it is conventionally understood, both in religious and secular terms, relies upon a range of positive and negative absolutes – obligations to perform particular rites or to act in a particular way, and injunctions against spectrum of behaviours – it is ethics which provide the grounds for rethinking the bases upon which conventional morality rests. Underwritten by an understanding that the moral certainty offered by concepts such as right and wrong are belied by the specific context and conditions in which individuals act or do not act, speak or remain silent, ethics are grounded not in principles but in the particularity of the event. Viewing and representing local and global conditions through the lens of the Holocaust, Coetzee’s writings are particularly sensitive to the capacity for an “event” such as the Holocaust

27 Of course, the case has been made, frequently enough, that the Holocaust is an event which escapes comprehension, certainly of those who were not there but also, additionally, of those who were. If a comparison between the Holocaust and apartheid is to be taken seriously, similar questions about its comprehensibility have to be considered, at the very least.
or apartheid (recalling Langer’s comments about language in general) to make a mockery of the language of morality: terms like “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong,” prove inadequate when confronted by the complex realities that characterize the Holocaust or apartheid. It was in The Drowned and the Saved (1988) that Primo Levi attempted to explain to an uncomprehending audience that to live in the camps was to inhabit a “grey zone” in which “the enemy was all around,” where one “could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers” (22); a world with “ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants,” the grey zone, Levi asserts, “possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge” (27).

Coetzee’s fiction, written from another kind of grey zone, takes as its subject the experience of living in it. Inhabiting a grey zone devoid of a clearcut morality, in which our need (or perhaps obligation) to judge is irredeemably confused by hazy outlines and indeterminate frontiers, Coetzee’s characters become vehicles through which the author can explore the alternatives for living ethically amidst such a moral morass; collectively, Coetzee’s fictions partake of this (always ongoing) effort to locate a position from which one can live an ethical life in the contemporary world.

A Journey through Coetzee’s Bystander Narratives: Historiography; Responsibility; Reconciliation; and conceiving Post-liberal Ethics

In Unspeakable Truths, Priscilla Hayner identifies the tasks facing a nation in the immediate wake of atrocity. She explains that a state “may have a number of objectives in responding to past abuses: to punish perpetrators, establish the truth, repair or address damages, pay respect to victims, and prevent further abuses” (11). In a case such as South Africa’s, it was
through both its quasi-juridical proceedings and through its narrative efforts (the two are in some sense inseparable) that the TRC contributed to the state objectives Hayner identifies. In that Coetzee’s fiction initially anticipates and then later responds to post-apartheid concerns, it addresses many, if not all, of the issues Hayner identifies. The nature of Coetzee’s approach to these issues is, of course, contingent, as I suggest above, on the subject-position he occupies and from which he writes. Neither a perpetrator nor a victim of apartheid and its abuses, Coetzee’s status as a bystander, and a producer of bystander fiction, shapes the approach his fiction takes in addressing immediate post-apartheid questions and concerns.

This study is thus committed not to a chronological reading of Coetzee’s novels as, I have been suggesting, the core concerns of Coetzee’s fiction remain remarkably consistent amidst the development of his aesthetic practice and the political and historical transformations of the context(s) from which Coetzee writes. I choose not to divide Coetzee’s writing schematically into apartheid and post-apartheid fiction, or, alternatively “South African” and “Australian” novels. Instead, I track the continuities that exist across such divides and, following from Hayner’s argument, suggest that post-apartheid South Africa faced at least four broad, closely interrelated challenges which Coetzee’s writing initially anticipates and to which it later responds.

In chapter two, I focus on Coetzee’s engagement with the problems, aporias, and dilemmas of the historiographic enterprise which seeks to translate the past into narrative form. In Hayner’s terms, Coetzee interrogates what it means to establish the truth about such large, epoch-defining “events” such as the Holocaust and apartheid. Beginning with The Lives of Animals, I argue that the text takes as one of its primary concerns the problem of knowing an event as complex as the Holocaust. Indeed, I contend that alongside the text’s manifest concern with what its protagonist wants to present as “a crime of stupefying proportions” (69), namely,
the mass production of nonhuman animals’ deaths, Coetzee also engages with the Holocaust as an event increasingly determined by its Americanization, wherein the always problematic relation between an historical event and its representation is further complicated by the increasing dominance of a particular set of representations with a closely-related set of representational politics with what amounts, for Coetzee, to an ethically problematic representation practice that denies the implication of readers, spectators, and consumers of the event in it. At the same time, Coetzee suggests, in The Lives of Animals, that the challenges to historiographical truth epitomized by the Holocaust are of relevance to post-apartheid historiographic enterprises, both official, authorized ones such as the TRC’s and unofficial ones produced by, amongst other things, journalism and literary fiction. As Berel Lang argues, Holocaust writing characteristically “aspires to the condition of history” (19). I suggest that Coetzee’s fiction self-consciously takes stock of apartheid fiction’s similar tendency to aspire to the condition of history. Thoroughly engaged with how the past, South African and otherwise, is narrativized, Coetzee’s fiction works to problematize the too ready association of factual truth with narrative truth. Coetzee ultimately suggests, through his fiction, an alternative model of representing the past that posits a truthful, as opposed to a true, representation of the past as epistemologically and ethically preferable.

My third chapter addresses Coetzee’s working through of a related cluster of concepts – guilt, shame, and complicity – as he attempts to address complicated questions of responsibility. Beginning with The Lives of Animals, it locates in Costello’s address echoes of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who, via his concept of metaphysical guilt, demands a re-conceptualization what it means to be guilty after the Holocaust, and contends that Coetzee’s fiction needs to be understood in relation to an international post-Holocaust interrogation of guilt and innocence. Coetzee’s evocation of this tradition of philosophical critique, reflecting a similar
desire to reject limited understandings of guilt, has important implications given Coetzee’s engagement with the TRC in both its imagined and actual forms. I explore these implications by ending with a consideration of Age of Iron, a novel that I suggest is very much about the problem of narrativizing guilt. Reading the text as a South African version of one of its primary intertexts, J’Accuse, I contend that one of Coetzee’s interests in the novel is to lay bare the difficulty facing a writer attempting to follow Zola’s lead in attributing responsibility for a radically unjust state of affairs in contemporary South Africa. Even as Coetzee’s writing implicitly draws on a notion of metaphysical guilt to engage with the realities of the South African situation, it also works to question the efficacy of such a concept and, ultimately, directs itself towards addressing the rewards and pitfalls of confessional discourse as a meaningful register of guilt and responsibility.

Chapter four examines how the recurrent trope, both in The Lives of Animals and in the wider oeuvre, of “breaking bread” points to Coetzee’s sustained interest in thinking through the concept of reconciliation, a concept that proved particularly important to post-apartheid South Africa and figured prominently in much public discourse within and about the country at the end of the twentieth century. Beginning with a pair of texts – Disgrace and The Lives of Animals – that explore practical and philosophical obstacles to the reconciliation process, I argue that Coetzee’s fictions work towards identifying what it means to make amends for the wrongs in which one is directly or indirectly implicated, and for which he or she is responsible. Anticipating and then responding to a body that would need to promote reconciliation as well as truth-telling, Coetzee’s fiction asks important questions about the steps necessary to re-integrate a divided society when the answer to the question who forgives, or who has the power to forgive, is deeply contentious. Considering Coetzee’s longstanding fictional and critical interest in confession, this chapter contends that Coetzee’s writing simultaneously insists on the
questionable truth value of confessional practice and points to the way in which such an epistemologically unreliable discourse may still, despite its drawbacks, be of ethical value in the reconciliation process. Ultimately, I suggest, Coetzee’s fictions collectively make a case for conceiving of reconciliation in more limited terms that privilege the value of an ongoing process of (textual) expiation in place of the simpler and perhaps more comforting notion of a completed process of reconciliation.

The fifth chapter concerns itself broadly with Coetzee’s attempts to grapple with the difficult question of “What next?” that frequently arises in the aftermath of such a large-scale atrocity. If, after the Holocaust and other atrocities, the phrase “Never Again!” has become a kind of refrain that signifies a desire to “prevent further abuses” (Hayner 11), post-apartheid South Africa’s transformation into a liberal democratic state, complete with a new constitution and Bill of Rights, constitutes the nation’s attempts to actualize the motto. At stake in the state’s official adoption of liberalism as its guiding political philosophy, then, is the effort to create a new politico-ethical culture in the nation that would make the perception of difference – racial, cultural, gendered, sexual, or otherwise – politically, legally, or scientifically deployable in the same way that it had been under the apartheid regime. The fourth chapter makes the argument that Coetzee’s fictions, which explore the possibilities for liberalism to provide the philosophical and practical grounds for achieving this goal, perform valuable work in that they adopt a critical stance in relation to liberalism’s self-justification. Focusing on three works – Waiting for the Barbarians, Foe, and The Lives of Animals – I suggest that Coetzee’s novels partake of an ongoing and evolving critique of the politics, aesthetics and ethics of liberalism; insofar as Coetzee’s fictional and critical output show him to be, at least temperamentally sympathetic to the goals motivating liberalism – namely, its concern to provide the strongest grounds for the just
and ethical treatment of its Others – it also demonstrates the ambivalence of the author’s perspective on liberalism’s capacity to achieve its lofty goals. Ultimately, I suggest, Coetzee’s fiction, in critiquing liberalism from the inside to show its internal contradictions and shortcomings, anticipates a yet-to-be-realized post-liberal ethics.

I conclude by speculating on the ways in which Coetzee’s fiction suggests that such a post-liberal ethics may be realized, and on the shape that it might take. Characterizing Coetzee as an author whose fiction performs an immanent critique of liberalism and of the Western model of modernity of which it is constitutive, the conclusion speculates that the orthodox tendency to position Coetzee as an author who re-articulates in his fictions the theoretical writings of post-structuralists and deconstructionists needs to be re-examined to allow for greater understanding of the longer history of writing critically about modernity from which Coetzee’s work draws and whose work it continues. Ultimately, I conclude, Coetzee’s writing thematizes the condition of modernity in order to insist upon the difficult but necessary challenge of re-configuring it in a more ethical formation. Whatever limited, tentative hope that is on offer in Coetzee’s fiction rests in the capacity for art, and narrative fiction in particular, to enable us, in Elizabeth Costello’s words, to “think ourselves into the being of another” (Lives of Animals 35).
Chapter 2

After Atrocity: The Holocaust, Apartheid and the Historiographic Enterprise

Though, as I argue in my introduction, the Holocaust is central to J.M. Coetzee’s imagination, Coetzee does not incorporate his interest in the Holocaust into his concerns as a South African (and later an Australian) author in any simplistic way. In many respects, the Holocaust provides an appropriate lens through which to view South Africa as it lends itself to comparisons with apartheid. The Holocaust and apartheid are both properly viewed as crimes against humanity. Both involved unjust suffering on a mass scale; references to either regularly evoke strong emotional responses that range from horror and a sense of outrage to relief that both atrocities were brought to an end; and a veneration of some prominent victims, such as Elie Wiesel and Nelson Mandela, who have emerged from their experiences to comment authoritatively on contemporary issues of political and ethical import. Apartheid and the Holocaust both involved the bureaucratic implementation of violence as well as the tacit acceptance of this violence by a complicit populace; both were underpinned by similar discourses about race and culture, cleanliness, disease and infection – so much so that, as Kenneth Christie observes, “Nazism in one sense was a source for the intellectual beliefs of National Party policies” (22). The Holocaust and apartheid have even occupied analogous positions in the consciousness of the global community: if the Nazi genocide was the paradigm of absolute evil in the decades immediately following the event, providing the metaphorical language through which other evils could be understood as well as the standard against which they could be measured, apartheid has, to some extent, come to occupy an analogous position in recent years. For
instance, as Rita Barnard explains in *Beyond Apartheid*, the language of apartheid has been applied to “the erasure of the conditions of labor in today’s world” in the sense that “the impoverished workers who produce our glossy commodities tend to live far out of sight, beyond the experiential realm of the privileged” in what some scholars call global apartheid (17).

Beyond the academic realm, and much more contentiously, opponents of the state of Israel’s policies have taken to referring to the practice of “Israeli apartheid” as a means of garnering support for Palestinians.

Despite the comparisons that the two events invite, one cannot overlook the significant differences between the Holocaust and apartheid. The Holocaust involved the deliberate attempt to eradicate Europe’s Jewish population in its entirety; conversely, apartheid, as violently as it was defended, involved no such genocidal intent.\(^{28}\) The Holocaust was carried out secretly, or as secretly as could be managed given the scale of the atrocity; while the human rights abuses perpetuated in defense of apartheid were usually conducted covertly, the inherently criminal policy of apartheid was official government policy in South Africa for half a century. In the case of the Holocaust, Nazi violence was directed against a minority population – or, alternatively, depending on whom you ask, against minority populations\(^{29}\) – while in South Africa apartheid was implemented by, and in the interests of, the white minority. The significant differences between the Holocaust and apartheid thus lead Asmal et al. to insist, “[i]t is as wrong to assert that every defining aspect of Nazism was unique as it is wrong to assert that apartheid amounted

---

\(^{28}\) Regardless of a lack of genocidal intent on the part of apartheid’s architects and officials, there are those who argue that the ultimate result of apartheid was nevertheless genocidal. For instance, in *Reconciliation through Truth* the authors argue that “[t]he genocidal effects of apartheid…are beyond doubt” (202).

\(^{29}\) An important issue that arises in discussions of the Holocaust is the question of exactly who was a victim of the Holocaust and who was “merely” a victim of Nazi violence. For some, the term “Holocaust” refers exclusively to the attempted eradication of Europe’s Jewish population. For others, the term encompasses the Nazi’s Slavic victims as well as the Roma (Gypsies) who were also targeted for elimination.
to a duplication of Nazi policies. There was substantial overlap; but the one was not a carbon copy of the other” (133).

It would be a mistake, then, to assume that Coetzee transplants post-Holocaust concerns into the South African context without being attentive to the important historical and material differences between the Holocaust and apartheid; or without interrogating what Holocaust comparisons mean both in a South African and a global context. Indeed, the very idea that the Holocaust can be compared to another historical event, like apartheid, is a vexed and contentious one. Much ink has been spilt over the issue of the Holocaust’s historical uniqueness, and, as Thomas Fallace explains, “Holocaust uniqueness has been and still is a central concern for scholars of the holocaust” (74). Debates about the possibility of discussing the Holocaust comparatively show that the issue is not merely “historical,” for want of a better term, but also involves moral, ethical, and political judgments. Holocaust comparisons often, perhaps inevitably, come to involve the use of implicitly or explicitly evaluative language, as when Costello asserts in *The Lives of Animals* that the scope of crimes perpetrated against nonhuman animals “dwarfs” the Holocaust (21). It is because the Holocaust is an historical event that provokes this kind of extra-historical commentary that it figures so prominently in Coetzee’s fiction: perhaps more than any other single event, the Holocaust demonstrates the interconnection of event and interpretation in historical narrative and so denies the possibility of completely disinterested historiography. Few other historical events, if any, are characterized by a

---

30 Indeed, to some extent debates about the question of the Holocaust’s uniqueness have spun out of control by assuming such a prominent place in Holocaust studies. In *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Steven T. Katz takes the issue to a new extreme, offering the most sustained argument in favour of Holocaust uniqueness. Katz frames his definition of uniqueness “in terms of intentionality” (13), and goes on to argue that the Holocaust “is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people” (28). For a sample of the positions on this issue see the essays collected in Alan Rosenbaum’s *Is the Holocaust Unique?*
simultaneously broad consensus, after decades of scholarly historical research, about the general shape of the events and a dizzying array of competing interpretations based on those facts.

Ultimately, for Coetzee, it is both possible and ethically desirable to make comparisons involving the Holocaust. Recurrent Holocaust references in Coetzee’s fiction indicate the strength of his objection to past and contemporary injustices inside and outside of South Africa. Allusions and direct references to the Holocaust function somewhat paradoxically in Coetzee’s writing: they evoke strong emotional responses, drawing on the event’s popular status as the worst crime in human history, while simultaneously rejecting the hierarchy of suffering that accompanies this status. In *The Lives of Animals*, when Elizabeth Costello asserts the likeness that many in her audience – both the one fictionalized within the text and the one comprised of readers outside the text – will find objectionable, she does so, crucially, by discussing the concentration camps without naming the Holocaust specifically. As Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider suggest in *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, the use of the word “Holocaust” carries with it an implicit claim to uniqueness, provided that no other genocide gets its own name (52). If the name “Holocaust” inscribes a hierarchical privileging of the Nazi genocide at a linguistic level, Costello’s method of evoking the event without naming it works in conjunction with the comparison she makes to disrupt claims of Holocaust uniqueness: indeed, Costello does in fact use the word “holocaust” once – when she refers to the “fresh holocaust”

---

31 Obviously, such a claim cannot ignore the morally reprehensible practice of Holocaust denial. The question of the extent of Holocaust denial is a matter for debate, however. For Deborah Lipstadt, Holocaust denial is an increasingly widespread and dangerous phenomenon, worthy of its own book-length study. In contrast, Peter Novick argues that Holocaust denial is an element on the political fringes with no real standing in mainstream society, despite the issue’s frequent media (and academic) coverage: though deplorable and offensive, it is not, for Novick, prevalent enough to be a cause for serious alarm. See Lipstadt’s *Denying the Holocaust* and Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life* for an elaboration on this issue.

32 Holocaust comparisons are also, it should be added, a common occurrence. Putting aside the question of whether or not such comparisons should be made, it makes little sense to ignore the fact that they are made frequently.
that occurs daily (35) – but the use of the lowercase ‘h’ indicates that the term has been unmoored from its conventional semantic particularity.

Such an unmooring works to divest the word Holocaust, as it is conventionally used, of its hierarchical supremacy vis a vis other words – genocide, apartheid, slavery – that typically signify atrocities assumed to be different because of their supposedly lesser scale. That Coetzee would conduct his interrogation of the Holocaust’s relative valuation at a linguistic level is unsurprising, given both Coetzee’s academic proclivities and his tendency to render his wider thematic concerns inseparable from his consideration of how language frames and mediates those concerns: in The Lives of Animals, a large part of the difficulty Costello encounters in effectively conveying the scale of what she sees as a “crime of stupefying proportions” (69). What Coetzee shows us is that, in contrast with the event known as the Holocaust, there is no word to describe the continuous, mechanized production of animal death. Whereas, for the majority of Costello’s audience, this linguistic lack signifies the non-criminal status of such a process, Costello herself invites us to read such a linguistic lack as the inability of our human language to acknowledge, contain, and communicate the scope of a crime which “dwarfs” the Holocaust (21).

If, in The Lives of Animals, Coetzee challenges the Holocaust’s privileged position as the ultimate signifier of human evil, that challenge continues throughout Elizabeth Costello, a work that contains the earlier text. Walking through the streets of Amsterdam, Costello reflects on the popular conception of evil: “Adolf and his cohorts still grip the popular imagination. A curious fact, considering that Koba the Bear, his older brother and mentor, by any measure more murderoust, more vile, more appalling to the soul, has almost dwindled away” (159). In this passage, Costello’s obscure reference to Stalin makes demands on the reader’s knowledge and ultimately works to reject an understanding of Hitler and the Nazis as exceptional exemplars of
evil by measuring Hitler’s evil against Stalin’s; yet, at the same time, Costello also signals her own (and, I would argue, Coetzee’s) rejection of the logic operative in claims about the quantifiable nature of evil: “A measuring of vileness against vileness in which the very act of measuring leaves a vile taste in the mouth. Twenty millions, six million, three million, a hundred thousand: at a certain point the mind breaks down before quanta” (159). Costello’s cataloguing of familiar statistics – six million is an obvious reference to the Holocaust, twenty million a conservative estimate of the casualties of Stalin’s murderous policies – seeks not a reversal of the prevailing hierarchy of evil, but its rejection. The simple inversion of hierarchy that Costello asserts in *The Lives of Animals* – wherein the continual mechanized production of animal deaths is deemed worse than the Holocaust – is later undermined in *Elizabeth Costello* when the very possibility of rendering evil quantifiable is cast as ethically dubious. Allusions and references to the Holocaust in Coetzee’s wider body of writing can be seen to operate similarly: for instance, the emotive appeal that comes with Major von Rensburg’s description of Michael K as an individual who looks “like someone out of Dachau” (*Life & Times of Michael K* 146) both draws on the horror attendant to Holocaust imagery and refuses to render K’s suffering secondary to the very terms of comparison that make that suffering comprehensible.

Though the Holocaust’s legacy has been central to Coetzee’s thinking from the beginning, it is in *The Lives of Animals* that Coetzee most clearly and explicitly explores what it means to think about the Holocaust comparatively. Early in her lecture, Costello acknowledges the dangers of comparing the Holocaust to the systematic murder of nonhuman animals when she admits that “talk of this kind polarizes people” (22), yet she insists on partaking of this polarizing talk. It would be quite unfair to Costello (or her creator), to accuse her of making a facile comparison, of engaging in the kind of “cheap point scoring” (22) that accompanies many of the
comparisons made by others, including those who make the very same comparison as Costello. As David Attwell notes of Coetzee’s writing generally, “Coetzee’s response to controversy and its underlying relations of power is to absorb it... into his fiction, to enact the contestations and the social conditions of possibility that history has bequeathed to him” (“J.M. Coetzee and South Africa” 170). This is precisely the path Coetzee chooses in *The Lives of Animals*. Aware of the likelihood that her comments will be met with resistance and anger, even anticipating it, Costello demonstrates a degree of self-awareness and deliberation when she persists with her contentious discussion. *The Lives of Animals* thus does not only depict a character that mobilizes the Holocaust comparatively, but also acts as a kind of meta-commentary on Holocaust comparisons. By depicting a character engaging in the kind of talk her audience wants no part of, Coetzee explores what about the Holocaust makes comparisons involving it so polarizing and reveals the effect of such polarization as an unwillingness to engage with contemporary ethical problems. *The Lives of Animals* is, of all Coetzee’s work, the text most explicitly involved in exposing and undermining the hierarchy of suffering that accompanies (the rejection of) Holocaust comparisons.

After reading *The Lives of Animals*, readers are most likely to remember the disturbing comparison that Elizabeth Costello makes when she likens the systematic murder of animals to the Holocaust. Deliberately provocative, though hardly novel\(^\text{33}\), Costello’s Holocaust comparison stands out in her criticism of Western philosophy’s failure to recognize the moral worth of animals\(^\text{34}\) and her discussion of poetic representations of animals. Obviously calculated to elicit a

---

33 In *The Holocaust Industry*, Norman Finkelstein writes, “one is hard-pressed to name a single political cause that hasn’t conscripted the Holocaust” (144); animal rights activists are amongst a myriad of groups that have invoked the Holocaust in support of a cause.

34 Though I use the term “animals” here, as opposed to “nonhuman animals,” I do so for reasons of brevity only. References to animals throughout this dissertation should be understood to imply the same meaning.
response, the analogy Costello puts forth is in many ways the crux of the text: any reading that ignores Costello’s controversial position will be wanting. Published in the same year as Coetzee’s Booker Prize-winning novel, *Disgrace*, *The Lives of Animals* occupies a place on the periphery of the growing *oeuvre* of Coetzee criticism, even though the story it relates reappears as part of *Elizabeth Costello*. The extant criticism on *The Lives of Animals* tends to discuss Costello’s comparison mainly in terms of what Coetzee suggests about animal rights and the species barrier and, accordingly, tends not to make the consideration of what Coetzee suggests about the Holocaust of central concern. 35 In this chapter, however, I contend that Coetzee does have something to say about the Holocaust in *The Lives of Animals*, and that a consideration of what Costello’s comparison allows Coetzee to say about the Holocaust – particularly as a global(ized) referent – is crucial to an understanding of the work. Coetzee’s Holocaust interest rests in his exploration of how an historical event – one which, it is worth noting, has been known by the singular term “the Holocaust” only since the 1960s (Novick 133) – operates in the present as a relatively fixed referent both in terms of its historical content and in terms of its moral and ethical signification. Making sense of *The Lives of Animals* ultimately entails recognizing how Costello’s comparison links Coetzee’s interrogation of the species boundary to his troubling of the fixity of the Holocaust in contemporary thought.

Before proceeding further, it seems worthwhile to address a pair of potential objections that such a reading of *The Lives of Animals* invites. On the one hand, to suggest that it is Coetzee who displays an interest in disrupting how and what the Holocaust typically signifies is to run the

---

35 This is not to suggest that critics have avoided Coetzee’s treatment of the Holocaust. In “What Is It Like to Be a Nonracist?” Michael Bell asserts that “the central theme [in *The Lives of Animals*] is the Shoah itself with the animal theme as an analytical device for unsettling conventional ways of thinking it” (76). While I agree with Bell’s argument that Coetzee is interested in rethinking the Holocaust – not the Shoah – I find Bell’s article unsatisfying because he does not make this claim central to his reading of the text and also because Bell is mistaken when he reduces the “animal theme” to an analytical device.
risk of treating Costello as a simple mouthpiece through which Coetzee can safely voice controversial personal opinions. Where Coetzee is concerned, such a position is never tenable: if any feature unifies much of Coetzee’s latest work – beginning with *Boyhood* (1997) and continuing on through *Summertime* (2009) – it is a warning about the possibility of determining the author’s “true thoughts” based on his fictions. In the case of *The Lives of Animals*, specifically, the nature of the work – a textual reproduction of Coetzee’s 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton that took the form of a story about another, fictional, author delivering a set of university lectures on the topic of how humans treat nonhuman animals – makes determining what Coetzee has to say about the Holocaust very difficult work indeed. The arguments Coetzee’s audience encounters “are Costello’s arguments. Coetzee’s fictional device enables him to distance himself from them” (Singer, “Reflections,” 91). For that reason, while there “is no doubt that Costello’s general concerns are indeed Coetzee’s” (Attwell “Life and Times” 36, emphasis mine), it is equally true that “Coetzee’s position is ultimately irreducible to Costello’s” (Durrant “J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination” 119).

Whatever opinions regarding the Holocaust that Costello voices during the course of her lectures, therefore, cannot be seen, in any uncomplicated manner, as reflective of Coetzee’s.

The acknowledgement of this feature of *The Lives of Animals* does not, however, clarify matters completely. If Costello is not simply a vehicle for voicing Coetzee’s opinions, where, then, does Coetzee stand in relation to Costello’s most controversial statements? Is the author – a known vegetarian – broadly sympathetic towards his creation’s deep-felt horror at the meat industry but reluctant to accept the Holocaust analogy she puts forth? Does Costello’s comparison come across to her creator as merely ludicrous, somewhat hyperbolic, or (as is the case for many readers) downright offensive? Any attempts to answer these questions must
grapple with the nature of Costello’s character, which many readers are likely to regard off-putting, if not thoroughly unlikable. Costello shows herself to be “narcissistic, grandiose, [and] short of temper” (Horsman 152), especially when, during what was supposed to have been a congenial academic debate with philosophy professor Thomas O’Hearne, she breaks with conventional academic decorum and brings the debate to a close on a note of “acrimony, hostility, bitterness” (LA 67). Costello’s abrasiveness – here, and elsewhere throughout the text – hardly encourages Coetzee’s audience to be receptive to his creation’s point of view.

Yet, it is worth acknowledging, *The Lives of Animals* is not atypical, particularly in terms of Coetzee’s later oeuvre, when it comes to presenting readers with a less-than-sympathetic protagonist: *Slow Man*’s Paul Rayment is grouchy and displays a number of “anti-social tendencies” (Woessner 225); in *Youth*, Coetzee “contrives to depict his youthful self in as poor a light as possible” (Head *Cambridge Introduction* 15); while in *Disgrace*, David Lurie – “old, grumpy…unattractive, even despicable” (Jolly “Writing Desire Responsibly” 99) – may well be the least likeable of Coetzee’s protagonists since the murderous Jacobus Coetzee and psychotic Eugene Dawn of *Dusklands*. At the same time, Michael McDunnuh has persuasively made the case that, when it comes to Lurie, Coetzee “sets the ethical challenge of understanding and sympathizing with Lurie by charging us to ‘think ourselves’ into his being” (16). I want to extend McDunnah’s argument and suggest that Coetzee sets a similar challenge in relation to Costello, a protagonist whose genesis is roughly contemporary with Lurie’s and whose ability to “think [her] way into the existence of a being who never existed” models the power of the sympathetic imagination for her audience (*Lives* 35). If, as readers, we are offended by Costello’s Holocaust comparison or are tempted, like Costello’s fictional audience, to remain “nonplussed” by Costello’s less-than-satisfying responses to reasonable questions about what practical advice
might be taken from her lectures (Lives 37), we are also invited to understand, if we can, what it means for Costello to live on a daily basis amidst “a crime of stupefying proportions” (Lives 69). In this way, the text renders the question of Coetzee’s relationship to Costello secondary to the ways that Costello attempts to unsettle a great many things, including how we think about the Holocaust.

On the other hand, reading the text as being at some level “about” the Holocaust and how it is understood may be to fall into the trap of “deflection,” as described by Cora Diamond (who borrows the term from Stanley Cavell): as Diamond explains it, deflection occurs “when we are moved from appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity” (57). Diamond’s warning against too easily falling prey to the impulse to categorize Coetzee’s text as a contribution to a familiar, and thus non-threatening, philosophical debate about animals is a useful one that has implications for the reading I wish to pursue: by treating The Lives of Animals as a meditation on what and how the Holocaust means, I may run the risk of obscuring the text’s central “concern with the presentation of a wounded woman” (Diamond 49). However, as useful as Diamond’s warning is, her insistence on the centrality of Costello’s woundedness itself runs the risk of producing as unsatisfying a reading of The Lives of Animals as some of the responses she calls into question, because it loses sight of the particularity of both the content and the context of Coetzee’s story. There are important questions that Diamond’s analysis leaves unanswered. For instance, why is the Holocaust comparison Costello makes, and upon which other characters repeatedly comment, so vitally important both to Costello personally and to the larger narrative Coetzee constructs? Of all the forums in which Coetzee could have chosen to speak or write about the treatment of animals and the Holocaust, why is it that he chose to tell Costello’s story at an American
academic institution, and why is it that the story he tells is similarly set in America? It is to these kinds of questions, about which Diamond is silent, that I now turn my attention.

Critical and philosophical debates about Holocaust uniqueness are implicit in Costello’s comparison, a comparison that insists upon the Holocaust’s comparability but also enables Coetzee’s use of the Holocaust as a limit case to explore how comparisons construct the meaning of two referents. Abraham Stern, a poet and professor at the fictional university where Costello delivers her address, gives voice in *The Lives of Animals* to one of the polarized positions mentioned above in explaining his decision to absent himself from the dinner held in Costello’s honor. Writing to Costello, he accuses her of misunderstanding “the nature of likenesses…willfully, to the point of blasphemy” (50). Stern continues: “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” (50). In addition to providing an internal critique of Costello’s comparison within *The Lives of Animals* itself, Stern’s letter serves a crucial function in the text by anticipating the kind of response that Coetzee can reasonably expect his audience to have to his protagonist: the offense Stern takes to Costello’s speech provides a similarly offended reader with an articulate in-text surrogate who can object to Costello’s address in a cogent fashion. Yet, while the immediate rejection of comparison between Jews and animals shows admirable historical sensitivity given the Nazi tendency to animalize Jews by referring to them as vermin, Coetzee is interested in demonstrating what the immediate rejection of a comparison between Jewish victims and animals means for animals – namely, the hostile rejection of a dialogue meant to better their lot.

Stern’s objections to Costello’s comparison cannot be reduced to a simple assertion of Holocaust uniqueness; Coetzee simply does not allow us to know whether Stern generally finds
Holocaust comparisons offensive, or whether it is Costello’s comparison in particular that raises his ire. Nevertheless, in objecting to Costello’s comparison, Stern voices the kind of position that Coetzee explores and interrogates. Perhaps characteristically for Coetzee, this process begins at a linguistic level with an exploration of the relation between the figurative tenor and vehicle in a Holocaust comparison. Emptied of its emotional charge, with its implicit accusations of anti-Semitism, Stern’s position amounts to the claim that Costello has simply inverted the proper order of things by making the Holocaust the figurative vehicle in her comparison, when its rightful function is as the tenor. Stern’s objection to Costello’s comparison stems, in part, from his refusal to follow Costello in viewing the relation between the genocidal murder of Europe’s Jewish population and the industrialized slaughter of animals as a metaphoric one, that allows for tenor and vehicle to stand in a reflexive and mutually-constitutive relation with each other.

Instead, by referring to Costello’s blasphemous misunderstanding of *likenesses*, Stern restricts Costello’s comparison to a simile, revealing that he is capable of viewing the plight of animals only as a figurative vehicle in that non-reflexive, strictly unidirectional simile. Though his own understanding of the Holocaust is shaped, in part, by figurative language, he insists that the Holocaust cannot be mobilized in a reflexive comparison to shed light upon the plight of nonhuman animals.

Though Stern’s letter to Costello takes her comparison as its subject, it is really the rigidity of Stern’s conception of how language functions that is at stake in the episode. It is ultimately Stern, Coetzee suggests, who willfully misunderstands the nature of Costello’s comparison when he insists on treating it as a simile, despite the fact that Costello never claims that the industrialized production of animal death is *like* the Holocaust. Stern’s reluctance to consider the possibility that Costello may be speaking metaphorically is perplexing, particularly
because Stern is, according to Costello’s son, “[q]uite well-respected” as a poet (LA 49), and raises questions about the origins of the poet’s willful (mis)understanding.

The context in which Coetzee sets *The Lives of Animals* suggests answers to these questions and is crucial to understanding why Coetzee’s intervention on behalf of nonhuman animals takes the form that it does. Though coming from outside the American setting of the story he tells, Coetzee employs a metafictional frame to locate his text in an American context, one that mirrors the actual setting in which Coetzee first read *The Lives of Animals*, rendering that context doubly important by calling attention to the centrality of the Holocaust in American consciousness, only to disrupt American ideas about it. Insofar as *The Lives of Animals* is “about” Holocaust comparisons, it rejects notions of the Holocaust’s incomparability, but does so in a specific national context: as such, Coetzee leaves open the possibility, at least, that in a different context, a different position concerning Holocaust comparisons could be privileged.\(^36\)

Coetzee’s text thus responds to the widely noted “Americanization” of the Holocaust and grounds its consideration of animals in that context. This is not to say that Coetzee’s text is of limited relevance, however. If the Holocaust is truly being Americanized, it is worth noting that the Holocaust’s Americanization is taking place concurrently with the ongoing process of globalization. Many of the most significant representations of and memorials to the Holocaust that have been seen by international audiences – Steven Spielberg’s highly successful film, *Schindler’s List*, and the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, to name just two – come from American sources. Moreover, in Annette

---

\(^{36}\) There are different implications for Holocaust comparisons in, say, America and Germany. Jürgen Habermas’s response to comparative Holocaust studies in Germany kicked off the intellectual and political debate that came to be known as the *Historikerstreit*. Habermas accused conservative historians, like Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, of seeking to “normalize” the German past by seeking analogues between the Holocaust and the Soviet gulags. In a different national context, however, Holocaust comparisons need not necessarily normalize the Holocaust.
Wieviorka’s words, “Holocaust historiography, having once been German and Israeli, is now primarily American” (118). Assessing the international reach and power of American representations of the Holocaust, Tim Cole concludes that “there is little doubt that at the end of the twentieth century the ‘Holocaust’ is being made in America” (15).

In initially delivering *The Lives of Animals* to an American audience, and simultaneously fictionalizing that American audience within the text, Coetzee, in a sense, symbolically brings his contestation of an event whose meaning is produced largely in the United States directly to its source. Stern’s position on likenesses reflects a shared understanding of the Holocaust that Coetzee is interested in troubling. Coetzee mobilizes Costello’s comparison, then, not only to shed light on the plight of animals, but also to demonstrate how such a comparison renegotiates the meaning of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Coetzee challenges Americanized perceptions of the Holocaust, suggesting that the Holocaust, particularly, but not exclusively, in an American context, can become a deterrent to the acknowledgment of obligation in the face of contemporary ethical crises.

If the Holocaust is the supreme example of evil in the wider Western imagination, this is especially true for Americans, who “derive much of their contemporary language of catastrophe from the Nazi destruction of the Jews” (Doneson 4). Americans arguably also derive much of their contemporary language of cruelty, intolerance, and anti-democratic tyranny from the Holocaust as well. Despite the centrality of the Holocaust in American public discourse, an incongruous lack of knowledge about the Holocaust complicates its central place in American consciousness. Polls indicate that “while Americans know the least about the Holocaust, they seem to care the most” (Rosenfeld 120). Moreover, the Holocaust provides Americans with a subject about which they are able to achieve a rare public consensus. Peter Novick explains: “As,
over the past generation, ethical and ideological divergence and disarray in the United States advanced to the point where Americans could agree on nothing else, all could join together in deploiring the Holocaust” (13). Costello’s comparison takes on new meaning in this context: it is as much about the combination of American emotional investment in, agreement concerning, and ignorance about the Holocaust as it is about either animals or the Holocaust itself.

Deliberately incorporating hostile reactions to Costello into The Lives of Animals, Coetzee anticipates similar reactions from his audience(s). Norma, Costello’s daughter-in-law, says that Costello “should have thought twice before bringing up the Holocaust. I could feel the hackles rising all around me in the audience” (49). The offense that Costello’s audience feels dramatizes the type of response Coetzee wants to explore. Its reaction is instinctual, manifested bodily in the rising of hackles, and suggests a corresponding lack of intellectual receptivity to Costello or the concerns behind her polemic. The audience’s reaction in this case prefigures Stern’s more articulate response to Costello in his letter, where his references to God and to blasphemy illustrate the sacralization of the Holocaust in American consciousness; Costello’s fictional audience’s response, anticipating the reaction of Coetzee’s audience, is suggestive of the way in which Holocaust discourse, particularly in the United States, belongs not to the realm of opinions but, rather, of belief. As Coetzee’s text demonstrates, it is precisely because Costello’s comparison seeks to upset a hierarchy of suffering that is grounded not only in intellectual argument, but also in supra-rational certainty, that it is rejected in such absolute terms. The sacred character that the Holocaust has assumed in American life, Coetzee suggests, acts to prevent engagements with other ethical dilemmas, which are seen not to measure up to the Holocaust, if they are considered at all.
Significantly, in demonstrating not just that the Holocaust functions in such a manner, but also why it does so, Coetzee situates *The Lives of Animals* in a specific geographical and temporal setting: a footnote in *The Lives of Animals* directs readers to consult Daniel J. Goldhagen’s best-selling book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (20). This seemingly incidental reference to a comparatively well-known academic account of the Holocaust, published in 1996, further contextualizes Coetzee’s narrative: the story Coetzee tells is not only set in America, but also, and more specifically, in a late twentieth-century American context in which references to the Holocaust take on specific meanings.

Naturally, the centrality of some representations of the Holocaust, and not others, means that these versions offered definitive accounts of the Holocaust to Americans, and to the rest of the world, at the end of the century. As Rosenfeld puts it, “for most people a sense of the Nazi crimes against the Jews is formed less by the record of events established by professional historians than it is by individual stories and images that reach us from more popular writers, artists, film directors, television producers, political figures and the like” (120). *Schindler’s List*, in particular, “has been watched by large numbers of people who had very little previous knowledge of the Holocaust, and cannot be expected to gain more knowledge in the future” (Bartov 46). *The Lives of Animals* is not a direct response to a film such as *Schindler’s List*, nor

---

37 Interestingly, the footnotes found in *The Lives of Animals* are absent from the chapters of *Elizabeth Costello* that are comprised of the earlier text.

38 The place of the Holocaust in American consciousness has altered dramatically in the decades after the event. See Tim Cole’s *Selling the Holocaust*, Tony Kushner’s *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life*, and Alvin Rosenfeld’s “The Americanization of the Holocaust” for the relevant discussions of how the meaning of the Holocaust has changed over time in America. Thomas Fallace offers a more specifically focused approach in *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, in which he pays particular attention to the curricular development of Holocaust education. Fallace’s book provides an effective alternative approach to that of Novick, who emphasizes the role of Jewish elites in the raising of American Holocaust consciousness, in that Fallace is less tied to a top-down notion of education. As Fallace explains, “the rise of Holocaust education was a grassroots phenomenon initiated by practicing teachers” (5).
to any other individual film or text that represents the Holocaust; rather, it responds indirectly to the intellectual climate of which such prominent Holocaust representations are a part and to which they contribute. Published in 1999, six years after the “year of the Holocaust,” a year which saw the theatrical release *Schindler’s List* as well as the opening of the USHMM, *The Lives of Animals* self-consciously interjects its narrative about an aging author grappling with what she perceives to be a dire ethical crisis into a context in which, on the one hand, the Holocaust assumed unprecedented centrality in American consciousness, but also in which, on the other hand, Americans came to know the Holocaust through exposure to a limited number of sources.

The late twentieth-century tendency for Holocaust consciousness to base itself more on a handful of highly visible representations of the Holocaust than on the historical event itself, argues Tim Cole, problematically enables individual representations of the Holocaust to attain a falsely representative status: “for some, Schindler’s List has almost the status of a primary source. It is not seen as simply representation, but as the ‘real thing’” (75). In a case such as *Schindler’s List*, the film’s factual accuracy enables a kind of metonymic fallacy: an audience that sees *Schindler’s List* – or, alternatively, one which visits the USHMM – can become complacent in assuming that its knowledge of an individual account constitutes complete knowledge of the Holocaust. Cole thus identifies a major epistemological problem, one that does not apply only to the Holocaust, but is of particular importance in relation to what is possibly considered the defining event of the twentieth century.

It is precisely because the Holocaust is an event that is widely assumed to be known that it presents such an obstacle to Costello, and anyone else wishing to mobilize the Holocaust comparatively. Crucially, *The Lives of Animals* foregrounds problems with knowing the
Holocaust. In this regard, the work is of a piece with Coetzee’s other fictions which, in a general sense, are concerned to interrogate not only \textit{what} we (think we) know but also \textit{how} we know what we (think we) know: this is what I would consider the essence of Coetzee’s Beckettian inheritance, for, as Jonathan Boulter writes, Beckett’s fictions are characteristically “metahermeneutical” in that they “not only thematize the reading process but in various ways are “about” the reader and the process of interpretation” (4). In the case of \textit{The Lives of Animals}, specifically, Coetzee troubles the epistemological, and subsequent ethical, comfort with which an Americanized Holocaust can be approached by the reader of the text. Given that the replacement of event by representation constitutes a form of metonymic substitution (as in Cole’s example of \textit{Schindler’s List}), it is possible to read \textit{The Lives of Animals} as foregrounding and troubling the role of metonymy (and synecdoche) in Holocaust representation. Though Costello does not use the word “Holocaust” when laying the grounds for her comparison, she (and Coetzee) can safely assume that the audience will understand her. The Holocaust is “so familiar that we don’t even need to hear the word spoken” to know when it is being discussed (Cole 2). Costello may not use the word “Holocaust”, but her audience nevertheless assumes a shared frame of reference. This assumption of a shared frame of reference is precisely what Coetzee seeks to trouble.

Preparing her audience for her comparison first by discussing the concentration camps of the Third Reich, Costello focuses on Treblinka, rather than on the more famous camp, Auschwitz (19). This decision is revealing. For Cole, “[n]ot only is the word ‘Auschwitz’ virtually

\footnote{It is worth noting, at least in passing, that Coetzee’s choice to have Costello reference Treblinka is resonant with the wider contestation of an Americanized Holocaust taking place in the text. Treblinka, which was, as opposed to the more complex, hybrid extermination-labour camp at Auschwitz, a straightforward extermination camp, has not only been marginal to the popular understanding of the Holocaust but also is the camp at the centre of what may well be another of \textit{The Lives of Animals}’ implicit filmic intertexts: Claude Lanzman’s \textit{Shoah}. Given that \textit{Schindler’s List}, a film at the heart of the contemporary Americanization of the Holocaust and one which includes a trip to Auschwitz, has come to}
synonymous with ‘Holocaust’, but the word has become virtually synonymous with generic ‘evil’” (98). As such, Auschwitz is a familiar synecdochical and metonymic substitute for the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{40} That Costello evokes the Holocaust and its attendant associations without directly naming it, and without reference to Auschwitz, reveals much about the complexity of Coetzee’s approach in \textit{The Lives of Animals}. Though Treblinka is sufficiently recognizable as a Holocaust referent, Costello’s decision to discuss Treblinka relies, at least partially, upon the reader’s recognition of Auschwitz as an absent metonymic/synecdochical referent. Costello employs a seemingly familiar representational strategy when she uses Treblinka to refer to the Holocaust; however, by having Costello reference Treblinka instead of Auschwitz, Coetzee disrupts the conventional relationship between Auschwitz and the Holocaust, and in the process interrupts his audience’s epistemological certainty concerning the Holocaust. It is in this way that Coetzee seeks to offer Costello’s comparison a better chance of a hearing.

Crucially, Coetzee’s – not to mention Costello’s – disruption of his (American) audience’s epistemological comfort, deriving from its (limited) Holocaust awareness, also works to deny that audience the corresponding ethical comfort that can come from “knowing” the Holocaust. Indeed, the two effects are inextricably intertwined in Coetzee’s text, as it is only when the audience’s certainty in its knowledge is undermined that the text can similarly trouble the audience’s self-confidence regarding its own fundamental innocence.

\textsuperscript{40} Auschwitz is a synecdochical referent in the sense that, as one particular site of the Holocaust, it signifies the location of the Holocaust. Auschwitz is also a metonymic referent because it connotes a specifically Nazi form of violence.
The Holocaust’s centrality in American historical consciousness is somewhat paradoxical.\textsuperscript{41} Taking place on another continent, the Holocaust is, technically speaking, not part of American history; yet the proliferation of museums and memorials in US cities, including the USHMM in Washington, DC, the symbolic heart of America, positions the Holocaust as American history (with some justification).\textsuperscript{42} More often than not, American representations of the Holocaust are not just about the murder of Europe’s Jewish population; they are also about America itself. The USHMM, in particular, weaves together an account of the Holocaust with an ennobling representation of the American nation. This intertwining of narratives takes place not only in terms of the memorial’s content, but also its physical location:

Situated adjacent to the National Mall and within view of the Washington Monument to the right and the Jefferson Memorial across the Tidal Basin to the left, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a neighbor to the National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian Institute. It enshrines, by dint of its placement, not just the history of the Holocaust but American democratic and egalitarian ideals as they counterpoint the Holocaust. (Young 72)

The juxtaposition of the Holocaust with American values continues inside the USHMM itself, which, according to Cole, “sells” a nationalist narrative in that it aims to tell the story of the Holocaust as “the negation of American ideals” (xv, 154). When visitors enter the museum, they are greeted by words from the Declaration of Independence that offer guarantees guarding against bigotry (Rosenfeld 128). Accordingly, there is a sense, for Cole, “in which the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is essentially established as an un-American museum, telling the story of an un-American crime to Americans” (158). Such a position is shared by James Young,

\textsuperscript{41} Tim Cole, in \textit{Selling the Holocaust}, and historian Peter Novick, in \textit{The Holocaust in American Life}, are among a host of writers who have noted this paradox.

\textsuperscript{42} Clearly, the role of the American army in liberating some of the camps in the Third Reich and the post-war immigration of many Holocaust survivors to the United States need to be acknowledged as a part of the American experience of the Second World War; however, such acknowledgement need not, in and of itself, make the Holocaust a part of American history per se.
for whom “the Holocaust memorial defines what it means to be American by graphically illustrating what it means not to be American” (73). Though the representational politics of the USHMM are complex, in that American culpability in refusing refuge to desperate European Jews is acknowledged, America ultimately gets figured by the USHMM – through the combination of its content and its physical placement in the symbolic heart of America, which renders it central to American history but foreign to American values – as a place where the Holocaust could not (have) happen(ed).

The ideological work performed by the USHMM in representing Americans as incapable of such evil recurs in other prominent depictions of the Holocaust that appeared at the end of the twentieth century. Like the museum in Washington, DC, *Schindler’s List* is an Americanized “telling” of the Holocaust (Cole 76). Audiences view the film through American eyes and so are presented with implicit commentary about America itself. In making the film, Steven Spielberg deliberately worked without American stars (Loshitzky 5), an absence which is particularly noticeable in the film’s dialogue as all of the participants in Spielberg’s version of the Holocaust are marked as different from American viewers by their non-American accents: in the logic of a film set in continental Europe but performed in *English*, the perceptibly Irish accent evident in the speech of Liam Neeson playing the part of Oskar Schindler, for instance, does not act to replicate an imaginary German-to-English translation of Schindler’s speech patterns mimaetically, but rather stands in metonymically as an audible manifestation of an Other (read non-American) sensibility. While the famous American director’s casting decisions cannot reasonably be reduced to a (conscious or unconscious) desire on his part to represent the Holocaust as an un-American crime, given the legitimate historical reasons for Spielberg’s casting decisions, the
effect of casting recognizably foreign actors in Schindler’s List is, nevertheless, a potentially comforting narrative about America and Americans. Even a scholarly work such as Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners offers Americans a similar ethically comforting narrative, one that reassures them of their fundamental innocence. At its core, Goldhagen’s book is about perpetrators, and its central argument concerns what the author identifies as a long-standing tradition of “eliminationist” anti-Semitism at the heart of German society. For Goldhagen, this pervasive form of anti-Semitism serves to explain the Holocaust: indeed, it is the cause for the Holocaust, the reason that ordinary Germans both accepted and participated in the large-scale, and often gratuitously cruel, murder of Jews. It is this allegedly monocausal explanation of the Holocaust that has prompted the most strenuous objections to Goldhagen’s work.43

A key debate to emerge from the Goldhagen controversy was that between Goldhagen and Christopher Browning, particularly because Goldhagen follows Browning’s lead in considering the actions of Reserve Police Battalion 101, a battalion that operated in occupied Eastern Europe and participated in the genocide. As Browning explains in a response to Goldhagen’s work, he and Goldhagen agree on two issues: “the extensive participation of numerous ordinary Germans in the mass murder of Jews and the high degree of voluntarism they exhibited” (“Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans” 55). This, however, is where agreement between the two ends. In his key Holocaust study, Ordinary Men (1991), Browning argues that

43 Goldhagen himself denies that his book offers a monocausal explanation. In “The Failure of the Critics” Goldhagen writes,

[explaining the Holocaust and its many features requires…attention to many factors other than anti-Semitism. Yet whatever the influence of such factors was upon the formulation and implementation of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic program, the source of the will of the Nazi leadership and of the ordinary Germans executed the policies to persecute and kill Jews derived not from these other factors but principally from the actors’ common anti-Semitism (141).
more mundane concerns, including desires for career advancement and fears about appearing weak in front of colleagues, were instrumental factors in the decisions of members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 to participate directly in the violent murder of Jews (188-89). In contrast, Goldhagen focuses his attention on a German culture of anti-Semitic hate as the primary factor enabling individual Germans to engage in mass murder. Goldhagen details a number of scenes of gratuitously cruel murder and suggests that this capacity for cruelty is linked to a specifically German view of Jews: according to Goldhagen, “the perpetrators, “ordinary Germans,” were animated by a particular type of anti-Semitism that led them to conclude that the Jews ought to die” (14). Jane Caplan is thus correct when she explains that “the sheer preference to kill assumes a large explanatory place in Goldhagen’s argument” (157).

The idea that the perpetrators were driven primarily by a specific desire to kill finds no place in Browning’s work. Accordingly, the actions of the members of Reserve Battalion 101 suggest to Browning that anyone could potentially be a perpetrator: as he puts it, “[i]f the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could have become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?” (189) Goldhagen modifies Browning’s “ordinary men” thesis by insisting upon the specifically German character of the individuals involved in the Holocaust. As a result, Goldhagen’s treatment of Holocaust perpetrators works against the broadly implicating nature of Browning’s study: in contradistinction to Browning, the potential to become a perpetrator in the Holocaust is restricted to one national group.

---

44 Although it is not something Browning calls attention to, his own thinking is heavily indebted to Hannah Arendt. As James Waller explains in *Becoming Evil*, Arendt’s writing on Eichmann and the banality of evil “would fundamentally challenge our understanding of who commits extraordinary human evil” (94); after Arendt, it became commonplace that “the most outstanding common characteristic of perpetrators of extraordinary evil is their normality, not their abnormality” (87). Browning’s thinking about the Holocaust is distinctly post-Arendtian in this regard; I am inclined to position Coetzee similarly as an inheritor, and occasional interrogator, of Arendt’s thinking.
Modifying Browning’s position, Goldhagen partakes of a representational practice that enables Americans – particularly those who consider themselves to be concerned with matters of racial equality and justice – to feel good about themselves, confident of their essential difference from the “ordinary Germans” who participated in the Holocaust, and thus “offers his U.S. readers a seductive counter-image of themselves” (Caplan 159) in a manner reminiscent of Schindler’s List and the USHMM. Goldhagen makes this explicit when he writes that “much of Germany did roughly mirror our society, but…important realms of German society were fundamentally different” (Hitler’s Willing Executioners, 28).

An international bestseller that enjoyed unusual popular success for an academic work, Goldhagen’s book was controversial in its time, even garnering significant attention from the mainstream media and making a minor celebrity of its author, and prompting a host of (mainly critical) academic responses.45 The reference to Goldhagen’s book in a footnote in The Lives of Animals is, as I argue above, a temporal marker grounding the work in a particular historical context. The international furor over Hitler’s Willing Executioners constitutes an important part of that context, helping us to make sense of Coetzee’s text by positioning it as a critique of the kind of ethically-excusing representational practice exemplified by Goldhagen but common to a wider range of contemporary Holocaust accounts.

Radically different in form, media, and content, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Schindler’s List, and Hitler’s Willing Executioners, three highly visible and successful American products of the late-twentieth century, all contribute to a prominent discourse about the

45 See the essays collected in Unwilling Germans?: The Goldhagen Debate, A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth, and The “Goldhagen Effect”: History, Memory, Nazism – Facing the German Past for a (largely negative) assessment of Goldhagen’s book. The speed with which these publications followed Goldhagen’s indicates both the level of success and of controversy that Goldhagen achieved.
Holocaust that portrays Americans as being incapable of participating in such a crime. Read in this context, The Lives of Animals responds to narratives about the Holocaust that comfort Americans on an ethical level, for it is a text that resolutely rejects notions of Holocaust incommensurability and of German exceptionalism. Where the USHMM, Schindler’s List, and Hitler’s Willing Executioners posit a fundamental discontinuity between Americans and Holocaust perpetrators, Coetzee asserts a continuity, pointing to a historical connection and insisting that Americans, though not only Americans, are involved in an ongoing crime of the Holocaust’s scope: as Costello states, “Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies” (53).

Coetzee’s text thus replicates the imbrication of writing about the Holocaust with writing about America, but challenges the tendency of an Americanized Holocaust to tell Americans reassuring stories about themselves. In offering a fundamental challenge to the construction of national innocence embedded in an Americanized Holocaust, The Lives of Animals can be read as a text that engages, typically for a postcolonial work, in a challenge to a hegemonic power even as it re-orient that challenge away from what might be expected to be the primary target of writing emerging from the former British empire. In a short critical piece entitled “Critic and Citizen”, published in the journal Pretexts around the same time as The Lives of Animals, Coetzee expressed his views concerning the place of the United States in the prevailing neocolonial dispensation:

There is a process of intellectual colonization going on today that is far more massive and totalizing than anything Victorian England could muster. It originates in the culture factories of the United States, and can be detected in the most intimate corners of our lives…It passes my comprehension that we as academic intellectuals in Africa and of

---

46 Other historical connections can be made: American eugenics, for example, was an important precursor to the Nazi genocide. See Fallace’s The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools for a discussion of the impact of American eugenics on Nazi science.
Africa should want to spend our time tracking down the residual ghosts of the nineteenth-century British Empire, when it is clearly more urgent to recognize and confront the new global imperialism. (“Critic and Citizen,” 111)

If *The Lives of Animals* is to be read as a response to an Americanized Holocaust, as I argue it should be, it can best be read in light of Coetzee’s stated distrust of what he calls the culture factories of the United States. Coetzee’s challenge to an Americanized Holocaust, from this perspective, becomes part and parcel of a larger concern to contest the imposition of a set of ideologically laden narratives – with their attendant valorization of American history and values – about not only Africa but also the rest of the postcolonial world. In a global historical context in which the United States’ capacity to disseminate its cultural productions is matched only by its military and technological might, Coetzee’s challenge to one aspect of the globalization of American culture reveals itself to be related to a similar contestation of the more material manifestations of American imperialism that can be found running throughout his fictional output, most overtly in works like *Dusklands* and *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Denying the innocence of the Poles around Treblinka who chose not to know what was happening, Costello informs her audience that it is “inconceivable that people who did not know (in that special sense)...can be fully human” (*Lives* 21). The ethical implications of her claim for her American, and international, audiences are broad. Given Costello’s preeminent focus – the treatment of nonhuman animals by humans – the reference to the willed ignorance of the Poles near Treblinka cannot but cast the reader of *The Lives of Animals* in an analogous role. Costello tells her audience: “I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant

---

47 In *Dusklands*, Coetzee’s first published fiction, the author imaginatively links the work of Eugene Dawn – a propagandist working to further American aims in the Vietnam War – to the adventures of Jacobus Coetzee, an explorer from South Africa’s eighteenth-century colonial history. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the work’s protagonist, a novelist by the name of JC, comments scathingly on the conduct of the United States and its allies in fighting the so-called War on Terror.
enough town. I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here... They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them” (21). Here, Costello figures her audience as bystanders of a different, and ongoing, atrocity, as complicit in it as the citizens of Treblinka were in the event that came to be known as the Holocaust; readers who rush to object to Costello’s comparison on the grounds that animals are less (important) than humans find themselves uncomfortably close to replicating Nazi justifications of the so-called “Final Solution.” At the same time, however, the parallel that Costello insists upon extends beyond the terms of Costello’s comparison: if the Holocaust and the meat industry rely on bystanders’ willed ignorance of the abuses that take place all around them, the same can be said of colonialism in all its manifestations.

Waltham, lacking the signs of horror Costello names (either because they are physically absent from the town or are merely well-hidden; ultimately, for Costello, the difference is irrelevant) represents, on a small scale, the working out of a larger spacio-political logic whereby all that is distasteful, troubling, or horrifying takes place, in a sense, “over there,” out of sight and out of mind. This spacio-political logic was operative in the Nazi camps, in apartheid-era South Africa, and in what is now an increasingly globalized and, for many, neo-colonial economic dispensation in which the United States plays a key role. Costello’s comparison brings atrocity closer to home by highlighting and undercutting the logic that renders it simultaneously visible and invisible, known and unknown. Addressing her fictional American audience, paralleling Coetzee’s real life address to his American audience, Costello confronts that audience with an image of itself it would prefer not to see, one which demands that it reckon with its own role as

48 In a text about the injustices animals face, Coetzee is remarkably reticent about representing animal suffering and death. I suggest that this decision reflects concerns similar to restrictions made against Holocaust representation: while it is Costello who explicitly compares the treatment of animals to the Holocaust, it is Coetzee who seeks to validate Costello’s position in his representational practice.
bystander. In an era of American hegemony, that demand is, as I have been arguing, particularly pointed in relation to an American audience, which both knows and does not know, in Costello’s “special sense,” what kinds actions are undertaken around the globe with the approval of, and at the direction of, its elected officials. At the same time, however, Costello’s demand does not stop with the American reader, as the spacio-political logic with which Costello concerns herself is by no means geographically confined within the boundaries of one particular nation, but recurs in a myriad of ways, on similar and different scales, around the world. With each potential parallel that arises from Costello’s stated comparison, *The Lives of Animals* further enmeshes its audiences – American and non-American – in a narrative that stresses that audience’s current complicity in a number of atrocities which, like the Holocaust, are functionally reliant upon, and could not take place without, the willed blindness of bystanders.

In terms of how it positions its audience, then, *The Lives of Animals* differs considerably from a text such as Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* and from a film such as *Schindler’s List* insofar as Coetzee’s narrative actively denies its readers the opportunity to assume the role of consumers, or spectators, of an atrocity. Cast instead as bystanders, readers of *The Lives of Animals* become participants rather than outsiders observing or learning about events that do not involve them.\(^49\) In this way, Coetzee’s narrative, with the notorious Holocaust comparison at its centre, lays an ethical charge before its audience, one that exceeds the typical call for remembrance common to much popular – and some academic – discourse about the event.

\(^49\) Although, as I argue, the USHMM performs ideological work similar to that of *Schindler’s List* or *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, it is in regard to the positioning of its audience that the USHMM parts ways with Spielberg’s film and Goldhagen’s book, as visitors to the USHMM are issued identity cards linking them to concentration camp prisoners.
If, as I have been arguing, *The Lives of Animals* can be productively read as a response to, and thorough-going critique of, the Americanization of the Holocaust, particularly at the century’s end, then Costello’s emphasis on the role of bystanders in the Holocaust takes on an added dimension of meaning. As Rosenfeld notes, a paradigm shift in the way that Americans think about the Holocaust has taken place, wherein the focus has moved from Holocaust perpetrators, victims and bystanders to rescuers and survivors (‘Americanization’ 143).

Focusing on bystanders, then, Costello hearkens back to an older way of thinking about the Holocaust – one which perceived in the event a fundamental challenge to traditional notions of guilt and innocence – and thus to a different set of implications to be drawn from the event.

It is fitting that Costello draws on an older understanding of the Holocaust, because *The Lives of Animals* is at some level concerned with generational difference. Costello’s son John “does not want to hear his mother talking about death. Furthermore, he has a strong sense that her audience – which consists, after all, mainly of young people – wants death-talk even less” (19). The audience’s desire to avoid death-talk thus speaks to a generational gap in terms of the implications to be taken from atrocity\(^50\); at the same time, however, its reluctance has as much to do, if not more, with its national origin as with its age.

Literary critic Lawrence Langer has long noted the tendency for Holocaust representations (particularly American ones) to offer what he terms a “discourse of consolation” that shields its audience from the full horror of the Holocaust and enables us to take a positive message from it, even amidst the devastation (*Admitting the Holocaust* 7). This discourse may

\(^{50}\) Caplan notes that the reception of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* took shape largely along generational lines. This generational gap was apparent in the United States but to an even greater degree in Germany “where the gap between academics and public was also a gap between the generations” (“Reflections” 154).
not be a new development in terms of American attempts to reckon with the Holocaust\textsuperscript{51}, but it remains a significant feature of an increasingly Americanized event. \textit{Schindler’s List}, for instance, “offers us a happy ending, where the 1,100 Schindler Jews survive, rather than one where the 6 million Jews not on the list are killed” (Cole 77). Similarly, though the story that the USHMM tells is certainly more complicated than Spielberg’s film, and its ending more ambivalent, it too participates in important ways in the discourse of consolation. On the one hand, the museum consoles its visitors even as it teaches and reminds them of the extent of Nazi violence. The first images visitors encounter are of Americans liberating the camps (Cole 152). Beginning in 1945 rather than 1939, the Memorial Museum’s story of the Holocaust emplots a narrative of rescue, so that visitors’ encounter with genocide is made more bearable by their foreknowledge of liberation. On the other hand, when visitors to the USHMM receive identity cards linking them to concentration camp visitors, visitors are statistically more likely to receive an identity card linking them to a survivor rather than a victim (Cole 162). The paradigm shift that Rosenfeld identifies as a key feature of the contemporary Americanization of the Holocaust thus exacerbates the longer-standing tendency for American representations of the Holocaust to offer a discourse of consolation. Representations of the event that opt for happier endings, by emphasizing survival, emplot the event in such a way that a different version of the Holocaust emerges: rather than being narratives that are primarily about death, stories of survivors and

\textsuperscript{51} Examples of it are abundant in American representations of the Holocaust from as far back as the 1950s. The stage and screen adaptations of the \textit{Diary of Anne Frank}, for example, exemplify the discourse of consolation. Goodrich and Hackett end their adaptations of Frank’s diary with an upbeat message. Taking a quotation from the primary source out of its proper context, the authors place reassuring words in the mouth of Anne Frank. Twice Anne tells us, “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart” (168, 174). Given the subject of the play, this affirmation of humanity’s inherent goodness seems radically misplaced. In a similar vein, the decision of American publishers to rename Primo Levi’s Holocaust memoir \textit{Survival in Auschwitz} – it was originally entitled \textit{If This Is a Man} – is indicative of an American desire to see the Holocaust as an event that ends happily.
rescuers focus on Holocaust survival as an outcome and so belie the truth of the Holocaust, as an event most of Europe’s Jews were unable to survive.\textsuperscript{52}

Concerned as it is with registering for its readers the ramifications of what Costello definitely regards as an atrocity, \textit{The Lives of Animals} is very much aware of narrative emplotment as a representational issue that complicates the task of rendering an atrocity comprehensible. Resisting the trend prevalent particularly in Holocaust representations as the event becomes further removed in time to opt for an optimistic resolution with hopeful implications, Coetzee’s story ends on an ambivalent note. When Costello breaks down because every day she sees the evidence of “a crime of stupefying proportions,” her son can only console her by saying, “[t]here, there. It will soon be over” (LA 69). These words, which conclude the narrative, offer no consolation: the promise of death as release mocks the optimism of American representations of the Holocaust that downplay the event’s pessimistic implications. When Costello’s son assures her that it will all be over soon, he clearly is not referring to the practice of mass producing animals for human consumption. His mother’s life, her ability to perceive and be tormented by a crime of stupefying proportions, is all that will end. The ambivalence of Coetzee’s ending reflects both his refusal to engage in a falsely uplifting narrativization of a contemporary crisis, and his desire to find an appropriate narrative means of prompting some sort of engagement with what remains an ongoing, daily atrocity.

Coetzee’s mode of Holocaust representation challenges the indifference to other ethical crises that can result from an Americanized Holocaust by demanding the recognition that the

\textsuperscript{52} The shift in emphasis is explainable, in part, by the popularity of survivor testimony; yet, survivors’ stories need not necessarily function to privilege survival as a Holocaust outcome. Primo Levi, in particular, is quite clear that his story, as well as the stories of other survivors, should not be taken as representative accounts. Levi writes, “we, the survivors, are not the true witness” (\textit{The Drowned and the Saved} 63); for Levi it is the “drowned,” those murdered in the genocide, who are the true witnesses.
suffering of other victims matters too, calling on us to remember Jewish suffering and to recognize an ethical imperative after the Holocaust. For Coetzee, the remembrance of suffering is ethically proper in itself, but is also a necessary prelude to ethical action. Though, as I will discuss in my fifth chapter, *The Lives of Animals* gestures toward the need for a new, post-liberal ethics, Coetzee offers no easy answers as to what constitutes such an ethics. When asked by a member of the audience for a solution, whether the factories should be shut down, or whether she wants her audience to stop eating meat, Costello can only say “I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise” (LA 36-37). In a context in which simple lessons can be (and routinely are) drawn from the proliferation of Americanized Holocausts, Coetzee suggests that the complexity of an ethical crisis of the Holocaust’s magnitude provides no easy answers.

**J.M. Coetzee’s Holocaust Comparison and the South African Situation**

In his much-quoted Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, given in 1987, J.M. Coetzee remarked of South African literature that it was “a literature in bondage…a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them” (*Doubling the Point* 98). Coetzee’s address spoke to the ways in which the prevailing conditions in apartheid South Africa thoroughly informed the creative output of all South African writers, but at the same time as Coetzee’s address signaled how South African literature, as Jane Poyner puts it, “inevitably had been overdetermined by apartheid” (*J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* 13), leading to its “stuntedness and deformity” (Coetzee “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” 98), it also implicitly and regretfully spoke to the existence of an equally deformed and stunted body of criticism whose readings of apartheid-era fiction relentlessly related its principal concerns to the contemporary South African
struggle. In a context in which narrative realism was widely assumed to be the only acceptable model for resistance in fiction to the apartheid regime, Coetzee’s overtly metafictional, antimimetic writing style and his propensity for setting his fictions in foreign and allegorical locales failed to provide readers with a directly referential account of contemporary South African life, leaving Coetzee open to harshly dismissive appraisals like the one offered by fellow author Nadine Gordimer, for whom Coetzee’s first three novels displayed his “desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences” (“The Idea of Gardening,” 139). Gordimer’s criticism is representative of the expectations placed on the works of South African authors that their writing comment on, respond to, and (in the Lukácsian-inflected rhetoric of the day) engage with the contemporary South African situation. Even those readers inclined to read Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction in a more positive light often seem to have asked of Coetzee’s fiction a question very similar to that asked by his toughest critics: what has this all got to do with South Africa? Neither critics nor defenders of Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction appear to have given any consideration to another question that could logically be asked of it – Does it matter if it has anything to do with South Africa? – because both sides shared the assumption that the only possible answer given the conditions of apartheid-era South Africa was a definitive yes.

---

53 Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*; Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context*; Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Each of the authors of these studies, amongst the first monographs published on Coetzee’s writing, offers in his or her own way a defense of Coetzee’s writing that refutes the criticisms directed against it by demonstrating its relevance to the contemporary South African situation. Of course, each of the critical studies I’ve mentioned were written and published prior to the democratic elections of 1994 which marked the final stage of South Africa’s transition to post-apartheid rule; as such, the critical focus of each can be explained by its immersion in either the formal apartheid or transitional eras of South African history. As time has passed, critical accounts of Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction have been relatively freer to explore Coetzee’s work outside the immediate South African context. Nevertheless, the turn away from context-sensitive readings of Coetzee’s early fiction in contemporary Coetzean criticism has not rendered the works of Dovey, Gallagher and Attwell outdated, and a significant portion of contemporary criticism continues to recognize the importance of the apartheid context to Coetzee’s earliest work.
As one of the first post-apartheid fictions produced by Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* offers the reader a definite degree of license to ignore its South African provenance. Like much of Coetzee’s previous work, *The Lives of Animals* has, on its surface, nothing to do with South Africa; it is, typically enough, set outside the country, and its metafictional content seems designed to raise questions about authorship and authority alongside the issues pertaining to the treatment of nonhuman animals. What makes *The Lives of Animals* different from other texts by Coetzee that similarly grapple with questions about authors’ relationships to the texts they write, such as *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, is that, freed from the background conditions that contextualize Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction, the work is the first in Coetzee’s *oeuvre* that need not automatically bring with it the question “What has it got to do with South Africa?” Reading *The Lives of Animals* with benefit of historical hindsight, the critic need not find him- or herself confronted with the responsibility of making sense of the text by elucidating its meaning in relation to South African history in the same way that would perhaps be necessary with apartheid-era novels like *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*. However, despite the interpretive freedom offered by *The Lives of Animals* relative to Coetzee’s earlier fiction, I suggest that the text can be read most fruitfully if located in the contemporary South African context of its production.

At its core, *The Lives of Animals* is very much interested in what it means to narrativize atrocity for a wider audience separated by time and distance from the historical event. Unsurprisingly, Coetzee’s exploration of what it means to “know” an event as complex as the Holocaust has implications for the South African context from which Coetzee wrote *The Lives of Animals*. As was the case following the Holocaust, there was a need, in the immediate post-apartheid South African context, to construct a record of the past – to determine what had happened, where, when, and to whom – that would enable the nation to acknowledge its traumatic
past while helping it to move on in a different, and just, direction. In the years immediately following the end of apartheid, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was given the responsibility of providing a true and therefore authoritative (though not final) account of the apartheid era. Deborah Posel explains that the TRC’s “truth-finding process was to be both descriptive (what happened) and explanatory (why it happened), the latter understood to involve establishing the ‘antecedents’ and ‘causes’ for gross human rights violations, as well as the ‘motives and perspectives’ of victims and perpetrators” (149). The TRC was thus engaged primarily, though not exclusively, in an *historiographic* enterprise, gathering testimony from both the victims of apartheid, who were finally able to have their suffering formally acknowledged, and amnesty-seeking perpetrators from whom the TRC demanded full disclosure about the crimes in which they were involved.

*The Lives of Animals* invites being read in the context of the TRC’s widely-publicized and greatly-scrutinized narrative efforts. Insofar as South African apartheid haunts the margins of *The Lives of Animals*, inviting by virtue of its very noticeable absence its inclusion in a consideration of a text that resolutely refuses to reference it directly, Coetzee suggestively engages, in a characteristically oblique fashion, with the narrative project at the heart of the TRC’s enterprise. *The Lives of Animals* responds not only to the Americanization of the Holocaust but also to the construction of a dominant post-apartheid narrative in South Africa that went beyond establishing what happened and sought, additionally, to interpret the *meaning* – historical, ethical, and otherwise – of the apartheid era atrocities. In light of Charles Maier’s characterization of the TRC’s engagement in “a project of national pedagogy” (265), Coetzee’s interrogation of a rigidified and simplified Holocaust from which lessons are routinely drawn
suggests a corresponding desire on the author’s part to question what was becoming the most well-known and widely disseminated narrative of South Africa’s recent past.\(^5^4\)

While the TRC was carrying out its task, and in the years since, critics of the TRC often pointed to its necessarily incomplete narrative. For some, this incompletion is explained by the sheer volume of material the Commission needed to sort through; or it is attributable to the TRC’s mandate, which limited the Commission to considering gross human rights violations from 1960 to 1994 only.\(^5^5\) For others, the TRC’s concept of who constituted a “victim” of apartheid was too limited: these critics took the TRC to task for confining its historical purview to gross human rights abuses, instead of focusing on the day-to-day injustice of apartheid, and for being interested primarily in those who were the victims of politically-motivated abuse. Mahmood Mamdani, in particular, has argued this point forcefully, claiming that the TRC’s “version of truth was established through narrow lenses, crafted to reflect the experience of a tiny minority” thus belying the truth that “the violence of apartheid was aimed less at individuals than at entire communities” (59). Yet others saw a problem with the final Report’s tendency to code the past

---

\(^5^4\) In actuality, the TRC transformed the South African past into narrative form in two senses: more obviously, the seven volume final Report that the TRC submitted to the South African nation, which summarized and condensed its extensive day-to-day operations in a multi-volume narrative, constituted a narrativized national past; at the same time, its day-to-day operations were themselves a kind of narrative, subject to commentary and analysis in the South African and international press. According to Mark Sanders in *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, “[t]hanks to the extensive coverage by the media, the hearings, at least those of its first two years, more than the commission’s seven-volume report, are what would likely remain most strongly impressed in the imaginations and memories of people inside the country as well as abroad” (3-4). Richard Wilson takes a negative view of the narratives offered by the hearings. “Hearings,” he writes, “were important for the media image of the Commission and for transmitting the principles of nation-building, but they had no value in creating knowledge about the past” (110). The scornfully dismissive terms with which Wilson assesses the hearings notwithstanding, I would suggest that in at least one regard one might expect Coetzee to share some of Wilson’s reservations – namely, in terms of the capacity for hearings, particularly those encapsulated in summarized form by the media for broadcast purposes, to do justice to the complexities of the stories they purported to tell.

\(^5^5\) To some extent, this criticism is unfairly harsh. Despite its formal limitations, the TRC as a body did not ignore the larger historical context preceding its mandated focus: the authors state quite clearly that “[r]acism came to South Africa in 1652, it has been part of the warp and woof of South African society since then” (1:16).
“in such a way that individual experiences are turned into visible, emblematic images” of South Africa’s past (Buur 81). Critics of this representational strategy claim that it undermines the TRC’s goal of explaining apartheid: for Posel, the TRC’s report “is more of a descriptive than an explanatory exercise” (163).

In some ways, *The Lives of Animals* captures the spirit of a number of the critiques of the TRC. Arguably, many of the most prominent contemporary Holocaust representations similarly have the potential to become representative stories about the Holocaust that possess little explanatory power: Coetzee’s challenge to an Americanized Holocaust, in which individual stories metonymically take on representative scope is also, in part, a challenge to any post-apartheid historiographic project, including the TRC’s, which had the potential to establish a fixed sense of the country’s recent past via its reliance on a handful of emblematic images and stories. Moreover, in concerning itself with individual cases of gross human rights violations that took place between March 1, 1960 and April 27, 1994, the TRC implicitly cast the period it considered as a discrete one, separate from both the years before 1960 and the post-apartheid era in which the TRC operated. Coetzee contests this sense of the country’s apartheid past as separable from its present by suggesting a continuity between the Holocaust and post-Holocaust America. When Costello ends her first lecture by noting that each day brings a “fresh holocaust,” she resists the restriction of the implications of the Nazi genocide – the historical Holocaust – to the past (35). In the context of the post-apartheid ethos, in which certain sectors of the population were disingenuously calling for the past to be forgotten, and in which the operation of the TRC and the composition of its *Report* had the potential to enable the perception of apartheid as “the past” – as accounted for – *The Lives of Animals* plays a crucial role, for it insists on remembering the past and on seeing the continuities between apartheid past and post-apartheid present. Above
all, by challenging the ways in which the meaning of an event, particularly one as stupefying as
the Holocaust, can become ossified by its representation(s), The Lives of Animals highlights the
continual need for texts that open up the past to reinterpretations that challenge the
epistemological and ethical “certainties” of the present.

In important ways, then, The Lives of Animals is thoroughly informed by South African
c条ns of the day. Taken in its entirety, though, Coetzee’s oeuvre displays a close involvement
with the TRC that exceeds his topical engagement with it in The Lives of Animals. The
interruption of dominant national narratives about the past is a project that has arguably long been
central to Coetzee’s work. As Stephen Watson puts it, “Coetzee would seem to be a writer
obsessed with history to a degree scarcely matched by any other author in South Africa” (21).
Four of Coetzee’s novels – Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country, Foe, and The Master of
Petersburg – and Coetzee’s three memoirs – Boyhood, Youth, and Summertime – are set either
completely or partially in the past, however heavily fictionalized some of those pasts may be. In
Waiting for the Barbarians, a novel whose temporal setting is indefinite, but which is evocative
of the past, the magistrate obsesses over archeological ruins and even considers writing a history
of the barbarians. These works are all, at a thematic level, concerned with the project of
historiography, with the recovery and representation, in writing, of the past for the present:
history itself is in some sense the subject of much of Coetzee’s work.

To a significant degree, Coetzee’s interest in history has been inseparable from his
contestation of official historiography. Much work has been done on how Coetzee’s interest in
the past is bound up with his desire to expose the distortions of the past that underpin white
supremacist ideology and which were fundamental to the apartheid state’s self-justifications. The
acknowledgement of the potential for the distortion of the past by its representation can be found,
for example, in *Dusklands* in what Watson calls the “pseudo-scholarship” of the material in which Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative is embedded (15); the parodic rewriting of colonial history in which *Dusklands* engages points to the ideological conscription of history. Against the distorted view of the past offered by the fictional editor of Jacobus Coetzee’s deposition, Coetzee represents the history of colonialism in South Africa as a history of wrongdoing. Written at a time when official historical narratives in South Africa resolutely denied past and contemporary racial injustice, *Dusklands* insists upon recognizing South African history as a history of injustice. In this respect, at least, the text resembles the TRC’s final *Report*, which Posel reads as “primarily a moral narrative about the fact of evil in South Africa’s past” (162).

Coetzee’s narratives are consistently underwritten by moral narratives that attest to the fact of evil, though their formal inventiveness and hermeneutical complexity prevent them from being reducible only to moral narratives. However, the nature Coetzee’s contestation of official history changes, becoming increasingly complex over the years: in his subsequent fictional and nonfictional writings, Coetzee poses challenges not only to the prevailing pro-apartheid historiography that sought to deny wrongdoing but also, in a prescient manner, to the TRC and its efforts to narrativize the past as a history of injustice.

In a short piece, “The Novel Today,” originally given as a talk in Cape Town in 1987, Coetzee articulates his position on the relationship between history and fiction. Stating that South African writing tended to “subsume the novel under history,” Coetzee notes that such a tendency relegates novels to a supplementary position in relation to history (2). However, Coetzee argues, novels can either supplement history or act as rivals to history: a novel that rivals history, Coetzee claims, “operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions,” rather than

---

56 Richard Wilson similarly characterizes the TRC’s *Report*, claiming that it “is primarily to be understood as a chronicle of acts embedded within a moral framework of denunciation” (55).
operating “in the terms of the procedures of history and eventuat[ing] in conclusions that are checkable by history” (3). Coetzee’s spirited defense of his own aesthetic practice responds to the demand, from some sectors of the South African reading public, for realistic anti-apartheid fiction and answers that demand by characterizing his own anti-mimetic fiction as a fiction of rivalry. Beyond this, what is interesting about Coetzee’s piece is not just that Coetzee, an author notorious for being unwilling to speak for his own novels, defends his own non-realist aesthetic and indicates the terms by which his novels should be read – namely, as rivals to history – but also that Coetzee makes a strikingly broad generalization about South African fiction, indicating that all South African fiction, including his own, is bound up in a broader, nascent historiographic enterprise.

In *Novel Histories*, Michael Green argues that apartheid-era fiction involved itself in constructing “the pre-history of post-apartheid” (7). South African fiction thus anticipates a post-apartheid future in which it could be read as a kind of historical document. Coetzee’s discussion in “The Novel Today” makes sense of what was the prevailing trend in contemporary fiction toward a realist aesthetic by reading the commitment to realism not only in terms of the Marxist-inspired idea of committed fiction but also as, in part, an effort to narrate the present as history: contemporary realist fiction thus anticipated a post-apartheid future in which there would be a need to construct a narrative of the past, toward which realist apartheid-era writing, grounding itself in the details of contemporary South Africa, could then contribute as historical witness.⁵⁷ For Coetzee, the South African fiction of the day involved itself in *anticipatory* acts of witnessing that, although such an eventuality could not have been predicted with certainty at the time, would

---

⁵⁷ David Attwell explains that for Nadine Gordimer “the essence of the writer’s role lies in her social responsibility, and responsibility is treated primarily as a form of *witness*” (*J.M. Coetzee* 13).
eventually be superseded by the retrospective acts of witnessing that became the stuff of the TRC’s hearings and Report.

Coetzee’s understanding of South African fiction as future-directed is manifested subtly in his own fiction, particularly that of the 1980s. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the magistrate admits that “[a]t a certain point I begin to plead my own cause,” indicating his expectation that his account will be read in the future (5). On the one hand, a text’s awareness of itself as an object to be read is a familiar trope of post-modernist writing. On the other hand, however, it is significant that the magistrate not only expects that his words will be read but also that they, and he, will be judged. The magistrate’s anticipation of future judgment takes the novel beyond the realm of playful self-referentiality. A similar moment occurs in *The Life & Times of Michael K* when Nöel suggests that he and the medical officer are “scheming a bit,” thinking of the day someone will “come and put everyone on trial” (132). A sense of impending judgment hangs over Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction and universally casts doubt upon the reliability of his own writing, as well as that of all contemporaneous South African writers, in terms of their capacity to bear witness to apartheid for the future. In a sense, *Life & Times of Michael K* concretizes Coetzee’s approach to history: Coetzee’s writing interrupts the process of writing the pre-history of post-apartheid in much the same way that the highly self-conscious first-person narration of the novel’s middle section literally interrupts the authoritative third-person narration of the novel’s first and final sections. Although the medical officer, who narrates the novel’s second section, is implicated in the brutality from which he wishes to dissociate himself and is, accordingly, an

---

58 It was in the 1980s that Nadine Gordimer’s concept of South Africa as living in the interregnum gained a great deal of currency.
ethically unreliable narrator,\(^59\) this unreliability does not detract from his capacity to interrupt the dominant narrative, but rather complements it. As the medical officer’s narrative invites, even demands, the questioning of its truth value on account of his own implication in the crimes of the regime he serves, it also gestures towards the need to question the wider larger narrative of which it is a part and to which it contributes. This includes other witness accounts which are, like his own, the product not of those who stand apart from the history they witness but who, by virtue of being witnesses and bystanders, are participants in what they witness.

Coetzee’s fiction understands itself as offering historical witness and in that sense it resembles contemporaneous South African fiction; however, in signaling its own unreliability, Coetzee’s fiction also resists its future conscription into a single authoritative history. In writing fictions that act as rivals to history, then, Coetzee refuses to participate in the construction of a single dominant narrative about the past. Coetzee’s overt interest in the Holocaust in *The Lives of Animals* should thus be seen not as a topical and transient engagement with the TRC, but rather as a continuation of a long-standing concern with the difficulties involved in a project (first anticipated and later realized) such as the TRC’s.

Coetzee’s fiction tends to take history as its subject but also tends to foreground problems inherent in the historiographic enterprise, often stressing the inescapable link between the past and its textual representation. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda undercuts her ontological status as a single colonial woman when she states “I create myself in the words that create me” and says of her own story, “I make it all up in order that it shall make me up” (8, 73). Her words are a reflection on the relation between language and identity, rendering her an overtly textual

---

being: she is both a textual construct of J.M. Coetzee and also of the literary predecessors upon which she self-consciously models herself. Readers of Coetzee’s novel are never allowed to forget that the colonial woman, the supposedly recognizable figure from an era in South Africa’s past, has no existence outside of her (re)inscription in Coetzee’s novel. When Magda asserts that “[t]he land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history” (3), Coetzee suggests that Magda is not a recovery of those lost to history, but a reminder of their continuing absence from history: as an absence that calls attention to herself, Magda complicates the access to a past era that she ostensibly offers.

The issue confronted in relation to Magda in In the Heart of the Country, and continued in relation to the barbarian “girl” in Waiting for the Barbarians and K in Life &Times of Michael K, reaches a kind of conclusion in Foe. In Foe, the true story of Friday’s tongue, which Susan Barton comes to see as essential to telling the true story of Cruso’s island, remains untold: its absence eventually comes to dominate the narrative. Friday, a character whose experiences Susan Barton has not shared and who is either unable or unwilling to communicate the truth of his experience, confronts Coetzee and his readers with the limits of representation, for he is a character about whom it is impossible to know the truth but about whom it is, or would be, unethical to remain silent. In this regard, Friday is a figure reminiscent of what Holocaust survivor Primo Levi famously refers to as the Muselmänner. According to Levi, the term Muselmänner came to be applied to those in the camps who were near death after having been

In The Novels of J.M. Coetzee Theresa Dovey argues that In the Heart of the Country is a rewriting of Olive Schreiner’s The Story of an African Farm (150). Conversely, from Susan Gallagher’s perspective, Magda ironically undercuts the Afrikaner mythology of the woman as Vrou en Moeder (wife and mother). From both of these perspectives, Magda rewrites previous inscriptions of the colonial female and so refers only to another textual being rather than to any real historical referent.

Most critics accept Cruso’s explanation concerning the fact of Friday’s mutilated tongue. See Lewis MacLeod’s essay, “‘Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story,’” for an argument in favour of recognizing the possibility that Friday has a tongue and chooses to remain silent.
worked to a state of exhaustion that rendered them probable candidates for selection for the gas chambers. Levi suggests that his ability to speak for the *Muselmann* is limited by the fact that his experience as a survivor of the camps does not reflect the experience of those who did not survive: it is the *Muselmänner*, Levi insists, not himself or the other survivors, who are the true witnesses to the Holocaust (63). Yet because the *Muselmänner* are incapable of telling their own stories, it is Levi, one of the “saved,” who *must* bear witness to the experience of the “drowned.”

*Foe* ends with just such a scene of witnessing in which an unnamed and unknown diver plunges into the “dark mass of the wreck,” “Friday’s home,” a watery grave and a “place where bodies are their own signs” (156-57); “pass[ing] a fingernail across [Friday’s] teeth, the narrator “tr[ies] to find a way in” until “His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me…it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face” (157). The final encounter with the “drowned” Friday dramatizes the act of witnessing, for the text’s final scene reminds us of the fact of a story to which we, like the narrator, have no access: the steady stream of breath that buffets the narrator ensures that this story which cannot be told, or at the very least cannot be told by Coetzee, is literally a *felt* absence. Ultimately, *Foe* tells Friday’s story by showing that it is a story that cannot be told by those who remain behind to dive into the wreck; *this* is the story of the “drowned” and it is a story that Coetzee, like Levi before him, insists on telling.

If representing his experience of the Holocaust is thus an obligation for Levi, it is possible to see a related, though not identical, sense of obligation running throughout Coetzee’s *oeuvre*. As Stef Craps argues in his essay on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, bearing witness to the *Muselmänner* is “an overriding concern of Coetzee’s” (61). Characters such as Magda, the barbarian “girl,” Michael K and Friday, all victims in one way or another, are also all figures of
an unrecoverable subjectivity on whose behalf Coetzee feels a compulsion to speak. All of them are incorporated into the novels they inhabit, but they escape the efforts of other characters, and possibly even Coetzee himself, to tell their stories authoritatively. In “Bearing Witness to Apartheid” Samuel Durrant writes that “Coetzee’s novels testify to the suffering engendered by apartheid precisely by refusing to translate that suffering into a narrative” (430). Coetzee acknowledges the fact of suffering, but by refusing to translate these characters’ suffering into a narrative he abandons the path of the TRC, with its strategy of addressing representative examples of suffering, to show the necessarily incomplete process of historical recovery. Ultimately, Coetzee’s novels tend to point to the irrecoverability of the past. In a South African context this amounts to more than an academic exercise. Rather, it addresses an issue vital to the core concerns of the nation after the end of apartheid.

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee makes the act of recovering the past central to the novel’s plot. The protagonist, Dostoevsky, struggles with an impossible task when he attempts to construct the true story of his son Pavel’s death from the stories of those that knew him in his last days. The difficulty of Dostoevsky’s task arises in light of the conflicting narratives that frame Pavel’s story, for it is not only Dostoevsky who is interested in learning the true story behind his son’s death but also the policeman, Maximov: Pavel’s affiliation with a politically subversive group during a turbulent time in Russian history points to an unavoidable coalescence of private loss with public narratives in times of national uncertainty, and so picks up on a theme begun in *Age of Iron*, which is, to some extent, a novel about the impossibility of private experience in a

---

62 It is worth turning to Coetzee’s explanation of the nature of this acknowledgement, for it will shed light on the sense of obligation that can be found in Coetzee’s writing. In an interview with David Attwell Coetzee claims that “in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons…but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority” (*Doubling the Point* 248).
context such as that of apartheid South Africa during the States of Emergency. In Dostoevsky’s search for the truth of his son’s death it is possible to see an anticipation of the work of the TRC, one of the primary goals of which was to help families mourn the loss of loved ones by determining the truth of what exactly happened to the dead and to the missing victims of apartheid through the public testimony of witnesses participating in the construction of a larger national narrative. In the TRC’s final Report, it is personal narratives, validated by the TRC and consolidated in one report, that contribute to the formation of a true narrative of apartheid and the South African past; yet, as Coetzee’s novels suggest, when history inscribes the stories of those lost to history it inevitably does so from the perspective of those whose experience of history, even of the same history, is fundamentally different. Coetzee’s overt emphasis on the writing of history and the recovery of the past, as well as the ethical urgency that imbues these projects, suggest that his interests coincide to a large degree with the core concerns of post-apartheid and post-Holocaust accounts of these events.

Like the Holocaust, apartheid is now an historical event about which the moral content – the fact that the struggle over apartheid was not a struggle between two equally legitimate sides – and the broadest contours – for example, the timeline of key dates, events and personalities – are matters of general consensus. Indeed, agreement about the key details of apartheid may be even more widespread than is the case with the Holocaust because apartheid, unlike the Holocaust, was an openly acknowledged government policy and so is not subject to publicized (and so partially validated) denial.63 As debates about the meaning of the Holocaust show, however, even when the

63 This claim is in need of qualification because the occasionally heard objections that “apartheid wasn’t really that bad” or that the idea behind apartheid was not unjust though its implementation was (a claim made by former South African president, F.W. de Klerk) are akin to denial in that they refuse to acknowledge the extent of the suffering caused by apartheid. Cf. Asmal et al: “This kind of response,
fact of past evil is acknowledged as a truth, this does not lead to any wider and final agreement about the meaning of that evil.

Robert Eaglestone notes of the debate over Daniel J. Goldhagen’s controversial work that “at its core, the debate was metahistorical” (196); the debate over whether ordinary men or ordinary Germans were the typical Holocaust perpetrators was not a debate about historical data, but rather over what were the correct implications to be taken from that data. Both Browning and Goldhagen consider the same historical material, but the positions of two authors could hardly be farther apart. The Browning/Goldhagen debate shows quite clearly, then, that the notion of historical truth is a particularly fraught one when it comes to a limit event like the Holocaust. Because Browning and Goldhagen accept a number of common details as true while reaching different conclusions about the implications of the same material, the basis for choosing between Ordinary Men and Hitler’s Willing Executioners cannot be mere adherence to a limited notion of historical truth. As I have argued, it is possible both to tell the truth about the Holocaust, in a limited, factual sense, and to offer a misleading narrative concerning the event whose status as “true” both obscures its commitment, ideological or otherwise, to producing historical truth and seeks to render that truth fixed. The problem with a film like Schindler’s List, for example, is not that it tells a story that is, broadly speaking, factually untrue. Though the film takes certain liberties with the historical figures it portrays, particularly with its depiction of Oskar Schindler and its reduction of the survival of Schindler’s 1,100 Jewish workers to the outcome of a personal struggle between Schindler and the camp commandant, Amon Goeth, the story it tells is essentially true, and thankfully so. The problem, as I have indicated, is that in telling this true attempting to preserve a semblance of morality underneath the atrocities of apartheid, is our own South African brand of holocaust denial” (40).
story, the movie fails to communicate a fundamental truth about the Holocaust; indeed, it tells the story of the Holocaust in a manner that is fundamentally, and paradoxically, untrue.

It is thus possible to know something of the Holocaust, to be in possession of a certain body of truth(s) about the Holocaust, and to misunderstand the event radically at the same time. Coetzee’s grounding of The Lives of Animals in the context of the Americanization of the Holocaust points to this fundamental problem, a problem that I want to suggest faces all retrospective attempts to come to terms with a traumatic past. This problem is primarily a problem of historiography – which does not mean that its implications are of relevance only to historians – and so it is a problem that faced South Africa’s TRC, which sought, among other things, to bring together many individual narratives in a single historical narrative for the new nation.

The authors of the TRC’s Report were themselves aware of the historiographical implications of compiling such a document. Though the TRC was charged with recovering the truth of the country’s past, the Report bears traces of its authors’ efforts to anticipate and reject being read as offering a fixed version of the past. In the first place, in the Report’s preface Desmond Tutu appeals to fellow South Africans to “add to [the Report], correct it and ultimately share in the process that will lead to national unity through truth and reconciliation” (1:5). At the same time, the TRC’s identification of four different notions of truth – factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth, social truth, and healing and restorative truth – at work in its Report, combined with its decision not to privilege factual truth over the other forms of truth it considered, can be understood as a related attempt on the Commission’s part to avoid suggesting final closure to the process of historical closure. And yet, despite the TRC’s best efforts, it is perhaps unavoidable that its Report may very well contribute to such a perception of the past. In
part, the TRC’s *authorized* status as chronicler of the past contributes to its narrative version of
the apartheid era taking on the characteristics of official history despite the fact that, as Charles
Villa-Vicencio writes, the Commission “saw itself as offering no more than a historical comment
from its perspective on a given period of history” (22). Even more significantly, however, the
*formal* generic implications of the TRC’s final *Report* are also likely to contribute to the
perception that what it offers is the truth. In this regard, the TRC’s variegated concept of truth is
equally, if not more, likely to suggest the *comprehensiveness* of its version of historical truth than
it is to suggest its limitations. Though it constitutes a sophisticated effort to bypass the
hysteriographical impasse highlighted by the Goldhagen/Browning debate, the TRC’s final *Report*
is arguably just as hampered by its formal limitations as other works of historiography.

Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo⁶⁴ may offer a way out of this historiographical
impasse. The epigraph to Delbo’s trilogy of memoirs, *Auschwitz and After*, points to the
difficulty of telling the truth about the Holocaust: Delbo writes, “I am not sure that what I wrote
is true. I am certain it is truthful.” Delbo’s epigraph addresses itself to a number of problems that
face a writer, and in her case a survivor, when writing about the Holocaust, and by implication
any other atrocity of a similar scale. On the one hand, the epigraph identifies the problem of
memory, acknowledging that some details may be misremembered while simultaneously
asserting that incorrect details do not deny the force of the larger truth she conveys. On the other
hand, Delbo offers a self-conscious admission of the limits of her narrative to reflect, adequately,
the wider truths – contextual, factual, social – of her traumatic experience. To some extent,
Delbo anticipates the TRC’s distinction between factual truth and personal, experiential truth;
however, Delbo’s epigraph also points to a conscious refusal to meet the generic requirements of

---

⁶⁴ Delbo, it should be pointed out, was a political prisoner, not a Jew. Her experience of the camps, while
similar in many regards, is not identical to the experiences of Jewish prisoners.
historical writing. The true/truthful distinction Delbo articulates both identifies an epistemological barrier that qualifies claims to complete historical understanding and gestures towards an ethics of representation; that is, Delbo voices the familiar postmodernist orthodoxy that all truths are partial truths and also makes truthfulness, rather than trying to tell the entire truth, an ethical obligation of Holocaust representation.

Borrowing Delbo’s terms, I suggest that it is the conflation of the true and the truthful that purports to wholeness of representation and fixes the meaning of an atrocity like the Holocaust. Schindler’s List is an exemplary case of a Holocaust representation that collapses the distinction between what is true and what is truthful in an ethically problematic manner. A similar case could be made against Goldhagen, at least in an American context, and perhaps against Browning in a German context. All could be accused of not being truthful about the implications of the Holocaust at the same time as they offer narratives that are, for all intents and purposes, true. The ethical approach found in Delbo’s epigraph points to the need for a representational practice that resists the erasure of the distinction between the true and the truthful.

Following on this, I propose that J.M. Coetzee’s aesthetic practices may be better understood if the distinction between what is true and what is truthful is kept in mind. This is not to say that Coetzee derives his approach from Charlotte Delbo directly, but rather that the ethical approach found in Coetzee’s writing is very much akin to Delbo’s. Insofar as it is the memoir form of Auschwitz and After that enables its privileging of truthfulness over the truth, it should be acknowledged that whatever capacity Coetzee has to maintain a similar distinction is ultimately and intimately bound up with his own formal decisions. Revisiting what Coetzee has to say about the rivalry between the novel and history in “The Novel Today,” I would suggest that Coetzee’s
privileging of fictional discourse is related in part to the way in which fiction can be truthful without purporting to tell the truth. Indeed, this paradoxical logic gets pushed to its furthest extreme in a text such as *Summertime*, the most recent of Coetzee’s autobiographical works, in which the text’s basic premise – that it is a biographical sketch of the recently-deceased author – demands its being read as a recognizable, indeed impossible, falsehood at the same time as its obvious confessional properties encourage the reader to search the text, uncertainly, for the truthful content it contains.

The recurrent skepticism concerning the possibility of telling the truth that runs throughout the Coetzean oeuvre, both fictional and critical, lends itself to the argument that the paradoxically truthful admission of an inability to speak personal and historical truths is characteristically Coetzean. If, in a critical piece like “Confession and Double Thoughts” (1985), Coetzee can say of the confessional enterprise that “the [confessing] self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself without the possibility of being self-deceived” (291), that admission is not disabling, at least not from the perspective of historiography, if not confession, which aims for the end goal of absolution. The radical limitations on historical truth are, in fact, enabling for Coetzee. They contribute to a representation of the historical past as perpetually open to renegotiation and, in so doing, enable the author to attempt to oblige the reader not to adopt the position of passive consumer of historical truth but, rather, to recognize him- or herself as an active producer of meaning.

To the extent that Coetzee is committed to being truthful about the South African situation in his fiction⁶⁵, his utilization of a non-realist, non-referential, aesthetic needs to be

---

⁶⁵ Stephen Watson cites an interview he conducted with Coetzee in which, in Coetzee’s words, the South African situation was “only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism” (13).
understood as working towards an ethic of truthfulness rather than subscribing to a limited, and potentially misleading, notion of forensic truth. Coetzee, like Delbo, wants to be honest about an historical atrocity, and its implications, and such honesty requires more than the realistic (re)presentation of verifiable forensic truth. This is not to say that Coetzee ever balks at the obligation to acknowledge these kinds of truth in his novels: it would be a willful misreading of Coetzee’s oeuvre to suggest that novels that deal with torture, mutilation, forced dislocations and internments, and other forms of violence associated with the apartheid state could ever be seen as disengaged with the realities of life in South Africa. Yet Coetzee goes beyond asserting such abuses as truths about South African life to explore the implications that emerge from an honest reckoning with the fact of atrocity. The self-consciousness of Coetzee’s writing, the overt allegorical frames Coetzee frequently employs, and the host of ethically suspect narrators and characters that inhabit his novels, present obstacles to readers hoping to learn the truth about South Africa. However, the necessarily qualified and limited truths that can be gleaned from Coetzee’s work should not be seen as attempts to avoid historical truth, but as deliberate strategies for being truthful about the meaning of an atrocity such as apartheid for a post-apartheid community struggling to come to terms with its history.
Even as South Africans sought to move forward in the post-apartheid era, attempting to leave the injustices of the past behind, the effort to make sense of the apartheid past by narrativizing it was, for many, an integral component of moving forward. Crafting an authoritative historical record that established the factual details of apartheid-era South African history – who did what to whom, when, and where – was the over-riding goal of the TRC’s historiographic enterprise. Yet, the TRC aspired to write more than a chronicle of apartheid abuses. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson explain that a truth commission “typically seeks a historical *verdict,*” using the word verdict to refer to “a final judgment about what happened, intended to be accepted by all citizens” (34-5); to some extent, though, the more familiar sense of the word verdict, pertaining to a legal judgment of fault rather than a historical judgment of fact, is loosely applicable to truth commissions like the TRC as well. The TRC’s project of narrativizing recent history so as to address the issue of responsibility in apartheid-era South Africa reveals the two tasks to be conceptually inseparable: a history of gross human rights abuses is, necessarily, a narrative about the guilt of those involved in perpetrating those crimes. In a narrative concentrated primarily (though not exclusively) on apartheid’s victims and perpetrators, the TRC sought to explain apartheid, in a quasi-juridical forum, by providing provisional answers to difficult questions about guilt and responsibility.

In *The Lives of Animals,* a text – as I noted earlier – written as the TRC was carrying out its task, J.M. Coetzee addresses similarly difficult questions about human responsibility for how we treat and allow nonhuman animals to be treated. The text depicts the struggle of its
protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, to live a morally good life. Unwilling to follow President Garrard’s lead in distinguishing between eating meat and wearing leather – calling them “[d]egrees of obscenity” (44) – Costello nevertheless admits that her vegetarianism is motivated by “a desire to save [her] soul” (43). Costello’s recourse to the old-fashioned language of the soul causes her academic audience great discomfort: indeed, it is a language with which neither Costello nor, behind her, Coetzee seems completely comfortable. Yet, as Derek Attridge states, “[i]n his reaching for a register that escapes the terminology of the administered society, Coetzee has often turned to religious language” (“Age of Bronze” 111). Though Attridge’s comments here pertain to Disgrace, the novel published in the same year as The Lives of Animals, they are applicable to both texts, as both fictions situate Coetzee’s discontent with modern, globalized society at least partially in a university setting. By drawing on religious language in the manner that Attridge suggests, Coetzee, in The Lives of Animals, exploits the tension that arises from the insertion of such language into a secularized university setting to demonstrate the limits of secular moral judgment. Costello’s vegetarianism is an ethical choice in its own right, but it simultaneously expresses a yearning, that possibly includes but is not limited to Coetzee’s, for an authoritative standard of judgment unachievable in secular society.

If judging guilt is naturally complex, the events of the twentieth century further complicated matters, making the interrogation of what it means to be guilty of more than academic concern. The Second World War, and particularly the Holocaust, redefined what it means to be guilty by giving rise, in post-war trials, to a new conceptual and legal category – crimes against humanity. This innovation has been significant: whereas “[o]lder international

66The collective sense of the nature of Nazi crimes has changed substantially over the years. The prosecution at Nuremberg charged the defendants with three crimes: crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The three charges covered everything from the planning and launching of an
law acknowledged only the responsibility of states, not that of individuals” (Wise 64). Nuremberg “established the principle of individual criminal accountability for human rights violations against civilians in wartime” (Teitel 44). This development allowed for the punishment of individual perpetrators who carried out the crimes against humanity and, crucially, the highest-ranking officials of a regime responsible for their planning. In addition to contributing to the development of human rights, the post-war trials at Nuremberg⁶⁷ (as well as the subsequent Eichmann and Auschwitz trials of the 1960s) also attempted to restore world faith in international justice through the prosecution and punishment of key participants in Nazi crimes. In The Memory of Judgment, Lawrence Douglas judges that attempt to be successful, writing that Nuremberg “recuperated the power of law to submit even the most radical of crimes to neutral judgment” (90). Nuremberg was, moreover, “a morality play…that claimed to deliver justice, truth, and the defeat of evil” (Buruma 145). Even as the architects of Nuremberg proclaimed the unprecedented nature of Nazi crimes as justification for the trials, they simultaneously used the trials to restore a sense of normality that would enable Germany and the global community to aggressive war to the contravention of the Hague and Geneva conventions to atrocities committed by the Nazi regime against its own citizens before and during the war (Conot 23). Norbert Ehrenfreund notes that while most people today might assume that the main charge at Nuremberg centered on “the unspeakable crimes that came to be known as the Holocaust,” in the view of chief prosecutor Robert Jackson “the extermination of the Jews was subsidiary to Hitler’s overall goal of military conquest by aggressive means” (15). It was under the secondary charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity that the event that eventually came to be known as the Holocaust was subsumed. The Holocaust was thus merely one of a host of crimes for which the prosecution hoped to convict the Nazi leadership. In the past sixty years, though, the Nazi genocidal plot has come to be seen as a particular crime in its own right, indeed, as the worst of the Nazis' crimes.

⁶⁷ Though “Nuremberg” tends to refer to the initial trial of the major war criminals conducted by the American, British, French, and Soviet allies, the Americans conducted twelve further trials in Nuremberg on their own. Among the defendants in these trials was Alfried Krupp, an industrialist whose firm had privately owned and managed 138 concentration camps (Ehrenfreund 23) and who had escaped prosecution in the initial trial only through a blunder on the part of the prosecuting team. Additional defendants included members of the Einsatzgruppen, mobile killing squads operative in the Soviet Union, and “lesser” offenders, like doctors, judges and financiers with ties to the Nazi party. To some extent, then, “Nuremberg” encompasses many of the immediate post-war attempts to reckon with German guilt.
return to business as usual, with the Nazi past safely behind them. Clearly, then, Nuremberg not
only enacted legal retribution for Nazi crimes, but also crafted an historical narrative about the
guilt of the accused that equated retributive punishment with narrative closure. The victorious
Allies’ efforts to deal with the increasing complexity of guilt in the post-war period set a powerful
precedent, offering closely-linked procedural and narrative models for dealing with future mass
atrocities.

That the legacy of Nuremberg is deeply ingrained in South African consciousness cannot
be doubted: the rhetoric of Nuremberg was prevalent in the last years of apartheid and into the
post-apartheid era, as apartheid’s opponents eagerly anticipated state officials being punished for
creating and implementing the criminal policy of apartheid and for the gross human rights
violations perpetrated in its defense. It is unsurprising, then, that the decision to pursue post-
apartheid justice through the operation of the TRC was a source of frustration for those who
favoured criminal and civil trials, the possibility of which the TRC’s truth-for-amnesty process
occasionally precluded. Yet, as Wilhelm Verwoerd explains, defending the TRC against its
opponents, the belief that “the new government [had] the power to comply fully with its positive
duty to dispense justice for the past crimes of the previous regime” was underwritten by “what
can be described as a post-Nuremberg way of thinking” (11). The post-Nuremberg way of

68 Trials typically tend to serve historiographic purposes; however, this is especially true of Holocaust
trials, which operate not only in a given historical setting but self-consciously as history. A key product of
the prosecution strategy at Nuremberg, employed in both the international trial and the later American
trials, of primarily using the Nazis’ own documents against them, rather than witness testimony, was the
construction of a verifiable historical record. Lawrence Douglas explains that both the Nuremberg and
Eichmann trials were “staged to teach history and shape collective memory” (3). As much as the legal
findings of these trials aim to achieve individual justice, they also aim to inscribe themselves as
pedagogically-useful historical narratives. Charles Maier claims of the TRC that it similarly “attempted to
add a project of national pedagogy to an effort of rendering individual justice” (265).

69 The TRC did not foreclose on the possibility of criminal or civil litigation completely. Gutmann and
Thompson point out that “only a relatively small proportion of applicants were granted amnesty” (24).
Alex Boraine also reminds us that “A number of trials and prosecutions took place simultaneously with the
work of the TRC” (149).
thinking Verwoerd describes has to do with a procedural model whose usefulness to the South African situation has been questioned. However, it also has much to do with a collective historical understanding that largely takes Nuremberg to be the successful retributive punishment of those responsible for the radical evil that unfolded in the Third Reich: its implications are hopeful, perceiving in the retributive punishment of key officials and perpetrators the possibility of an achievable worldly justice. It was precisely because the TRC opted for a restorative model of justice rather than the retributive model that was operative in Nuremberg that it came under attack from some quarters for being too soft, and too lenient.

As David Luban argues, however, Nuremberg’s legacy is “equivocal” at best (360). The sense in which Luban uses the word “equivocal” relates primarily to what I have been calling Nuremberg’s procedural legacy. However, “equivocal” applies equally well to Nuremberg’s narrative legacy. Although the restoration of a sense of normality was a goal at and of Nuremberg — a goal it in many ways realized — neither it nor the trials that followed it were entirely successful in persuading the global community that justice had been done. Since Nuremberg, many have felt that the prosecution of individual perpetrators, while necessary and right, ran the risk of exculpating the rest of the German nation: those not specifically named or tried could, and did, slip back into ordinary life, confident that they were not implicated in the Nazis’ crimes. In The Lives of Animals, Elizabeth Costello echoes this sense of dissatisfaction, ending her first lecture with the following observation:

70 TRC chairperson Desmond Tutu writes in the foreword to the TRC Report that a “military stalemate” made Nuremberg-style trials “an impossible option” in South Africa (1:5). This view is widely accepted by most commentators on the TRC.
71 Critics of Nuremberg then and now complain that the trial implemented ex post facto law by charging the defendants with violations of laws that did not exist prior to 1945, and also that the Allies enacted victors’ justice by not holding themselves accountable for violating the same laws as the defendants. Nevertheless, as M. Cherif Bassiouni observes, “world public perception then and now is that the entire process was substantially fair and the outcome substantially just” (295).
We point to the Germans and the Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them. We like to think they were inwardly marked by the aftereffects of that special form of ignorance. We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter came back to haunt them. We like to think they woke up haggard in the mornings and died of gnawing cancers. But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment. (35)

Costello identifies the doubled injustice of the Holocaust: the suffering and death of Europe’s Jews is magnified by the fact that many of those bearing some responsibility for Nazi crimes have gone unpunished by the law and by their consciences. Costello’s words reveal her refusal to believe, optimistically, that we live in a just world. In this, she resembles the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, for whom “we live in a world of laws...a world of the second best” (136). Again and again, Coetzee’s works confront their readers with an uncompromising vision of an inherently unjust world, in which national and international laws are inadequate responses to the demands of justice.

The Lives of Animals suggests that the types of injustice exemplified in the Holocaust find parallels in the South African situation. Indeed, Costello’s lament implicitly echoes the common complaint that the TRC’s granting of amnesty to perpetrators in exchange for full disclosure of their crimes was a grave injustice. What The Lives of Animals speaks to, then, is the legacy of the Holocaust – the most well-known racist crime of the century – in a nation hoping to come to terms with its own racially-unjust past. Coetzee shows the legacy of the Holocaust and the resultant trials to be more divided than the proponents of Nuremberg-style justice are usually prepared to acknowledge. Coetzee’s work needs to be read in a context that The Lives of Animals clearly characterizes as post-Holocaust: one in which atrocity simultaneously gives rise to a desire on the part of (at least some) victims and outside observers that those responsible be punished by the law; and a historically-informed understanding that trials inevitably involve a
restricted sense of responsibility. Moreover, this is also the context in which the South African government’s decision to pursue justice via the TRC needs to be understood: such an understanding enables one to see the TRC not merely as a body that rejected Nuremberg’s procedural legacy out of political necessity, but rather as a body that purposefully chose to reject Nuremberg’s narrative legacy as well.\footnote{There is, of course, more to the TRC’s decision than this. As the TRC states in its report, “the tendency to equate justice with retribution must be challenged and the concept of restorative justice considered as an alternative” (1: 118). Without question, the decision to pursue restorative rather than retributive justice played the biggest part in the government and the TRC’s defense of the decision to forego retributive punishment; however, the pursuit of restorative justice is not necessarily incompatible with the contestation of Nuremberg’s narrative legacy.}

Though the negotiations leading to the creation of the TRC were born out of the need for political compromise, it would be a mistake, then, simply to dismiss the TRC’s approach to post-apartheid justice. Some commentators see truth commissions as a more effective means of pursuing justice than trials, since “there is little room in legal proceedings for structural explanations of wrongdoing; from the perspective of the law, agency is first and foremost a question of individual accountability” (Posel and Simpson 6). This was certainly true of Nuremberg, for example, where “the notion of liability at work” was “the relatively tight legal notion of direct causal involvement and not the looser notion of moral liability” (Luban 353). The law’s restrictive focus on direct causal liability thus leads to (legal and historical) verdicts that belie the complexity of responsibility in Nazi Germany and apartheid-era South Africa alike. In failing to account for structural component of what Elizabeth Costello would no doubt not hesitate to call evil, trials also allow for simplistic divisions between guilt and innocence. Priscilla Hayner cites Paul van Zyl: “A trial is not about our complicity. It makes it look like
they’re guilty, not us. So all of white South Africa can look at Eugene de Kock and say, ‘evil
guy’, and not realize they made him possible” (101).\textsuperscript{73} As the TRC explains in its report,

[that Commission was obliged to identify all persons, authorities, institutions and
organizations involved in gross violations of human rights. This meant that it had to go
beyond the investigation of those that had actually committed gross violations of human
rights and include those who had aided and abetted such acts. (1:87)

Though the TRC concerned itself greatly with individual perpetrators, like de Kock, its hearings on the sectors of South African society not immediately involved in gross violations of human rights – like the media and the health and business sectors, for example – constitute an attempt on its part to address the issue of complicity and thereby eschew simplistic distinctions between guilt and innocence.

The TRC thus achieved what Nuremberg did not, and what Nuremberg-style trials in a South African context could not – that is, address itself meaningfully to those South Africans who, as Elizabeth Costello analogously suggests about the citizens of the Third Reich, “did not know (in that special sense)” what was going on around them (21), offering, in place of a trial, a more complex and challenging evaluation of guilt and responsibility that speaks to the wider South African public. In The Lives of Animals, Elizabeth Costello’s support for the “admirable moral rigor” (20) required to reject ignorance as an excuse for the indifference of the Poles near Treblinka demonstrates a significant intersection of Coetzee’s moral judgment with the TRC’s efforts to address (white) South Africans’ moral liability. Thus, if Nuremberg offers one narrative model of justice, the TRC and Coetzee offer alternative, and more broadly challenging, narratives of guilt. I place particular stress on the shared place of narrative here, for the TRC (whose Amnesty Committee had the power to grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights

\textsuperscript{73} Eugene de Kock, commonly referred to as “prime evil,” was the commander of the Vlakplaas, a police squad involved in the murder of anti-apartheid activists.
violations on the condition of full disclosure, but not to legally convict) was confined by its mandate to addressing the issues of guilt and responsibility primarily *in narrative form*, both in terms of its published report and its day-to-day operations *as* (the subject of) a public narrative. In that Coetzee, as an individual author, can himself only address the issue of guilt narratively, *The Lives of Animals* overlaps with the TRC’s narrative of guilt, even as it also competes with it to some extent.

As a work concerned with the issues of guilt and responsibility, *The Lives of Animals* resembles the TRC’s narrative in at least one other significant way. Rosemary Jolly explains that the TRC hearings
did give the lie to the myth of white ignorance adopted by many of apartheid’s beneficiaries and frequently articulated in the society at large…The TRC did not merely uncover a simple obvious lie, such as the notion that the majority of white South Africans did not know of their covert government’s covert actions. More significantly, it has exposed the practice of (pro)claiming one’s innocence, or ignorance, in the face of no verbal evidence to the contrary, for what it is: the coping strategy—all the more dangerous for its lack of self-consciousness—of a society pathologically involved in deceiving itself. (“Desiring Good(s)” 700)

If trials that follow atrocity, like those at Nuremberg, imply a desire for an easy return to normalcy, the decision to pursue justice via the TRC and *The Lives of Animals* can both be seen, in different ways, as efforts to complicate that return to normalcy by suggesting that the pathology at issue is not, or at least not only, the violent pathology of the individual perpetrators and planners of human rights violations but also that of (post-)apartheid white society in a wider sense.

What post-apartheid whites have to come to terms with, Coetzee suggests, is their pathological faith in their own decency. The text of Costello’s first public lecture, in which Costello gives her “scholarly speculations, backed up with footnotes” (26), contains a footnoted
reference to Daniel J. Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (20). Though, as I argue in chapter one, Coetzee displays strong reservations concerning Goldhagen’s diagnosis of a specifically German brand of “eliminationist anti-Semitism” as the root cause of the Holocaust, Coetzee’s treatment of Goldhagen’s work in *The Lives of Animals* is ambivalent rather than wholly negative. Indeed, in at least one sense Coetzee suggests the applicability of Goldhagen’s work to the South African situation.

Central to Goldhagen’s case is his contestation of prevalent assumptions concerning the relationship between ordinary German attitudes about Jews and the Holocaust. David H. Jones explains that, whatever its faults, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* is “tremendously valuable in soundly refuting the popular rationalization that most German perpetrators were reluctant participants acting under coercion against their moral principles” (162). However, this is not merely a popular rationalization; even a thinker as wary of common-sense opinions as Hannah Arendt could claim, in accordance with popular belief, that “there were very few people in the Third Reich who wholeheartedly agreed with the late crimes of the regime and a good number who were perfectly willing to commit them nonetheless” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 35). Contrary to both popular and learned opinion, Goldhagen argues that the Holocaust took place because many Germans wanted it to, not despite their (internalized and powerless) opposition: for Goldhagen, that “ordinary Germans were possessed of racial, demonological anti-Semitism cannot be doubted” (128); such prevalent anti-Semitism led ordinary Germans “to conclude that the Jews *ought to die*” (14). Goldhagen thus confronts his readers with the troubling claim that mass atrocities take place because (otherwise decent) people desire it.

Through Costello’s son, John, Coetzee offers a similarly discomforting opinion. John tells his mother that people “*like* eating meat. There is something atavistically satisfying about
it…If I were asked what the general attitude is toward the animals we eat, I would say: contempt” (58). The attention John calls to the role that contempt plays in meat-eating has important implications not just for understanding how humans interact with non-human animals but also with each other. Where Goldhagen asserts that the Holocaust occurred because ordinary Germans ultimately wanted it to, Coetzee is equally adamant that ordinary and decent people eat meat because of, rather than in spite of, their personal beliefs about nonhuman animals. In the South African context in which many whites denied knowing about the apartheid regime’s crimes and denied having ever supported its policies, the relevance of this line of argument is clear. Coetzee’s reference to Goldhagen’s controversial work denies comfort to those white South Africans eager to believe in their own decency, confronting them with the suggestion that apartheid survived because of what most white South Africans thought about the non-whites alongside whom they lived.⁷⁴

Though Coetzee’s references to Goldhagen in The Lives of Animals challenge unquestioned, and insupportably optimistic, assumptions about the beliefs of ordinary white South Africans, his focus departs from Goldhagen’s in significant ways. Goldhagen’s argument may lend itself to a more broadly challenging account of Holocaust responsibility, but his overt concern is with Holocaust perpetrators whose virulent anti-Semitism prompted them to take an active part in the killing. In contrast, Coetzee’s interests primarily lie elsewhere. Admittedly, perpetrators of various kinds have a place in Coetzee’s fiction (Jacobus Coetzee in Dusklands, Colonel Joll in Waiting for the Barbarians, and the men who rape Lucy in Disgrace, spring to mind); however, Coetzee tends to display less interest in perpetrators, the ethical standing of

⁷⁴ Cf. Asmal et al: “Apartheid was the organizing principle of the old South Africa; it was a principle around which large numbers of people actively rallied, as they rallied around anti-Semitism in Germany” (149).
whom is comparatively clear, than he does in those whose ethical positions are more ambiguous and complex. Where Goldhagen states, in response to the furor generated by *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, that he “reject[s] categorically” the notion of collective guilt and insists that “[o]nly individuals who have themselves committed crimes can be held guilty for them” (“The Failure of the Critics” 143), Coetzee, both in *The Lives of Animals* and elsewhere, takes seriously the possibility that restrictive notions of perpetrator guilt fail to make adequate moral sense of guilt in relation to mass atrocities.

If Larry May is correct to perceive “a strong contemporary current in ethics toward a minimal morality” (33), it is a current against which Coetzee’s fiction swims. Coetzee is more indebted to older traditions of thinking about atrocity than he is to contemporary efforts, like Goldhagen’s, that shift the emphasis away from a complicitous populace back onto restrictive notions of perpetrator guilt. This indebtedness is clearly visible in *The Lives of Animals*: Coetzee’s decision to name one of his fictional characters Dean Arendt suggests his self-conscious placement of his text in a context in which Hannah Arendt’s controversial opinions about Adolf Eichmann and the banality of evil have provided a vocabulary for dealing with the Holocaust and other mass atrocities that has remained influential in the West to this day.

Arendt’s primary conclusion in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that one need not be radically evil in order to participate in radical evil, permeates *The Lives of Animals*. Indeed, Arendt is a powerful precursor to whom Coetzee frequently returns throughout his *oeuvre*. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, Costello’s discussion of the Poles near Treblinka implicitly draws on the work of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who, in his influential work, *The Question of...*  

---

75 In “Into the Dark Chamber,” Coetzee demonstrates his agreement with Arendt’s thesis, writing that “[t]he Nuremberg trials and, later, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem presented us with a paradox in morality: a stupefying disproportion between the pygmy stature of the men on trial and the enormity of the crimes they had committed” (364).
German Guilt (1946), argued forcefully that extant definition(s) of guilt were incapable of adequately addressing the issue of guilt in the post-war context.\textsuperscript{76}

Jaspers responded to the legal and moral crises facing both the victorious Allies and the defeated German nation by distinguishing between criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical guilt. While crimes “violate unequivocal laws,” and political guilt “results in my having to bear the consequences of the deeds of the state whose power governs me and under whose orders I live,” moral guilt indicates that each individual is “morally responsible for all [his or her] deeds, including the execution of political and military orders” (25). Metaphysical guilt refers to a mode of guilt not covered by the other three. Jaspers writes, “There exists a solidarity among men [sic] as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do what I can to prevent them, I too am guilty” (26). Jaspers distinguishes between forms of guilt to defend the legitimacy of proceedings, like Nuremberg, that focus on individual criminal guilt; but he also simultaneously insists that such trials neither exculpate the rest of the nation nor provide definitive closure on questions of individual guilt. Andrew Schaap notes that, although moral and metaphysical guilt differ from criminal and political guilt in that they are “a matter of individual conscience” and thus are not “collectively imputable,” Jasper’s analysis “is that all Germans are morally and metaphysically guilty, to varying degree, by virtue of their individual actions and inaction during the Nazi regime” (751). Metaphysical guilt is collectively imputable, then, on the basis of the group membership Jaspers shares with his fellow Germans whose guilt he diagnoses.

\textsuperscript{76} It is worth noting, at this juncture, that the conceptual reworking of guilt that Jaspers pursues is difficult to imagine outside of its specific historical context. Though it is a philosophical work with typically universalist aims, The Question of German Guilt is very much a product of the time of its composition: it is concerned, primarily, with the specific issue of German culpability in the recently-ended war and concerns itself with guilt as a broader philosophical issue facing humanity as a whole only on a secondary level.
making the concept consistent with a broader range of existentialist thought which holds that “membership in a group that causes harm implicates all members of the group, even those who did not do anything to bring about the harm” (May 146). Jaspers’s emphasis on responsibility in defining metaphysical guilt indicates his expansion of guilt’s conceptual limits: if guilt and blame “lie at the end of a continuum which also contains shame, remorse, regret and feeling tainted” (May 34), metaphysical guilt responds to this continuum, denoting the differing degrees of responsibility that can be borne for a crime, as well as a correspondingly varied range of emotional responses. Articulating a perspective on guilt that divorces it from a strictly legalistic emphasis on direct participation by drawing attention instead to the act of witnessing, of bearing witness to a crime, Jaspers contributes to modern ethics by providing the philosophical tools to deal with the guilt of bystanders.

If, as I argue in my introduction, Coetzee’s writing can be read as a kind of bystander fiction, it stands to reason that Jaspers’s ideas concerning metaphysical guilt at least implicitly underwrite Coetzee’s work; the recurrent focus on the notion shame throughout Coetzee’s fiction would seem to bear this out. It is in The Lives of Animals, the work in which the Holocaust figures most directly, that Jaspers’s influence can be most obviously felt. Elizabeth Costello’s reference to a widespread international belief that a “sickness of the soul” marked a generation of Germans as “standing a little outside humanity” (20) draws on an idea of taint that is very much indebted to Jaspers’s notion of metaphysical guilt. Where Jaspers asserts that “[n]o one is guiltless” in post-war Germany (16), Costello is adamant that “[o]nly those in the camps were innocent” (20). Given the context in which Coetzee wrote The Lives of Animals, the implications of Costello’s aggressive stance for Coetzee’s white South African audience are clear: if Jaspers’s response to the question of German guilt was essentially to declare “we are all guilty” for Nazi
crimes, Coetzee similarly imputes guilt collectively to his fellow white South Africans for the crimes of apartheid.

It is worth noting a strange, and at least potentially troubling, silence that emerges in Coetzee’s piece. At the same time as Costello avoids restricting guilt for the Holocaust to perpetrators, she veers toward offering an equally problematic and reductive perspective on innocence. Primo Levi’s well-known thoughts concerning the existence of a “grey zone” in the camps that “possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure” speak to the dangers of simply assuming that the victimization of those in the camps rendered them incapable of being morally culpable in the degradations of others (27). While, for Levi, it “must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system,” it is “naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism was, sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them similar to itself” (28, 25). The system of “privilege” that arose within the camps thus created the conditions by which the victims could be made to participate in their own victimization by turning on themselves. The implications of this understanding in relation to Costello’s position are clear: if only those in the camps could be innocent, it need not follow that everyone in the camps actually was innocent.\(^7\) Levi’s warning highlights the fact that Elizabeth Costello’s thoughts about guilt and innocence are not above critical scrutiny themselves. However, Costello’s assertion does not necessarily demonstrate her own flawed understanding as much as it reveals something significant about the nature of Coetzee’s own approach to the issue of guilt – that his focus is circumscribed, limited to the segment of the

\(^7\) Certainly, the TRC hearings and its written report spoke to the “grey zone” in apartheid-era South Africa. In particular, the TRC’s focus on the violence that took place in the years leading up to the country’s democratic transition between supporters of the ANC and the IFP makes impossible simplistic assumptions concerning the essential innocence of South Africa’s oppressed populations. At the same time, by placing that violence in the context of the struggle against apartheid, the TRC followed Levi’s lead by attributing the greater responsibility for that violence to the system in which it took place.
South African population in which he can claim membership. Accordingly, while there is some validity to the criticism, articulated by Derek Wright, that Coetzee “gives privileged attention in his works to the moral predicaments of the white bourgeois intelligentsia” (12), a more sympathetic position is possible. Not able to speak from a position of innocence, Coetzee has little to say about those for whom innocence is a possibility.

*The Lives of Animals* resonates with contemporary post-apartheid attempts to grapple with issues of guilt and responsibility. However, Coetzee’s interest in thinking through the issue of guilt in *The Lives of Animals* is not simply a topical response to contemporary concerns, but part of an ongoing effort to make sense of concepts such as guilt and innocence in a South African context that Coetzee perceives “as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation having to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism” (Qtd. in Watson 13). The related issues of guilt, fault, blame, complicity and responsibility were issues to be worked through in the composition of the TRC’s narrative report, and in post-apartheid South African life generally, but they have also been obvious thematic concerns in Coetzee’s writing from the beginning. If, at the end of the first section of *Dusklands*, Coetzee’s first published fiction, Eugene Dawn disingenuously states that he has “high hopes of finding whose fault I am” (49), Coetzee’s project throughout has been to explore, as truthfully as possible, what fault he bears.

**Facing Metaphysical Guilt**

Living in a (late) colonial situation, such as South Africa’s, placed the opponent of colonialism in a particularly acute ethical bind, an ethical bind that figures prominently throughout Coetzee’s work. In “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee,” Stephen Watson speaks to this issue, arguing that Coetzee “is not only a colonizer who is an intellectual, but a colonizer who does not want to be a colonizer”; moreover, Coetzee repeatedly stages this
condition of being the “colonizer who refuses” (a phrase Watson borrows from Albert Memmi) because “all Coetzee’s major protagonists are colonizers who wish to elude at almost any cost their historical role as colonizers” (22). Watson’s article usefully signals the way that Coetzee’s fiction represents the colonial situation as one that gives rise to a particularly colonial condition of metaphysical guilt. Metaphysical guilt emerges as a central problem to be faced by the protagonists of Coetzee’s fiction: the colonizer who refuses his role is the colonizer looking to find an escape from this condition of guilt.

Jaspers’s notion of metaphysical guilt allows for at least the possibility of such an escape. As a concept, metaphysical guilt rejects, or perhaps more properly refines, reductively blunt charges of collective guilt, which hold every member of a group equally responsible for the crimes committed by the group. Though Jaspers is adamant that “there can be no collective guilt of a people or a group within a people” (36), his concept of metaphysical guilt retains the inclusive scope of collective guilt while admitting that, even within a context of widespread guilt, individual innocence is possible, for it is only if I fail to do what I can that I am metaphysically guilty (26). If metaphysical guilt allows for the possibility of individual innocence, Coetzee’s fictions are, to a large extent, concerned with exploring this possibility. The highly individualistic nature of Coetzee’s work, which tends to focus intensely on individual protagonists in narratives that make use of first-person and focalized third-person narrative

---

78While Watson’s observation is generally accurate, it does ignore both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, the protagonists of the two novellas that comprise Dusklands. Nevertheless, the case could be made that the metafictional apparatus employed in Dusklands – pointing as it does to the author’s implication in the violent exercises of colonialism associated with both characters – functions to display the author’s occupation of the historical position Watson identifies.

79For citizens of the Third Reich, simply living in Nazi Germany was not, in itself, criminal. In contrast, at least from the perspective of the colonized, the mere fact of colonizer’s presence in the colony contributes to the criminal act of territorial theft.
voices, reflects Coetzee’s commitment to thinking through the issue of (metaphysical) guilt at the individual rather than the collective level.

In wanting to elude their historical role as colonizers, Coetzee’s protagonists want, at least to some degree, to participate in a world in which easy oppositions are a possibility, where one is able, as Elizabeth Costello puts it in *The Lives of Animals*, “to divide us into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats” (22). A world in which such divisions are possible might be comforting in some senses, offering absolute standards of judgment, but it is not the world that Coetzee’s protagonists inhabit; Coetzee’s novels represent the world as a place in which legal and moral judgments about responsibility, guilt, and innocence are irreducibly complex. For Coetzee’s protagonists, occupying the position of refusal is incapable of providing an assurance that one is amongst the saved: they can never be sure that refusing the role of colonizer is sufficient. Accordingly, Coetzee’s novels consistently concern themselves with what Aroma Kharshiing calls a “hermeneutic dilemma” (28): Coetzee’s protagonists never know with certainty what ethical position they occupy.

Though the protagonists of Coetzee’s apartheid-era fiction tend to set themselves in opposition to various kinds of authority, be it patriarchal authority in *In the Heart of the Country*, or the canonical authority of the established writer in *Foe*, or state and imperial authority in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Age of Iron*, the inadequacy of symbolic actions haunts many of them. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the writer-protagonist explains that, although “political actions by individual citizens seem unlikely to have any practical effect,” they may “at least allow people to hold their heads up”; conversely, “[m]ere symbolic actions,” like flag-burnings and public renunciations of the government, “will certainly not be enough”
It is for this reason that, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate, upon seeing his rival Colonel Joll preparing to torture his prisoners publicly, cannot go back to his cell as he thinks he “ought”; because, “as a gesture to [himself] alone” (102), it will not be enough. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren considers immolating herself in front of the parliament building, but ultimately rejects her plan as futile and self-servingly symbolic. Mrs. Curren’s regretful admission to her daughter that she was wrong in striving “always for honor, for a private honor” because there are times “when to be a good person is not enough” speaks powerfully to the dilemma facing all of Coetzee’s protagonists (165). Curren’s thoughts here are underwritten not only by Jaspers’s but also by Arendt’s, for whom “[m]oral considerations are self-regarding insofar as they are guided by the kind of person one is or wants to be. By contrast, political considerations are not so much concerned with whether one is good as whether one’s actions are good for the world in which one lives” (Schaap 757). Certainly, in a novel that laments the supersession of the personal by the political, the place of Arendt’s politically-minded approach is questionable; nevertheless, Curren’s implicit distinction between *being good* and *doing good* attributes greater moral worth to the latter. The problem facing Coetzee’s characters, then, is precisely the problem of acting in an ethically proper fashion.

While for some active involvement in anti-colonial or anti-apartheid violence was a legitimate option, Coetzee’s protagonists repeatedly reject violence as their preferred mode of

---

80 *Diary of A Bad Year* deliberately complicates the question of authorial identity. The text’s protagonist, a reclusive, older Australian writer engaged in writing a book entitled *Strong Opinions*, bears the same initials as Coetzee. Though Anya, the woman he employs to type his manuscript, initially believes J.C. hails from South America and calls him Juan, the text eventually reveals this information to be mistaken: J.C. is South African, obviously suggesting a link to Coetzee. Moreover, J.C. refers to his novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (171), offering further support for reading a one-to-one correspondence between Coetzee and his creation. At the same time, details in the text actively discourage such identification. Anya learns that J.C. was born in 1934 (50); however, Coetzee was born in 1940. The effect of this relationship is to complicate the reader’s access to Coetzee-the-author; or, rather, to reveal that that access is always already complicated.
opposition. Coetzee represents the rejection of violent resistance most directly in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the only one of his novels to have a non-white protagonist at its center. Published in 1983, but set in South Africa in an indeterminate future, the novel depicts the country in a state of civil war. Between stints in Jakkalsdrif, a labour camp, and Kenilworth, a rehabilitation camp, Michael K lives primarily away from the conflict and on his own in the mountains, but has an opportunity to join a band of rebels. K decides not to join the rebels in their conflict with the state because “enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over,” while “there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening” (109) – a decision that reveals K to be a figure of paradoxical resistance. Faced with a choice between joining the rebels in (to use the terms in use at the time of the novel’s composition) their active and heroic resistance or continuing to live his own, non-heroic, individualistic life, K chooses the latter but does so in a way that disavows the terms of the choice before him. For Peter Horn, “the autonomy of the individual” is a “central topic” in the novel (59): K’s choice has everything to do with his ability to live a good life free from the interference of both sides in the conflict. The medical officer who narrates the novel’s second section marvels at the “originality of the resistance” K offers (163), as, for him, K’s stay in Kenilworth is “an allegory…of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). K resists, then, primarily at the level of meaning: though K’s decision not to join the rebels “inspired the critique and the rejection of the novel by the political left in South Africa” (Horn 59), the value of K’s mode of resistance in a context in which the political meaning of choices – artistic and otherwise – was becoming fixed is unequivocal for Coetzee. However, while K can resist in a meaningful way by rejecting the terms of the choice before him, most of Coetzee’s protagonists find this mode of resistance unavailable to them. This
unavailability is perhaps understandable given that the racialized identity the state forces K to adopt – “CM—40—NFA” (70) – separates K from the rest of Coetzee’s protagonists. For those characters who, like K, also seek a non-violent mode of opposition and a degree of autonomy, options ranging from (helpless) protest to withdrawal are available; however, the rejection of active, violent resistance in favour of passive, internalized resistance on the part of a number of Coetzee’s characters leaves them open to unsympathetic judgment.

A sense of impending judgment haunts the consciousness of many of Coetzee’s characters. Early in Waiting for the Barbarians, the magistrate admits that he “begin[s] to plead [his] own cause” (5), while in Life & Times of Michael K, the medical officer – “another version” of the magistrate (Chesney 313) – claims that his eloquence saves Michael K from torture and hopes that K “will be grateful one day” (142). In the context of the civil war raging in the background of Michael K, the medical officer’s sense of impending judgment takes on a significantly more literal cast than does the magistrate’s, for the medical officer can reasonably anticipate facing “victor’s justice” after the war, and so hopes to find a post-war ally in K. In contrast, the magistrate’s sense of impending judgment has more to do with an historical assessment of his character than with any legal judgment; the magistrate’s metafictional appeal places the reader in the position of judging his moral character. Of course, the same is ultimately also true of the medical officer, whose narrative ends in a suspended state in the form of an imagined conversation with an escaping and unresponsive K, to whom the medical officer directs a series of questions (166-7). The state of suspension present at the end of the medical officer’s narrative mirrors the state of historical suspension that finds its textual expression in the ongoing

---

81 Though the designation “CM” here seems to indicate that K is coloured, in the apartheid racial classification scheme, Paul Franssen rightly warns that “the reader is not allowed to draw any definite conclusions from this, in the light of the glaring errors that surround this racial category on the charge sheet” (456).
civil war; the reader’s moral judgment takes the place of the imaginable but not yet realized legal judgment facing the medical officer in the post-war dispensation. Anticipating judgment, the magistrate and the medical officer implicitly accept that their actions are open to judgment and that they are answerable, historically, if in no other sense, for what they have and have not done in their official roles; but they also attempt to assert their innocence by separating themselves, if not morally and legally then at the very least metaphysically, from the regimes that they serve.

Neither the magistrate nor the medical officer is completely successful in this regard. The magistrate intervenes in the public torture of captured prisoners, preventing Colonel Joll from beating them with “an ordinary four-pound hammer” (104). Because the magistrate’s intervention takes place after he has been arrested for “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (76), it places him in physical danger and results in his torture. On an obvious level, the magistrate’s humanitarian intervention, particularly in the face of the danger to himself, separates him from both Colonel Joll and the onlookers, some of whom participate in the whipping of the prisoners. He is less obviously guilty than they are; his refusal is meaningful. In Jaspers’s terms, he may have done what he can to prevent the crime unfolding before him. However, almost immediately afterward, the magistrate questions the extent to which he has separated himself from his captors. Not daring enough to “face the crowd and demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners,” the magistrate finds it “[e]asier to be beaten and made a martyr” than to deal honestly with the question of justice (106). In this way, the magistrate complicates the task of judging his actions by disrupting a potentially simplistic reading of his ethical standing in the novel. Indeed, his intervention in the public torture of the prisoners stands in stark contrast to his earlier inaction. When Colonel Joll first comes to the colony, he tortures a number of prisoners in the granary, yet the magistrate insists that he hears nothing of “the screaming which people
afterwards claim to have heard‖ (4). Coetzee leaves us to question whether it is the public nature of the later scene of torture – what David Attwell calls the “spectacle of cruelty” (J.M. Coetzee 83) – that the magistrate finds intolerable and that ultimately prompts his actions. Having earlier admitted to pleading his own cause, the magistrate’s later actions come under suspicion as being potentially part of the pleading. Likewise, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Major Noël van Rensburg’s admission, that he and the medical officer may be “scheming a bit,” hoping to acquire a good name for themselves before the day comes when the victors in the civil war “come and put everyone on trial,” casts doubt on the motivations of the medical officer in singling K out and saving him from torture (132).

Clearly, Coetzee sees a place for the writer in responding to the complexities of judgment engendered by the late colonial situation. *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* position the reader as judge, but the reader is certainly not left without a sense of Coetzee’s judgment of these conscientious officials. When the magistrate comes to the conclusion that he is not “the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel,” but rather one of “[t]wo sides of imperial rule, no more, no less” (133), the reader is not encouraged to disagree. K’s question to the medical officer, “Why fuss over me, why am I so important?” (135), calls attention to his own exceptionality: on no one else does the medical officer expend himself so. As such, the efforts that the magistrate and the medical officer take on behalf of individual others may *mitigate* their guilt; but it does not absolve them.

If providing a critical voice that speaks in terms of guilt is an avenue open to the writer, it is not an uncomplicated option for Coetzee, who has been willing to acknowledge his own
complicity from the beginning of his writing career. The similarities between Coetzee and many
of his protagonists are obvious, and Coetzee’s consistent doubts about the meaningfulness of the
colonizer’s refusal have clear implications in terms of his sense of his own ethical standing.
Crucially, Coetzee locates the possibility of his own implication in the act of writing. On the one
hand, the capacity for writing to participate in the process of Othering, and thus to be implicated
in its concomitant violence, is an overt concern of Coetzee’s, particularly in *Waiting for the
Barbarians*. On the other hand, the content and style of Coetzee’s fiction draw attention to the
possibility that writing may participate, however unwittingly, in producing a state of vicarious
excitement even as it depicts the violence to which it ostensibly opposed: Jolly explains, “the
concern to avoid fictional representations of violence that have a tendency to seduce both author
and reader through a fantasizing activity marked by its pornographic interest is evident in
[Coetzee’s] novels” (“The Gun as Copula” 44).

Beyond acknowledging writing’s potential complicity, in an abstract sense, Coetzee also
demonstrates a commitment to emphasizing that writing originates somewhere, not only from an
author but also from a place, a context. Discussing *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*,
Mike Marais stresses Coetzee’s “thematization of the inevitable implication of literature in the
relations of power which determine the social context in which it is produced” (“Places of Pigs”
102). The protagonists of the two works, Mrs. Curren and Dostoevsky, suffer, respectively, from
cancer and epilepsy, “two ‘symbolic’ diseases” (Splendore 154) that ultimately signify their
implication as writers in wider social ailments: if, as Marais claims, “Coetzee suggests that
Dostoevsky and his works are not immune to the ‘sickness’ of Russia” (“Places” 104), the same
can be said of Mrs. Curren and her letter from South Africa. Coetzee reaches a similar

---

82 Though not a writer in the same sense as Dostoevsky, Mrs. Curren is a writer of a kind in the sense that
her letter to her daughter comprises the entirety of *Age of Iron*. 
conclusion in his critical writing as well. In “The Politics of Dissent,” an essay on fellow South African author André Brink, Coetzee explains that Brink “claim[s] for the writer the role of diagnostician of society’s sickness/madness,” but goes on to argue that in acting in this role Brink is “infected by the violence of the state, and infected at the very level of his language” (211). What Coetzee suggests, then, is that the South African writer is never able to separate him- or herself from the sick body politic that is the state; as such, the metaphorical doctor-patient relationship that the writer draws upon is misleading as the very tools of the trade that the writer proposes to use to diagnose – not cure – the wider society are themselves not trustworthy, located as they are within the wider social and political body in which they circulate. As Magda, the narrator-protagonist of In the Heart of the Country explains, being “born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective,” she has “no words left to exchange whose value I trust” (97). The problem facing the writer-diagnostician for Coetzee is that there is no language available to use that is not bound up in a symbolic economy that is complicit in and infected by the very thing that it purports to diagnose.

Taken together, Coetzee’s fiction and criticism suggest his awareness that the historical situation in which he finds himself places a particular kind of demand on the writer, specifically the demand that he or she think through what it means to be a writer in a context such as the South African one. In some senses, Coetzee’s entire oeuvre can be read as an extended meditation on what it means to write in the midst of profound and widespread evil, one that attends to the complicated position that such a context forces the author to take, as the writer responding to this context can find him- or herself writing about guilt from a position that is itself implicated in that guilt.

The Problem of Writing about Metaphysical Guilt

118
Coetzee’s sixth novel, *Age of Iron*, written during the State of Emergency of the late 1980s, dramatizes the problem facing the (white) writer writing about guilt in the South African situation in a particularly acute manner. Despite the realist veneer that renders *Age of Iron* outwardly accessible in form and content, it is, like Coetzee’s writing generally, committed to a postmodern questioning of fictional discourse: comprised of a letter from Mrs. Curren to her daughter in America, the novel possesses an epistolary form that self-consciously calls attention to the work’s textuality. Added to this are frequent intertextual references to works by canonical authors – Tolstoy (14), Cervantes (18), Dante (92) and Virgil (192), to name a few – rendering the text overtly “literary” and thus apparently distant from pressing political matters. However, a seemingly casual intertextual reference to Emile Zola’s *J’Accuse* (139) by Curren provides a valuable suggestion for reading the novel, positioning it as a text that intervenes politically in South African affairs by identifying those responsible for an unjust state of affairs.83 Zola’s famous stand in *J’Accuse* on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus represents a model of politically-engaged writing by a fellow intellectual-writer to which Coetzee writes back in *Age of Iron*, while also providing an extraordinary example – given Dreyfus’s eventual acquittal – of the intellectual-writer’s power to intervene meaningfully in national affairs. The language of (factual and ethical) truth resonates through both texts, while the epistolary form that *Age of Iron* shares with *J’Accuse* suggests further affinities between the two texts, rendering Coetzee’s novel a modern-day, South African *J’Accuse* and inviting comparisons between them. *J’Accuse* took the form of an open letter to the French president in which Zola made sense of what had become a complicated affair by explicitly accusing individual officers in the French army of wrongdoing; *Age of Iron* suggests, through its protagonist’s depiction of a South African situation in which guilt is

---

83 It is not insignificant, in light of the South African context from which Coetzee wrote *Age of Iron*, that Zola’s defense of Dreyfus, a Jew, responded to a *racially* unjust state of affairs.
widespread and pervasive in a letter itself confessional in nature, that Zola’s model of engagement is one that is unavailable to Coetzee. He can neither represent the injustices of contemporary South Africa as being the responsibility of a select few, nor deny his own implication in the events he represents.

*Age of Iron* marks a departure for Coetzee, as it is the first of only two novels (*Disgrace* being the other) set fully in contemporary South Africa. The novel tells the story of Mrs. Curren, an elderly classics professor dying of cancer amidst the chaos and violence of the nation under the State of Emergency. Yet, the text makes this intensely personal story of one woman’s death inseparable from the political context that is more than just a background to the action. As Mrs. Curren explains to her absent daughter, her epistle tells “[her] truth” of “how [she] lived in these times, in this place” (130). The times and the place thus stand alongside Curren as the text’s primary subject matter, for it is the positioning of a particular character in a particular setting that gives the text its moral urgency. Curren’s perception of “John,” the friend of her housekeeper’s son who takes up residence with her for a short time, as “part of [her] salvation” demonstrates the way that her impending death subtly plays upon the traditional Christian idea of a final judgment after death, thereby extending the thematic concern with judgment found in the earlier novels (136). Meanwhile, Curren’s markedly confessional letter self-consciously demonstrates the problem of secular judgment, as Curren comes to occupy the position of both judge and (self) judged.

The issue of responsibility comes to the fore midway through *Age of Iron*, when Curren accompanies her housekeeper Florence into Guguletu, a black township just outside of Cape Town, where they discover the body of Florence’s son Bheki amidst the surrounding violence. The episode is in some sense a familiar trope of South African fiction: it is a scene of witnessing
that portrays an ethical awakening on the part of a white character. Employing a familiar formulation, Curren writes to her daughter, “Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (103). Curren, who formerly could only distrust the radio, television and newspapers, in whose reports “all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks learning about the square on the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle” (39), finds herself literally confronted with a (literal) body of truth that confirms her vague suspicions about what was really taking place throughout the country. Bewildered by the sight of the bodies of Bheki and the others with him, Curren asks who is responsible. The response offered by Mr. Thabane, the former teacher who accompanies Curren and Florence through Guguletu, leaves no doubt: “If you want to dig the bullets out of their bodies, you are welcome. But I will tell you in advance what you will find. ‘Made in South Africa. SABS Approved.’” (103). By attributing responsibility for the young blacks’ murder to the South African state and its security forces, Coetzee adopts a position similar to Zola’s: where Zola accused the General Staff of willfully covering up the truth of the Dreyfus Affair, Coetzee accuses the apartheid state of waging a covert and brutal war against its youngest citizens.

At the same time as it recalls J’Accuse, however, Age of Iron also subtly departs from Zola’s example. Redirecting the outrage expressed by Zola in J’Accuse through a fictional character, Coetzee allows the ethical truth of Thabane’s declaration to stand for itself. Although Curren finds Thabane’s Socratic method of teaching “oppressive” (98), his authority on the question of responsibility remains unquestioned. The political significance of the fact that it is Thabane who voices the accusations against the state and its security forces, rather than the novel’s white protagonist, should not be overlooked: in a context in which a state-enforced media blackout in the violence-ridden townships made information harder to come by, Coetzee’s
decision to grant the moral authority to speak the truth to a black character says much about *Age of Iron*’s ability to envision an alternative to the prevailing state of affairs in contemporary South Africa in which, particularly for Western audiences, moral authority remained the prerogative of privileged white authors such as Coetzee. The truth that Thabane spells out, which is further confirmed in the novel when the police storm Curren’s house and kill “John,” is that of the South African state’s moral bankruptcy and the guilt it bears for the deaths of youths like Bheki and his comrades.

Yet the dialogue that develops between Curren and Mr. Thabane as they journey through the violent landscape of the townships looking for Bheki suggests we approach Coetzee’s reading of the situation in light of Jaspers’s efforts to describe bystander guilt. Thabane tells Curren that what she sees “is not just terrible…it is a crime” (98). Thabane’s insistence that Curren recognize what she sees as a crime hearkens back, implicitly at least, to the connection Jaspers makes between being witness to a crime and metaphysical guilt, in which each person is “co-responsible…for crimes committed within his [sic] presence or with his knowledge” (26).

*Age of Iron* manifests an intensification of Coetzee’s efforts to think through issues of guilt and responsibility explicitly in South Africa. Whereas the magistrate and the medical officer are conscientious officials of brutal regimes, Curren is no functionary, conscientious or otherwise, but an ordinary private citizen, making her ethical standing the most complex. As a character, Curren is recognizable as yet another version of the magistrate and the medical officer; however, Curren’s gender demonstrates a further nuancing of Coetzee’s exploration of complicity, for, as a woman and as a mother, living during a time of intense political contestation in which both sides
exhibit extremely patriarchal attitudes, she possesses comparatively little authority with which to challenge the prevailing state of affairs. Nevertheless, if Coetzee ultimately suggests that even conscientious officials are responsible for the crimes of the regimes they serve, he takes a similar position on the responsibility of ordinary South Africans like Curren who must be forced to deal with the metaphysical guilt they bear.

Coetzee carries this position through *The Lives of Animals*, with its implicit comparison between Nazi Germany and apartheid-era South Africa, and beyond. Jane Poyner explains that, in *Disgrace*, David Lurie’s “sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women symbolically configures a sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally – and of the white writer in particular – for a history of abuse” (“Truth and Reconciliation” 67); for Colleen Sheils, Lurie’s guilt is apparent in that, “[h]aving willfully gained from the previous (unfair) state of the nation, [he] shared in the collective will of a minority to claim rights of domination over a majority” (39). Insofar as Coetzee’s autobiographical texts, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, come to display a confessional element as a part of the *Künstlerroman* form they adopt, in which the young artist-to-be is figured as complicit in the system of apartheid to which he bears witness, these works also treat the apartheid era as one that engenders metaphysical guilt.84

To a large degree, the lesson Thabane proposes to teach Curren about metaphysical guilt is a lesson she has already learned. In a confession to Vercueil, the vagrant who takes up residence with her on the day she learns that her condition is terminal, Curren admits that

A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am a part of it.

Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner.

---

84 Cf. Tim McIntyre’s discussion in “Autobiography and Confession in *Boyhood, Youth* and *Disgrace*” for a reading of *Boyhood* and *Youth* as confessional texts.
I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work—you have seen it, a shameful raging as stupid as what it raged against—but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. (164)

In her confession, Curren displays all the signs of metaphysical guilt: the language of crime runs throughout the confession; and the crime to which she refers is not one she has committed, but one for which she feels responsible on the basis of an identity she shares with the perpetrators of the crime. As May explains, “metaphysical guilt arises out of each person’s shared identity, out of the fact that people share membership in various groups that shape who these people are, and that each person is at least somewhat implicated in what any member of the group does” (147). It is indeed Curren’s sense of her identity as defined by the group into which she was born that prompts her feelings of shame and being tainted. Like J.C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, who opens his collection *Strong Opinions* by noting that “the only “we” we know – ourselves and the people close to us – are born into the state” (3), Curren is as powerless to reject her birthright as any subject of the state: for J.C., “those who are “under” the state, who “belong to” the state, will find it very hard indeed to change its form” and will find themselves “powerless to abolish it” (3). And yet, J.C. suggests, this powerlessness, being “born subject” (4), does not absolve us from accountability: we are, as political subjects, as responsible for the state as if we had willed it into existence in precisely the method “set down by Thomas Hobbes” in articulating the “myth of the founding of the state” (3).85 Born into the state of South Africa, in a more limited, political sense,

85 Given the obvious debts to Jaspers’s thinking evident in J.C.’s, it is not insignificant that J.C. is preparing his *Strong Opinions* for a German publisher. Always conscious of the role of his readership in shaping the meaning of his texts, Coetzee may playfully be pointing here to the ways in which different national audiences might be expected to respond in varied ways to the same material in such a way as to gently ironize his creation’s opinions: if J.C.’s implied reader is German, and thus potentially coextensive with Jaspers’s original implied reader, the Jasperian inheritance detectable in J.C.’s writing may speak less to the *strength* of his opinions (in terms of the conviction with which he holds the opinion) than to his desire to
and also born into a broader, existential state-of-being, Curren confesses to being and feeling
metaphysically guilty. Of course, Coetzee’s own confession of metaphysical guilt is also readily
discernible here. Yet Coetzee does not draw on the concept of metaphysical guilt uncritically. At
the same time as the text insists on recognizing Curren’s metaphysical guilt, it also questions and
problematises the very concept it mobilizes.

The group membership that prompts Curren’s feelings of guilt and shame is debatable.
For Sheila Whittick, Curren “confesses her guilt as a white South African” (44): the novel thus
expresses the idea that “South Africa’s whites, whatever their politics, their ethical stances, their
actions, their sentiments, have never been able…to divorce themselves completely from the guilt
of their race” (56). There are good reasons to read Age of Iron as a text that addresses white
South African guilt. In Guguletu, Curren reflects on her youth:

When I think back to my own childhood I remember only long sun-struck afternoons, the
smell of dust under eucalyptus, the quiet rustle of water in roadside furrows, the lulling of
doves. A childhood of sleep, prelude to what was meant to be a life without trouble and a
smooth passage to Nirvana. Will we at least be allowed our Nirvana, we children of that
bygone age? I doubt it. If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first
threshold of the underworld. White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be
dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping.
White our color, the color of limbo: white sands, white rocks, a white pouring down from
all sides. (92)

Whiteness is an overpowering presence in this passage: referring inter-textually to Dante’s

*Inferno*, a text that famously represents divine punishment as fundamentally just, Curren imagines
a universal order in which South African whiteness will be justly punished. However, it is the
contrast between the justice Curren imagines to be part of a divine order she doesn’t believe in
(evident in her use of the conditional *if*) and the profound injustice of the actual world in which
she lives, which cannot ethically be depicted as a Dantean Hell, that gives this passage its

---

appeal to that reader employing familiar codes that will increase the *strength* of his opinions (in the sense
of making them more persuasive and/or acceptable).
particular power: Coetzee’s use of Dante thus offers damning commentary on his fellow whites while simultaneously demonstrating the limited ability of such literary models to make moral and/or ethical sense of apartheid-era South Africa.

Despite Curren’s emphasis on whiteness as a source (and symbol) of guilt, there are signs that Curren’s ultimate focus is not on white guilt per se, but on a more particularly liberal form of white guilt. Significantly, Curren positions those about whose guilt she speaks in limbo. In Dante’s *Inferno* limbo is home to virtuous pagans and unbaptized children. The residents of limbo are thus not punished for violent crimes, nor even really for what they have done, but rather for what they have not done and for who they have not been. Accordingly, Curren assigns guilt neither across the board in an undifferentiated manner nor specifically to the violent offenders who would occupy the lower circles of Dante’s Hell, but to the otherwise virtuous (liberal) South African citizens, like herself, whose inaction she believes should consign them to Hell. The guilt with which *Age of Iron* deals can thus arguably be seen as liberal guilt, especially since Curren, like Coetzee’s other protagonists, is unwilling to resist violently. As such, I share Sheila Roberts’ sense that *Age of Iron* can be read “as a work of castigation of the white South African liberals who, over several decades of brutal government repression and black South African protest, managed to effect no change in the apartheid system” (39).

To some extent, then, *Age of Iron* has it both ways, suggesting that South African whites, generally, and liberal whites, specifically, are metaphysically guilty for the state of affairs in contemporary South Africa. Insofar as such a position is conceptually coherent, *Age of Iron*

---

86 A similar rejection of Dante’s *Inferno* can be found in writings about the Holocaust: to depict the concentration camp, or the apartheid township, as a Dantean Hell is to represent that world as sanctioned by divine authority and thus fundamentally just. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.
treats the issue of metaphysical guilt straightforwardly. However, matters become more complicated when Curren directs an accusation towards her absent daughter. She writes:

I cannot live without a child. I cannot die without a child. What I bear in your absence, is pain. I produce pain. You are my pain. Is this an accusation? Yes. J’Accuse. I accuse you of abandoning me. I fling this accusation at you, into the northwest, into the teeth of the wind. I fling my pain at you.

(C139-40)

Curren directs a personal criticism at daughter, faulting her for not being present in her mother’s time of need. Yet, the intertextual reference to Zola’s J’Accuse implies a corresponding political relevance, and, indeed, Curren’s daughter absents herself not only from her mother but also from her (mother) country. Curren explains to Vercueil that her daughter left South Africa and “will not come back until things have changed here. She has made a vow. She will not come back to South Africa as you and she and I know it” (74-5). Roberts explains that “[a]t the manifest level, the daughter’s behaviour is exemplary” (40); her desire to see a regime change unites her with her mother, who writes that she used to warn government ministers she had seen on television that their “days are numbered” (10). However, there are significant differences between Curren and her daughter as well, the most important of which is that Curren stays while her daughter has left.

When Curren tells Vercueil that her daughter left the country in 1976 (11), Coetzee subtly suggests that the daughter’s behavior is not as faultless as it first seems. The year Curren identifies as the date of her daughter’s departure has a special resonance in South Africa, as it was the year of the famed Soweto uprising. Mahmood Mamdani writes that for “the next decade,” after Soweto, “South Africa was in the throes of a protracted and popular urban uprising” (Citizen and Subject 30); it is precisely this state of affairs that Coetzee depicts in Age of Iron, wherein the township violence that Curren witnesses in Guguletu is the continuation of the renewed struggle whose beginning coincided with Curren’s daughter’s departure. The timing of Curren’s
daughter’s departure thus has political ramifications to which Curren’s accusations of abandonment allude. Roberts explains: “The daughter is the one who, in self-righteousness and the unstated desire for personal safety, abandons her country in its moment of extremity, leaving others to struggle for its restitution, and intending to return only after the dirty work has been done” (40). Not forced to leave by the apartheid state or its opponents, Curren’s daughter leaves of her own accord and, once gone, seems unconcerned with helping to realize the change she desires.

Though possessing a distinctly different ethical standing in Curren’s (and Coetzee’s) eyes, Curren’s daughter comes to resemble “the company of tennis players and crooked bankers and generals with pocketfuls of diamonds departing to set up retreats in the quieter backwaters of the world” (128). Coetzee suggests that, however unlike them she is in other ways, Curren’s daughter similarly avoids facing the judgment of black youths like Bheki and “John” and, especially, of Florence, who Curren sees as “the judge” of what constitutes “a serious death” (142,141) and whose generation could be expected to (and eventually did) assume positions of leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. If the “ruddy men with paunches and fat wives and gun collections on their living room walls and safety-deposit boxes in Rosario” who “exchang[e] Sunday-afternoon visits with the sons and daughters of Barbie, Eichmann” (128) escape post-apartheid justice, Curren’s daughter’s physical absence signals that she may be avoiding an honest reckoning with her own implication in the crimes she loathes and believes she’s left behind. The scope of Curren’s accusations thus stretches across the Atlantic: Age of Iron speaks not only to the responsibility of (liberal) white South Africans living in the country, but also those who have left.
The scope of Curren’s accusations spreads further still, as the epistolary form of the novel incorporates the reader into its ambit of judgment. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Gayatri Spivak writes that, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Margaret Saville becomes an “irreducible *recipient*-function of the letters that constitute *Frankenstein*” and that the reader of the novel “must *intercept* the recipient-function, read the letters *as* recipient, in order for the novel to exist” (259). Something similar happens in *Age of Iron*, where the reader intercepts the letters intended for Curren’s daughter. Taking the place of Curren’s daughter, the reader of the novel also stands accused by Curren. In addressing the reader, Coetzee self-consciously comments on the nature of his readership which, as Susan Gallagher noted in 1991, consisted (and still consists) primarily of “South African academics and well-educated Western readers concerned about oppression and injustice” (49). I cannot agree with Mike Marais, then, when he suggests that *Age of Iron* only identifies the South African reader with Curren’s daughter, although he hits the mark when he states that the novel “constructs the reader as someone who is indifferent to its content” (“Places” 111). It is at both of Coetzee’s audiences, local and international, that *Age of Iron* levels the charge of co-responsibility: if Coetzee invites his South African academic audience to admit its responsibility – to some extent speaking for them as one of them – his Western readership is similarly encouraged to acknowledge that we too are amongst the guilty by virtue of our indifference to the suffering of others.

---

87 Arguably, a similar maneuver is discernable in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* as well. In the former, the magistrate “reads” the tortured body of the barbarian “girl,” “treat[ing] her body as a surface, a map of a surface, a text” (Jolly “Territorial Metaphor in *Waiting for the Barbarians*” 72). In *Michael K*, the medical officer attempts to locate the larger significance of Michael K – which is to say that he looks for the meaning of K and his story – in what is recognizably the readerly act *par excellence*. In both cases, then, the narrating subject corresponds to both the author and the reader of the text.

88 Marais’s identification of Curren’s daughter with the South African reader may help to make sense of the issue of priority. Like Jaspers, who addressed his fellow Germans first and then the rest of the world, Coetzee similarly prioritizes his immediate South African audience in *Age of Iron*. 
Though the challenge *Age of Iron* poses to its Western readership is one that the text makes in full seriousness, Coetzee also gestures toward the ethical dangers inherent in stretching the concept of metaphysical guilt to its limits, as Curren’s accusations threaten to become all-encompassing. Faulting South African whites and liberals inside and outside of the country, her daughter, as well as academic and Western readerships implicated in the crime of apartheid to which they are witness, Curren also assesses the blameworthiness of black adults like Florence and Thabane. It is Florence who tells Curren, “I cannot tell these children what to do…It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers” (39), while Thabane informs Curren “I was a teacher. But I have left the profession temporarily” (100); Florence and Thabane both abdicate their responsibilities, parental and professional, to guide the younger generation, and it is this abdication that makes them blameworthy. When Thabane tells Curren that his generation “has nothing that compare” to the black youths, which is why “we must stand back for them” (150), he confirms Curren’s sense that war “is never what it pretends to be. Scratch the surface and you find, invariably, old men sending young men to their death in the name of some abstraction or other” (163). It seems, then, that no one, or at least no adult, is exempt from Curren’s accusations, except perhaps Vercueil.

Curren’s sense that she was born into a crime that predates her birth demonstrates the convergence of metaphysical guilt with the Christian notion of original sin, an idea with an important place in the Calvinist faith central to Afrikaner identity (164). Just as the concept of original sin ambitiously seeks to represent the entire human race as fallen, so too does the concept of metaphysical guilt come “dangerously close to saying that each of us, merely by being a member of the human race, share responsibility for all the harms of the world” (May 148). This
danger, which must be described as an ethical danger of judgment, is one to which Coetzee responds in \textit{Age of Iron} and elsewhere.

Calling attention to the conceptual overlap between metaphysical guilt and original sin, the Calvinist associations of which he distrusts, Coetzee reveals the sinister implications of metaphysical guilt, which is in other ways treated as an ethically desirable perspective. In theory, the doctrine of original sin may be seen to contain a radically egalitarian, albeit pessimistic, view of human nature, in which each person is equally implicated in humanity’s fallen state. In practice, however, the doctrine of original sin has been used to divide humanity into opposing groups – what Elizabeth Costello calls “the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned” \textit{(Lives of Animals 22)} – in ways that have been used to justify the worst of abuses. When Mrs. Curren writes that the “spirit of Geneva…Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold” is “victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch-hunters of both armies” (51), she expresses a concern, that cannot but be seen as Coetzee’s as well, about the legacy of the Calvinist spirit in South Africa. Coetzee could not have foreseen, in \textit{Age of Iron}, either the rapidity with which South Africa would change in the early 1990s or the shape of the post-apartheid dispensation that would emerge; nevertheless, in \textit{Disgrace}, his first post-apartheid novel, Coetzee picks up on the concern he expresses in \textit{Age of Iron} by depicting post-apartheid South Africa as a place where, as Georgina Horell puts it, “‘whiteness’ has been reinscribed, no longer unproblematically, as ‘norm’ or simply ‘privilege’, but as ‘guilt’”; it is also a place where Lucy Lurie’s rape calls attention to the ways that women’s bodies circulate as “pages upon which the narrative of guilt may be written” (23, 30). Insofar as \textit{Age of Iron} anticipates a future South Africa, not unlike the one depicted in \textit{Disgrace}, in which one or the other of the victorious “armies” would be in a position to pass harsh judgment, with harsh consequences, upon the other, it also suggests that a
modified theory of collective guilt, like Jaspers’s, may itself bear some responsibility for those consequences.

If Coetzee suggests in *Age of Iron* that metaphysical guilt lends itself, conceptually, to violent (gendered) retribution, a second danger to which he responds concerns the potential for such a concept to become so broad as to be meaningless, amounting to little more than, in Curren’s words, a flinging of accusations “into the teeth of the wind” (140). The plot device Coetzee employs in having Curren rely upon Vercueil, after her death, to mail her letter to her daughter, complete with its accusations, appropriately symbolizes the potentially limited power of a concept such as metaphysical guilt to reach those that it aims to address.

The fear that an expansive concept of guilt may result in a more attenuated sense of responsibility has had some purchase inside South Africa and out. Following World War II, Hannah Arendt warned that, although the claim “we are all guilty” initially sounds “very noble and tempting,” it is dangerously misleading because “where all are guilty, no one is” (*Responsibility* 147, 21). In “Guilt and Atonement,” a talk given in December 1991, early in the transition to post-apartheid rule, Njabulo Ndebele claimed that “[g]uilt on a massive social scale is not healthy…It is justice we must demand, not guilt” (155). “Paradoxically,” he continued, “it may benefit the whites to keep us demanding their guilt…The demand for justice…is more immediately and concretely threatening: *it keeps our attention firmly on the search for the actual process of redress*” (156). Arendt and Ndebele identified different problems, but both addressed the potential uselessness, from a practical perspective, of an overly expansive understanding of
Collectively, Arendt and Ndebele offer a powerful critique that needs to be addressed in relation to Coetzee’s writing; it is, however, a critique that Coetzee takes steps to address. Insofar as *Age of Iron* can be read as a text that troubles the concept of metaphysical guilt, even as it employs it, by gesturing towards its potentially endless expansion, it also suggests that recognition of a general implicated-ness in world events is only one part of the individual’s ethical responsibility. Curren tells Vercueil that she was wrong to believe that the price she had to pay for being implicated in the crime into which she was born was a life of shame. She confesses to having “been a good person” when “[w]hat the times call for is…heroism” (165). Rather than indulging herself in narcissistic feelings of shame and taint, Curren comes to see that being subject to such feelings is only meaningful if it prompts the ethically correct kind of action. Deciding on the right course of action in such ethically demanding times continually troubles Curren, who considers publicly immolating herself in a display of helpless protest but ultimately rejects that option in favour of living on and, by extension, continuing to write the letter that comprises *Age of Iron*.

Such a decision raises complicated questions: Are we, as readers, to read Curren’s authoring of her letter as a heroic act? As the author standing behind Curren, does Coetzee implicitly claim to be acting heroically? Coetzee’s opinions about heroism in *Life & Times of Michael K* may shed some light on the matter. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee claims that, when writing *Michael K*, writing a book in the heroic tradition was “not a book I wanted-to-write” (207-8) and that if “one takes Michael K seriously as a hero, a paragon, a model, it can only be a hero of resistance against…accepted ideas of the heroic” (206). The kind of heroism that Coetzee

---

89 Arendt’s remarks addressed the connection between the post-war German belief in shared guilt and the ludicrously light sentences handed out to Nazi offenders in the lesser trials that followed Nuremberg, while Ndebele’s reveal guilt-obsession to be an (often narcissistic) impediment to social change.
values, then, is not the conventional heroism of personal risk and martyrdom, but a quieter, subtler heroism. In *Age of Iron*, this translates into a heroism that doesn’t exonerate but implicates: speaking to his readership, through Curren, from a position of mutual implication, Coetzee does not seek to evade his own responsibility, to deny his metaphysical guilt, but to confront his readers with a responsibility we share so as to prompt ethical engagement from us. It is that attempt that constitutes the text’s heroic action even as Coetzee’s doubts about the power of his art to effect meaningful change undercuts that heroism.

A similar movement can be found in *The Lives of Animals*, which continues the interrogation of the notions of collective and metaphysical guilt begun in *Age of Iron*. While *The Lives of Animals* invites reading a one-to-one correspondence between what Costello states about Holocaust responsibility and what Coetzee suggests about apartheid responsibility, the work’s animal theme complicates this scheme by suggesting that the familiar triad of Holocaust terms – perpetrator, victim, bystander – go beyond being applicable exclusively in specific national contexts and are instead more widely applicable to humanity as a whole. Moving the focus away from historical guilt – which is to say guilt that is located in the past – and onto present responsibility, *The Lives of Animals* calls on its audience to engage in the present, even as Costello’s statement that she has “never much been interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise” signals her refusal, indistinguishable from her inability, to offer specific guidelines for action (37).

In both *Age of Iron* and *The Lives of Animals*, then, Coetzee assumes a complicated, even paradoxical, position on the idea of metaphysical guilt. On the one hand, a clear acceptance of the concept’s challenge to bystanders is apparent: the power of Curren’s letter and of Costello’s comparison to disturb is reliant primarily on their ability to mobilize the powerful appeal of
metaphysical guilt as a concept capable of addressing widespread guilt in a meaningful way. On the other hand, in expanding the notion of metaphysical guilt beyond the limits of the nation-state and suggesting its applicability on a much larger scale, Coetzee at least implicitly questions the usefulness of the concept by pushing it to its limits. The type of moral rigor that Curren and Costello (and behind them Coetzee) wish to maintain when speaking of guilt thus requires walking a tightrope between limiting notions of perpetrator guilt and overly expansive notions of metaphysical and collective guilt. In both affirming and questioning the concept of metaphysical guilt, Coetzee speaks to the difficulties facing the writer who attempts to make sense of guilt in relation to large-scale injustices at the end of the twentieth century.

Returning to *Age of Iron*, then, it becomes apparent that the text’s invocation of Emile Zola’s *J’Accuse* performs an important function in its formulation of the writer’s role in responding to injustice. Like Zola, Coetzee seeks to make (ethical) sense of an unjust situation. Ultimately, however, *Age of Iron* rejects the model offered by Zola out of necessity: the condition of widespread, indeed pervasive, guilt makes impossible the restriction of responsibility to a select few. Where Zola accused specific individuals in his letter, Coetzee’s fiction directs no accusations at real people, even as it seems to charge everyone with responsibility. Inviting a comparison between *Age of Iron* and *J’Accuse*, Coetzee also invites a comparison between himself and Zola, one that does not necessarily do him any credit. Where Zola’s intervention can be said to have had a practical and laudable effect, contributing substantially to Alfred Dreyfus’s eventual exoneration, there is a sense, in *Age of Iron* and elsewhere, that Coetzee harbors no hopes that his own interventions will have a similarly powerful, material impact: Mrs. Curren flings her accusations into the teeth of the wind, while in *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello’s response to her son’s question about whether she believes “that poetry classes are
going to close down the slaughterhouses” is a simple no (58). While Coetzee’s fiction remains committed to addressing the charge of metaphysical guilt, it also confronts the possibility, even the likelihood, that the challenge it poses is dismissible.

If Zola’s act of publishing *J’Accuse* represents an action that is morally meritorious, indeed courageous, in that, as Jean Denis Bredin explains, “Zola was not without knowing that virtually every paragraph was subject to legal action, that he could and would provoke a number of lawsuits” (250), Coetzee’s own intervention in South African affairs cannot but seem timid by comparison, and *Age of Iron* is even a confession to this effect. And yet, it is in making this confession that Coetzee’s brand of courage is discernible. In underwriting Curren’s fictional confession with his own, Coetzee models a strategy for all who are subject to the condition of metaphysical guilt, but particularly his fellow white South Africans. Insofar as *Age of Iron* constitutes Coetzee’s own confession(s) – to being implicated in apartheid, to being metaphysically guilty, and to being incapable of replicating Zola’s feat – it offers an admission of wrongdoing, or more specifically of *being at fault*; an admission that Coetzee figures as a meaningful precondition to genuine reconciliation.
Chapter 4

Making Amends: Problems of Reconciliation

The end of the apartheid regime confronted all South Africans with the significant challenge of building a new and stable nation following the dramatic collapse of the old one. The problem was more than a matter of establishing the legitimacy of the country’s first fully democratic government, a task by no means simple in itself. Rather – after more than four decades of a criminal apartheid system conceived, run, and actively or tacitly supported by a majority of the white population, centuries of racist colonial administration, and years of intense internecine struggle between supporters of the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party – the questions facing the nation were significantly more complex. How could South Africans hope to come together peacefully, in a spirit of mutual respect, in the “New” South Africa? What steps would have to be taken for formerly bitter enemies and political antagonists to co-exist peacefully with one another? What would reconciliation look like, and how could it be achieved? At an historical juncture in which questions of all kinds were presenting themselves to the South African government and people, questions of reconciliation were amongst the most visible and the most pressing.

Though the problem of reconciliation became increasingly urgent following the country’s transition to post-apartheid rule, it was by no means new to the South Africa of the 1990s. As an issue of concern, it registered within national consciousness well before the apartheid regime grudgingly relinquished its power. As far back as 1948 – a watershed year in South African history that saw the election of the National Party and the creation of the apartheid state — Alan
Paton memorably established the parameters of the issue in his seminal novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In a conversation with the novel’s protagonist, Stephen Kumalo, the Reverend Theophilus Msimangu acknowledges the terrible suffering inflicted on South Africa’s non-white populations by whites and goes on to describe his “one great fear” for the nation: “that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating” (40). In this oft-quoted dialogue, Paton succinctly framed the issue facing a possible future post-apartheid South Africa still divided by a history of racism and hatred, albeit in terms of a simplifying Christian discourse of love. As post-apartheid South Africa transformed from long-desired dream to an incipient reality, the formerly abstract question of reconciliation became an urgent and concrete need, providing the newly-elected government with its first major test and presented the nation with the possible realization of Msimangu’s fears.

While the earlier negotiated settlement between the apartheid government and its opponents made the cessation of official hostilities possible long enough for the transition to democratic rule to take place, it had long been known – as evidenced in Paton’s novel – that something beyond a formal political agreement between contending parties was needed to bolster what was still a fragile and tenuous arrangement and ensure future stability. A key provision included in the negotiated settlement allowed for individual amnesties to be granted in exchange for truthful disclosure of the past. In the hands of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, this “truth for amnesty” provision came to exceed its original purpose, becoming more than a mere implement in the service of political expediency: through its operations, the TRC hoped to enact a change in the country’s social dynamic by “entrench[ing] a new public morality” (Attwell and
Explaining in its final report to the nation that “reconciliation is both a goal and a process” (1:105), the TRC enacted reconciliation as part of its own process, modelling the behaviour it, and the South African government that created it, wanted to promote in the post-apartheid present.

To some extent, the process of post-apartheid reconciliation made similar demands of all South Africans: namely, the acknowledgement of the full scope and nature of the crimes of the past and an accompanying commitment to move forward in a more just present. In other ways, however, what was expected of those who had been privileged under apartheid – perpetrators, bystanders, and beneficiaries alike – was altogether different from that which was asked of apartheid’s former victims. Through often framed as a matter of forgiveness in popular and academic discourse (and at times by members of the TRC itself), the challenge facing the vast majority of South Africa’s population was not a matter of forgiveness – at least not insofar as the idea is commonly understood – so much as it was a matter of a deliberate choice not to pursue justice via an indiscriminately punitive programme. For TRC chairperson Desmond Tutu, this meant choosing restorative justice over retributive justice, while in Paton’s terms, discussed above, it entailed the deliberate decision not to turn to hating. Conversely, for the relative few who had not been victimized on a daily basis by the apartheid system, the challenges to be confronted (or avoided) on an individual level involved coming to terms with one’s role in a past atrocity and determining how best to live as a citizen in a radically transformed society. It was precisely in its capacity to address itself to wide segments of the population, at a momentous occasion in the country’s history, that the discourse of reconciliation came to proliferate in South African public discourse in the late 1990s.

---

90 Cf. Rajeev Bhargava’s argument that “the primary function of a truth commission is to help a barbaric society become minimally decent” (45).
Given the ubiquitousness of the discourse of reconciliation in South African public life during the early post-apartheid years, particularly as the TRC began its much-publicized work and became the subject of both national and international scrutiny, it is unsurprising that the problem of reconciliation figures prominently in *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, two works of fiction published by Coetzee in 1999 as the contours of post-apartheid life became clearer. Perhaps more than any of Coetzee’s other works, with the exception of *Age of Iron*, *Disgrace* is a recognizable product of a particular moment in South African history: as Laura Wright has it, the novel is “firmly situated” in “an Africa...undergoing pronounced social and environmental change” (90). Though specific references to particular contemporary stories and events of the day are, typically enough in a work by Coetzee, absent from *Disgrace*, references to “the times” operate as a refrain running throughout the text, self-consciously locating the work temporally and overtly calling attention to the timeliness of the novel as a response to the new South Africa and its project of national reconciliation. While the concerns that lie at the heart of *The Lives of Animals* precede and exceed the context of its early post-apartheid production more obviously than is the case with *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello’s addresses to the academic community at Appleton College overlap conceptually with several of the key issues that Coetzee explores in *Disgrace*. On the one hand, a concern for how human beings treat nonhuman animals overtly unites the two texts, not least of all because, in the latter novel, David Lurie likens the work Bev Shaw performs in the animal clinic where Lurie occasionally volunteers to a kind of “Lösung” in a manner that quite deliberately recalls the contentious Holocaust comparison Costello explores in *The Lives of Animals* (142). On the other hand, though in a less obvious manner, the two texts are also united in that each enables Coetzee to interrogate the notion of reconciliation, particularly

---

91 See Derek Attridge’s, “Age of Bronze,” for a thorough discussion of Coetzee’s engagement with the idea of changed times in *Disgrace* (100-105).
in terms of what it means for those who bear some responsibility for making reconciliation a necessity in the first place.

The protagonists of *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, David Lurie and Elizabeth Costello, respectively, are notably older characters – Lurie is 52 at the beginning of *Disgrace* and, although Costello’s age is not given, she has a son old enough to hold a PhD. Moreover, both show few signs of being receptive to the notion of reconciliation: if anything, they evince distinct hostility towards the idea itself and even, in direct and oblique ways, challenge and criticize it. While the attitudes and ideas that Lurie and Costello express might be taken simply as signs of cantankerousness on the part of characters enjoying the prerogatives they believe come with age, Coetzee endeavours to represent the ethical and intellectual positions of both protagonists as fundamentally embodied responses of the aging characters which express their respective perceptions of the contemporary world in which they live.

Given that both protagonists are likely to prove off-putting to the general reader, though for different reasons, the doubts that Lurie and Costello respectively cast on the reconciliatory project may be undermined to some extent by the characters voicing them. David Lurie is, at best, an arrogant, womanizing intellectual and, at worst, a sexually-abusive individual who takes maximum advantage of the position and privileges he enjoys in acting out his desires on a relatively powerless and vulnerable student. For her part, Elizabeth Costello not only knowingly makes a comparison most of her audience will reject but also is so uncompromising in her views as to lend her daughter-in-law Norma’s claim, that she is practicing a “power-game”, at least a degree of plausibility (*Lives* 68). However, given that Coetzee very well may, as Mcdunnuh has it, set an “ethical challenge” for readers by asking us to “‘think ourselves’ into his [characters’] being” (16), the larger challenge that Coetzee sets for readers of both works involves recognizing
that we may have to allow for the cogency of the positions voiced by characters we may be
inclined to dislike. Despite investing these characters with such personally unattractive traits,
Coetzee, through his narrative treatment of the challenges that each character respectively poses –
in Lurie’s case to an unchecked ethos of market-driven efficiency exemplified by Cape Technical
University’s “great rationalization” (3), and, in Costello’s case, to human complacency in the face
of what she perceives to be an ethical crisis of the grandest scale, “a crime of stupefying
proportions” (69) – works to resist their easy dismissal by the reader. In each text, the challenge
posed by the protagonist, which extends to the South African reconciliatory project and beyond,
retains at least some of its power to disturb.

With good reason Disgrace and The Lives of Animals can be, and often are, read as
companion pieces, as the two texts collectively engage in a profound philosophical and practical
questioning of reconciliation as both a process and a goal. Though neither work can be reduced
to a simple treatment of reconciliation thematically, both concern themselves centrally with the
issue by exploring what kinds of demands reconciliation makes, by representing how individuals
cope with the demands reconciliation places on them, and by questioning the possibilities for
genuine reconciliation in the wake, or even the midst of, atrocity. If Disgrace and The Lives of
Animals respond directly to a particularly pressing concern in contemporary South African public
and political life at the end of the twentieth century, it should not be imagined that Coetzee’s
interest in thinking through the notion of reconciliation begins and ends with these two works.
Indeed, as my earlier reference to Paton indicates, the thematic importance of reconciliation to
South African literature can hardly be said to begin in the mid-90s; if Coetzee’s apartheid-era
writing figuratively anticipates the post-apartheid preoccupation with reconciliation, and it does,
this helps to locate Coetzee’s work – frequently viewed through the lens of metropolitan literary
theory – within the South African literary tradition to which it belongs. *The Lives of Animals* and *

Disgrace*, then, pick up and continue the thematic treatment of reconciliation that runs throughout the works preceding them, but do so in historically-transformed circumstances that render the thematic concern overt and timely.

As I will argue in this chapter, a reading of how *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals* define and trouble the concept of reconciliation, in both a general, global sense and a specific, local sense, establishes the parameters for thinking about how Coetzee’s fiction has consistently returned to the issue, in order to question the possibility that the process can be completed; and to explore, the potential value of an ongoing process of atonement and expiation in place of a discrete, perfectable ritual. Ultimately, I show that Coetzee’s fiction self-consciously reflects on the connection between writing and the process of reconciliation, both positing and questioning the capacity for fiction to function as an act of contrition and a meaningful reconciliatory gesture.

**Disgrace and the Problem of South African Reconciliation**

It is in *Disgrace*, a novel set recognizably in post-apartheid South Africa, that the theme of reconciliation is obvious. It is difficult not to concur with Jane Poyner when she writes that the novel is “an allegory of the troubled Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (67). In particular, the novel “resonates with the national public spectacle of shame, confession, and forgiveness that was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Kossew “The Politics of Shame” 155). Much of the novel’s power comes from its focus on its protagonist’s efforts to come to terms both with his own actions, past and present, and with what happens to him and his daughter at the hands of others: the emotional charge that would no doubt be present in a narrative of this type if it were set anywhere else is magnified in a context in which the protagonist’s struggles recognizably evoke the challenges familiar to an entire nation confronted with a similar struggle. Beyond
evoking the TRC, the novel also confronts its readers with the notable resistance of the novel’s protagonist, not to the national project of reconciliation _per se_, but to the broader range of changes bound up with it. After losing his job as a professor in Cape Town because of a human rights complaint filed against him by Melanie Isaacs, a former student with whom he has a sexual affair, Lurie moves to live with his daughter in the Eastern Cape. While there, he agrees to help Lucy’s friend Bev Shaw in the animal clinic where she works, but informs his daughter that his agreement comes with a condition: “I’ll do it. But only as long as I don’t have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself” (77). For Lurie, at this early stage in the novel at least, the discourse of reconciliation is implicitly underwritten by a call for the rejection of his former identity – a step he is resolutely unwilling to take. Reacting against what he perceives to be a pressure to change _who he is_ as part of the broader reconciliatory project, Lurie adopts an aggressively hostile attitude that speaks to the obstacles facing the nation’s reconciliatory aims.

Lurie’s recalcitrant attitude proves to be a troubling feature of the novel. Though he comes across as a highly unsympathetic character throughout much of the novel – one for whom, from the beginning, women exist merely as instruments to be used to solve “the problem of sex” (1) – Lurie’s academic background and liberal leanings, represented by his love for the Romantic poet Lord Byron⁹², combine to make him a figure far likelier to be receptive to the need for a process of reconciliation in South Africa than a character like Ettinger, the “surly old man who speaks English with a marked German accent” and who “never go[es] anywhere without [his] Beretta” (100). Set against the character of Ettinger, Lurie seems open-minded and reasonable,

---

⁹² Lurie’s affinity for Byron also relates to his own exploitative practices and womanizing tendencies: Lurie may be accurate, speaking from a restricted academic perspective, when he informs Melanie that “Wordsworth has been one of my masters” (13), but it is Byron whose presence makes itself felt in Lurie’s conduct in his wider personal life.
particularly when it comes to the pre-eminent issue of race in South Africa. During the university inquiry into his actions, the third-person narrative voice, remaining characteristically close to Lurie’s point of view, reveals his long-standing friendship with fellow academic Aram Hakim, with whom he “used to play tennis...in his tennis-playing days” (42). Though the reference to Lurie’s tennis-playing days may appear incidental in relation to the obviously more significant matters it prefaces, it constitutes far more than a throw-away detail. As Bill McDonald explains, Lurie’s past “is largely a blank slate to readers” (64). Accordingly, the few glimpses that Coetzee provides into Lurie’s past take on added significance and help provide a fuller understanding of his character in the present.

For Sheils, Lurie’s past is as disarmingly familiar as his present because “the reader never gets any sense that [Lurie] had any role in resisting the apartheid ideology of the former South Africa” (41). To an extent, Sheils’s argument is compelling. Without doubt, it is hard to

---

93 It is largely the contrast that emerges between Lurie’s exploitative relationships with women and his (for the most part) more overtly acceptable racial attitudes that allows Coetzee to complicate his depiction of post-apartheid South Africa by foregrounding the intertwining of gender concerns with the more widely prevalent racial issues that were, and continue to be, predominant in South Africa. Though the novel powerfully registers the lingering hold of the “coarse old prejudices” and remains sceptical of efforts to see them “washed away in gales of laughter” (23), it also resists, in a manner characteristic of Coetzee’s writing generally, the acceptance of race as the only, or even the preeminent, factor shaping life in South Africa. Nowhere, perhaps, does the intersection of race and gender become clearer than in the figure of Melanie Isaacs, whose racial identity, in typical Coetzian fashion, is left indeterminate but is also suggested by Farodia Rassool’s reading of Lurie’s relationship with Melanie in light of the “long history of exploitation of which this is a part” (53). As a presumably non-white victim of Lurie’s actions, Melanie can be read as being symbolic of the many non-white women who were victimized, sexually and otherwise, at the hands of white men and who, and this is crucial to Disgrace’s message, remained vulnerable in sadly familiar ways on an individual level at the same time as the transformation of the nation’s racial political superstructure suggested their liberation from the dangers and inequalities of the past. At the same time, Rosemary Jolly’s warning that Disgrace “is easily consumed as a novel exclusively about racial identifications” offers a valuable reminder that one must be particularly careful about allowing one’s unconscious and unacknowledged assumptions to determine one’s reading of the text (“Going to the Dogs 167”). Coetzee’s invitation to the reader to ascertain Melanie’s race on the basis of Rassool’s comment may be an element of Coetzee’s noted habit of playing games with his readers. That is, readers who automatically conclude that the history to which Rassool refers is racial history neglect to consider the possibility that Rassool speaks in terms of gender rather than race. Disgrace, then, plays on its readers’ unacknowledged assumptions about race and gender almost as much as it registers the ongoing legacy of race and gender in post-apartheid South Africa.
imagine Lurie – a man whose academic output includes books on “opera…vision as eros [and]
Wordsworth and history” (4) – actively collaborating with the organized anti-apartheid
movement: his strongly individualist outlook and continuing fascination with Byronic anti-heroes
are hardly suggestive of a man drawn to broad political causes and movements. However
Sheils’s reading of Lurie’s past can only be followed up to a point, as it tacitly adopts a restrictive
notion of what constitutes resistance and thus requires rethinking: to follow Sheils’s lead in
effectively casting Lurie as sympathetic to the apartheid regime, thereby implicitly denying that
resistance to “apartheid ideology” can take any form other than organized political resistance,
pushes the matter too far, especially when dealing with Coetzee, whose own reservations
concerning prescriptive notions of engagement are well-known.  

Through the detail he provides about Lurie’s long-standing friendship with Hakim, Coetzee arguably allows Lurie to be seen in a
new and more positive light – as a character possessing a limited degree of independence from
the highly racialized thinking of apartheid-era South Africa. Given the way in which issues of
racial segregation in sport took on an increasingly public and intense cast during the apartheid
era, providing internal and international opponents of apartheid with a highly visible focal point
around which to rally, Lurie’s personal rejection of the colour-bar in sport casts him as mildly,

94 Labelled in the early stages of his career as a writer whose postmodernist tendencies and highly
allegorical narratives indicated his desire to hold himself aloof from the day-to-day concerns of South
Africa, Coetzee is a writer who has long questioned the validity of prescriptive notions of engagement and
commitment: in an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee looks back on his past (in a style that would
become very familiar to Coetzian autobiography beginning with the publication of Boyhood) and
comments of his younger self that
as a student he moves on the fringes of the left without being part of the left. Sympathetic to the
human concerns of the left, he is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language—by all
political language, in fact. As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays
down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back
sceptically at its premises. (Doubling the Point 394)

against the participation of South African sports teams in international competitions, Nixon explains that
the “boycott of South Africa amounted, after all, to the most prominent, extended anti-racist campaign in
if only privately and ineffectually, rebellious. Though it is hardly enough to recast Lurie in our eyes as a hero of resistance, it does serve to prevent Lurie being lumped into the same category as Ettinger in any uncomplicated way.

In contrast, Ettinger provides *Disgrace* with a representative of the old-fashioned racism that undergirded the apartheid regime and enabled it to survive for nearly half a century. Shortly after Lucy’s rape, Ettinger opines about the absent Petrus that there is “[n]ot one of them you can trust” (109). The voicing of such an opinion, particularly in the presence of Lurie, who Ettinger hardly knows, tellingly reveals the persistence of Ettinger’s blatant and unconsidered racism into the post-apartheid era; it is not so much what Ettinger says that is striking, but the way that his statement, in the context in which he makes it amongst people he does not know well, indicates his assumption that what he says will not bring offence. As an isolated figure, Ettinger – whose wife’s death and whose children’s decision to emigrate back to Germany make him “the only one left in Africa” (100) – immediately recalls the stubbornly unrepentant apartheid government, especially of the 1970s and 80s, that saw itself as the sole bastion of white civilization in Africa and which defiantly resisted internal and external calls for reform. At the same time, Ettinger’s warning to Lurie following Lucy’s rape that “the police are not going to save you, not any more” (100, emphasis mine) indicates, through its wistful evocation of a time when South African whites could depend on the police to prioritize their interests, that he also embodies the spirit of the contemporary South African white Right, which continued to celebrate the country’s racist past while opposing the changes that were taking place as the transition to post-apartheid rule unfolded.

the history of world sports. Arguably not since Jesse Owens ascended the Berlin Olympic podium four times against a backdrop of Nazi triumphalism has an intervention through sport had such striking political repercussions” (133).
If any character in *Disgrace* is unlikely to be receptive to the times, it is Ettinger. And yet, ultimately, the novel suggests that Ettinger’s opinions, distasteful and offensive as they are, are likely to prove unimportant in the wider scheme of things. As Lucy informs her father, it “is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back” (204). Rather than being indicative of a new level of fatalism on Lucy’s part following her rape, her account of Ettinger’s probable fate, in this instance, signals the political marginalization of the white Right in the new South Africa. While Ettinger’s habitual carrying of his Beretta makes him dangerous on an individual level, just as the white Right was (and continues to be) a persistent source of potential violence in post-apartheid South Africa, the limits that Lucy imaginatively places on Ettinger are indicative of the white Right’s waning capacity to dictate the course of South African affairs. Though far from suggesting in *Disgrace* that the racism of the apartheid era is a thing of the past, Coetzee does acknowledge that the shift to democratic rule has signalled an irrevocable end to white supremacist governance and policies. In the end it was not the Ettingers of South Africa from whom the proponents of reconciliation sought support, but the David Luries.

That support, however, does not come easily from Lurie. If Lurie’s liberalism initially casts him as an ideal supporter of the reconciliatory process, it is, Coetzee suggests, paradoxically this very liberalism that renders him unsympathetic to the project. Offering a self-defence of sorts when explaining his actions in Cape Town to his daughter, Lucy, Lurie states that his case “rests on the rights of desire” (89). While Lurie’s recourse to the language of rights is undoubtedly a self-serving and disingenuous distortion of the concept of rights that allows him to legitimize his own desires and actions, it also serves another crucial function in the text by foregrounding the issue of rights as one of the pressing concerns in a country attempting to redefine itself after an era in which human rights were constantly, even habitually, violated.
Seeking to avoid perpetuating a situation in which the law of the land enabled human rights abuses rather than providing defences against them, the newly-elected government drafted a new Bill of Rights designed to make impossible the kinds of human rights violations that were the norm under apartheid. It is this enterprise that stands behind Lurie’s reference to his own rights of desire; read in this light, Lurie’s comments are suggestive of a larger critique of this enterprise performed by the novel wherein, as Elizabeth Anker asserts, “Disgrace insists on core inadequacies afflicting the current state of the liberal discourse of rights” both inside the country and out (243).

Set in a country quickly being transformed from an authoritarian into a recognizably neo-liberal state, Disgrace depicts an image of the nation in which the triumphal strains of a newly-ascendant liberalism must be viewed with a healthy measure of scepticism: Lurie’s actions in his relationship with Melanie proceed not from his rejection of the idea of individual rights but rather from his automatic assumption of the priority of his own rights. The problem in a larger sense, as Disgrace demonstrates, is that rights can themselves come into conflict with one another: Lurie clearly “conceives of himself as an individual who is free to realize his every desire even if this means violating the rights of other individuals” (Marais “Disgrace and the Task of the Imagination” 76). As a white South African who lived his entire life with the privileges and freedoms afforded to him by the apartheid system, Lurie is fundamentally unprepared to recognize that his freedom to desire, and even realise, a sexual affair with a student, meets its limits when confronted by the competing rights of that student not to be subjected to his desire. The strange, unexpected quotation from Blake – “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires” (69) – that Lurie offers his daughter shortly after arriving in the eastern Cape,
signals his capacity to elevate his own desires to the status of rights while also prefiguring his later recourse to the language of liberal rights.  

Through Lurie, then, *Disgrace* demonstrates the capacity for liberal individualism to contribute to the perpetuation of human rights abuses, rather than contributing, as might be hoped and even expected, to their end. At the same time, the text also is concerned to show the tendency for liberal individualism to come into conflict with a national project of reconciliation such as South Africa’s. This conflict is played out in a particularly intense fashion during the investigation into Lurie’s actions by the university committee convened to deal with his case. Lurie’s attempts to offer a “secular plea” are a source of frustration for the committee, unwilling to follow Lurie’s lead in perceiving itself solely as a “secular tribunal” (58). In drawing repeatedly on an identifiably legal language of rights and pleas in constructing his own narrative account of his relationship with Melanie, Lurie casts himself in the role of a liberal opponent of a quasi-juridical disciplinary process that exceeds the appropriate boundaries of the law. Although Lurie’s is a self-appointed role, a manifestation of his often-ironized tendency to view himself as the hero-protagonist of his own life narrative  

97, the novel does not completely deny his ability to take on this role; indeed, to some degree, it validates Lurie’s opposition. Despite Chairman Manas Mathabane’s assurances to Lurie that “What goes on in your soul is dark to us” (58), Lurie’s unvarying sense that what goes on in his soul – or, more precisely, is perceived to go on

---

96 It also points to the role that literary texts, by thematizing and aestheticizing desire, can play in human rights abuses by contributing to an individual’s sense of the priority of his own rights. For a consideration of Coetzee’s treatment of issues surrounding the literary representation of desire see Rosemary Jolly’s “Writing Desire Responsibly.”

97 Cf. Lucy’s comment to her father: “You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am the minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor” (198).
in his soul – is of the utmost importance to the committee serves to strengthen, and to some extent legitimate, his resolve to resist its efforts to handle the situation before it.

Although obvious differences separate Lurie from Ettinger, whose hostility to the philosophically liberal underpinnings of Lurie’s objections to the reconciliatory process can easily be imagined, the two prove uncannily similar in their stubborn resistance to participating in broad-scale social changes and to being reformed individually. Early in the narrative it is established that Lurie’s “temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set” (2). Later, Lurie confirms and reinforces the earlier narrative assessment when he informs the committee of inquiry “No I have not sought counselling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling” (49). A fixed temperament and a resistance to being counselled are the links that bind Lurie to Ettinger, and, beyond that, to the kind of position Ettinger represents. Though we are never privy to Ettinger’s thoughts on the matter, it is difficult to imagine Ettinger being receptive to the idea that the era of reconciliation in South Africa brings with it special demands on him personally, or that being counselled out of his long-held racist beliefs is either necessary or beneficial in the context of a post-apartheid national project of reconciliation: his offer to “send a boy...to fix the kombi” following the attack on Lucy registers, on a linguistic level, his habitual tendency to regard the non-white men he employs as children (109). Such habits are indicative of a temperament that is, like Lurie’s, resistant to being changed.

Given the similarity of their viewpoints when it comes to personal reform, it is not so surprising, then, that Lurie comes to resemble Ettinger more substantively during his verbal and physical assault on Pollux, the disturbed young man who participates in Lucy’s rape. The narrative focalization that provides insight into Lurie’s thoughts during this disturbing episode
tellingly reveals how closely Lurie comes to replicating Ettinger’s outlook: “The word still rings in the air: *Swine*. Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right:  

*Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*” (206). Pushed to his limit, Lurie adopts a position resembling Ettinger’s by projecting the need for education and for change onto the racial and cultural other before him. Lurie’s desire to teach Pollux a lesson is highly ironic in light of his own rejection of the compromise offered to him by the university; for Lurie, the compromise is equivalent to policies of “[r]e-education” and “[r]eformation of the character” worthy of “Mao’s China” (66).

Even as Lurie attains a measure of revenge against one of Lucy’s rapists, regaining a touch of his wounded masculine pride in the process of asserting his mastery over Pollux, it should not be overlooked that Pollux’s name already carries signs of mastery, since it is clear that

---

98 During the course of his attack on Pollux, Lurie further reveals his similarity to Ettinger by asserting his dominance linguistically as well as physically: calling Pollux “swine,” in a manner not far removed from Ettinger’s references to the “boys” who works for him, Lurie engages in an act of (colonial) re-naming that enables Coetzee to emphasize, in a familiar manner, the link between language and the subjugation of the Other. In a sense, the scene in which Lurie assaults Pollux recalls an earlier moment in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* in which Colonel Joll, having recently returned triumphantly to the outpost with a group of captured “barbarians,” arranges a “game” that involves whipping his recently-captured prisoners until the word “ENOEMY,” written on the prisoners’ backs by Joll himself, is completely washed off (103). Through this scene, Coetzee allegorically diagnoses the connection between Joll’s linguistic mastery, particularly evident in his command of the written word, and the production of otherness. Against Joll’s linguistic mastery, the beaten prisoners emit only “moans” and “gasps” in response (103); responding to their torture with bestial, inhuman sounds, unrecognizable to Joll or the colonists as a form of human language, the prisoners become Other as they come to resemble nothing more than wounded animal bodies. Later in the novel, when the magistrate hangs by his arms from a tree and becomes “a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair” that “bellow[s]” and “roars” in response (103); responding to their torture with bestial, inhuman sounds, unrecognizable to Joll or the colonists as a form of human language, the prisoners become Other as they come to resemble nothing more than wounded animal bodies. Later in the novel, when the magistrate hangs by his arms from a tree and becomes “a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair” that “bellow[s]” and “roars” in response (103); responding to their torture with bestial, inhuman sounds, unrecognizable to Joll or the colonists as a form of human language, the prisoners become Other as they come to resemble nothing more than wounded animal bodies. Later in the novel, when the magistrate hangs by his arms from a tree and becomes “a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair” that “bellow[s]” and “roars” in response (103); responding to their torture with bestial, inhuman sounds, unrecognizable to Joll or the colonists as a form of human language, the prisoners become Other as they come to resemble nothing more than wounded animal bodies. Later in the novel, when the magistrate hangs by his arms from a tree and becomes “a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair” that “bellow[s]” and “roars” in response (103); responding to their torture with bestial, inhuman sounds, unrecognizable to Joll or the colonists as a form of human language, the prisoners become Other as they come to resemble nothing more than wounded animal bodies.
Pollux has already “been named by a colonial Master, or by a person steeped in the European classical heritage” (Shattuck 142). Lurie’s violent attempt to re-assert colonial mastery over Pollux both repeats a historical process whose continuing effects in post-apartheid South Africa *Disgrace* insists on registering, and speaks to Lurie’s lingering inability to regard himself as the one whose behaviour and attitudes require alteration in the post-apartheid era. In this regard, Coetzee’s first post-apartheid novel displays a deeply pessimistic view concerning the possibility of reconciliation in South Africa: it unambiguously figures national reconciliation as demanding a change of attitude and of temperament that individuals of Lurie’s gender, generation and class position instinctually reject. Yet, after half a century of apartheid, it was this commitment to change that was required of those who, like Lurie, held a position of privilege under apartheid.

It is precisely because *Disgrace* suggests the vital importance of Lurie being amenable to the prevailing ethos of reconciliation and the attendant need for self-examination and change that it entails, at the same time as it depicts him as fundamentally and intractably resistant to everything that he sees as bound up in the larger process of reconciliation, that the novel tends to come across as an intensely bleak portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa. In his depiction of a complex and flawed protagonist, who ultimately remains irreconcilable to an ethos of an efficient getting on with business, including, especially, the business of reconciliation, Coetzee juxtaposes his representation of post-apartheid South Africa against the “too easy achievement of cultural catharsis” represented by the play *Sunset at the Globe Salon* in which Melanie performs (Bill McDonald 80). If, as Adriaan van Heerden argues, the “new” South Africa that is represented in *Disgrace* “lacks moral intelligence, vision and goodness,” revealing the “dark side of the optimism and idealism that had prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the end of apartheid” (43), the failure of the David Luries of post-apartheid South Africa to accept the challenge of
reconciliation is but one obstacle among many blocking the road to reconciliation. It is unsurprising, then, that in putting forth his sympathetic reading of the novel amidst the controversy surrounding it Derek Attridge confesses that he finds the “bleak image” of post-apartheid South Africa “hard to take” (“Age of Bronze” 100): reconciliation in South Africa not only has not taken place but also, Coetzee may suggest, remains unlikely to.

The issue of Disgrace’s reception in South Africa cannot be overlooked. As Sarah Brouillette notes, in what has to be regarded as an understatement, Disgrace “has proven to be a galvanizing piece of literature” (129). The reaction to the novel upon its publication was immediate and intense. The novel drew harsh criticism from the ANC, which took offence to the novel, effectively, if not directly, charging its author with racism and submitting a complaint to the country’s Human Rights Commission. In its report, entitled “Blackboard Bungle,” the ANC put forth its harsh reading of the novel:

In the novel, J M Coetzee represents as brutally as he can, the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man...It is suggested that in these circumstances, it might be better that our white compatriots should emigrate because to be in post-apartheid South Africa is to be in “their territory,” as a consequence of which whites will lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity. The white women will have to sleep with the barbaric black men.

Accordingly, the alleged white “brain drain” must be reported regularly and given the necessary prominence. J M Coetzee makes the point that, five years after our liberation, white SA society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African. (Cited in Jolly “Going to the Dogs” 149).

The ANC certainly found support for its position from amongst Coetzee’s fellow literati. A particularly virulent, if uninformed response by Athol Fugard, for instance, lent Disgrace’s critiques the authority of another famous South African author, legitimizing the ANC’s critique and defending it from accusations that its complaints were based on an insufficient understanding of how literary texts function. Fugard wrote,

I haven’t read it, and I’m sure the writing is excellent, but...I could not think of anything that would depress me more than this book by Coetzee—Disgrace—where we’ve got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all the evil we did in the past. That’s a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus! It’s an expression of a very morbid phenomenon, very morbid. (Cited in Marais, “Reading Against Race,” 282-83)

At the same time as Fugard’s position became, in Marais’s words, “something of an orthodox response to the novel” (“Reading Against Race” 282), academics in South Africa and, particularly, in the metropolitan West were quick to come to Coetzee’s defence. For instance, according to Rosemary Jolly, claims concerning the novel’s racism “ignore the extent to which Disgrace explores the systematic aspect of rape endemic in South Africa” (“Going to the Dogs” 149). Accordingly, while it cannot be denied that Disgrace is at the very least a troubling text, even if deliberately so, I will not be discussing the complicated issue of Disgrace’s reception in South Africa here as the issue has been discussed at great length in the extant body of criticism on the novel; indeed, the body of critical writing on Disgrace’s reception is beginning to catch up to the body of straight-forward literary analysis of the novel. Suffice it to say, I tend to follow the lead of critics (like Jolly, Derek Attridge and David Attwell) who find the novel’s treatment of post-apartheid South Africa more complicated than its harshest critics have been willing to allow in calling it a racist text.
Doing what one ought not have done: The Lives of Animals and Elizabeth Costello’s Philosophical Objection to Reconciliation

Compared to Disgrace, The Lives of Animals treats the question of South African reconciliation somewhat obliquely, uprooting the issue from its local setting and transplanting it in a Western academic setting. With Costello at the work’s center, Coetzee’s attention shifts from a protagonist who rejects the call to abandon his identity to one whose public speeches at Appleton College are motivated by a desire to effect a change in how humans perceive nonhuman animals and themselves. However, regardless of the differences separating Disgrace from The Lives of Animals and Lurie from Costello, the two works conduct complementary investigations into the obstacles facing a reconciliatory project such as South Africa’s. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, a comparable level of pessimism regarding the issue of reconciliation can be found running through both works.

In her last public appearance at Appleton, Costello engages in an academic debate with philosophy professor Thomas O’Hearne, during the course of which Costello cites philosopher Michael Leahy\textsuperscript{100}, author of the anti-animal rights tract Against Liberation, stating that she “would not fall over [herself] to break bread with him” (66). Reconciliation in this case is not only unlikely but also, for Costello, profoundly undesirable. Figuring the “philosopher who says that the distinction between human and nonhuman depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate” as fundamentally irreconcilable with Costello’s views (66), Coetzee questions both the desirability and the usefulness of (external) attempts to promote, or even impose, reconciliatory dialogue. In the context of the congenial academic debate in which she participates, which is intended by its organizers to follow the typically

\textsuperscript{100} Cora Diamond points out that Thomas O’Hearne’s positions in his debate with Costello substantially resemble the positions of Michael Leahy (110).
courteous pattern of such activities wherein disagreement is voiced in a respectful manner, Costello’s breaking of the rules of academic decorum – bringing the debate to a close on a note of “acrimony, hostility, bitterness” (67) – says much about the difficulties involved in the project of reconciliation. Explaining that “[d]iscussion is only possible when there is common ground” (66), Costello speaks to an obstacle facing the process of reconciliation, generally, and to an objection that many South Africans raised to the TRC’s stated purpose of promoting reconciliation specifically: namely, that reconciliation between former opponents is impossible where one of the parties is unwilling to admit its (implication in) wrongdoing.

Consistently throughout his fictional output, Coetzee represents the colonial era – which, crucially, is not fully coextensive with colonial rule proper, but also includes the periods of late colonialism and neo-colonialism in which we still find ourselves – as an era of prolonged and profound wrongdoing. In The Lives of Animals and elsewhere, Coetzee suggests that the onus of reconciliation is properly on the wrongdoer – the person legally, politically, morally, ethically, or metaphorically responsible for the offence that makes reconciliation necessary. For Elizabeth Costello in The Lives of Animals, it is incumbent upon the philosopher – immediately represented by Michael Leahy and Thomas O’Hearne, but encompassing a much larger segment of Western philosophic thought that stretches back through Descartes and Aquinas to Aristotle – to admit that a philosophy based on the hierarchical privileging of reason has contributed to the promulgation of speciesist thinking and, beyond that, to the radically unjust treatment of nonhuman animals.

In order better to understand what the admission that Costello demands of the philosopher and of philosophy entails, it is necessary to turn to the work Philippe Lacoue-

101 It is worth noting, at this point, the connections to be made to the TRC’s final Report, which, as Posel writes, “reads less as a history, more as a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing” (148). Seen in this light, it is possible to see the relationship between Coetzee’s oeuvre and the (anticipated and actual) narrative work of the TRC as being far from wholly antagonistic.
Labarthe, whose discussion of Martin Heidegger’s famous support for Nazism subtly underwrites *The Lives of Animals* and its approach to philosophy. In *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, a text cited in a footnote in *The Lives of Animals* (22), Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Heidegger’s position cannot simply be regarded as a mere miscalculation on the philosopher’s part. Rather, he writes, “we must speak not of committing an error, but of doing wrong” (22). In considering Heidegger’s philosophical support of Nazism, Lacoue-Labarthe makes a very eloquent case in *Heidegger, Art and Politics* for the need to maintain or, more accurately, reinstate a strong ethical language into our intellectual judgments – indeed, for Lacoue-Labarthe, intellectual and ethical judgment are inseparable. Without doubt, Costello’s thinking displays affinities for Lacoue-Labarthe’s in this regard. In “The Problem of Evil,” the sixth lesson of the eponymously-titled *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello struggles to find the language with which to condemn, ethically rather than aesthetically, Paul Rich’s novel, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, without rendering herself a farcical figure of self-righteous censorship. Costello’s belief that West’s novel includes “[s]cenes that do not belong in the light of day, that the eyes of maidens and children deserve to be shielded from” may very well be, as Costello herself is aware, “old-

---

102 Though Lacoue-Labarthe’s concerns in *Heidegger, Art and Politics* are wide-ranging, this claim constitutes a central argument, if not the central argument, of the book. That Coetzee cites Lacoue-Labarthe work (albeit a different part of *Heidegger, Art and Politics*) in a footnote in *Lives of Animals* subtly suggests the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe’s argument to the text.

103 “The Problem of Evil” is a complex part of the broader complex work that is *Elizabeth Costello*. As Rosemary Jolly points out, it is “the most neglected” of Costello’s lectures (“Writing Desire Responsibly” 99). In large part, this can be attributed to the rather old-fashioned moralistic, indeed censorious, tone that characterizes Costello’s attack on Paul West’s novel. Against the far more nuanced discussion of the question of censorship offered by Coetzee in *Giving Offence*, for example, Costello’s position very likely comes across as an emotional tirade, intensely vulnerable to rational critiques like those offered by her audience who ask, reasonably, if Costello has not perhaps underestimated them by neglecting the possibility that they are “made of sterner stuff” than she imagines (175). And yet, it does not seem possible, to me at least, completely to juxtapose Coetzee’s position with Costello’s. Coetzee’s argument, in “Into the Dark Chamber,” that there is “something *tawdry*…in making [the state’s] vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy” (364) is perhaps more like than unlike Costello’s position on obscenity than many readers of *Elizabeth Costello* are often willing to admit.
fashioned” in its outlook (159, 168); and yet, despite the many “smiles in the audience” her talk provokes amongst the urban intellectual elite in attendance at the conference on evil that in which she participates (175), Costello’s attempt to “take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places” resembles Lacoue-Labarthe’s position, at least insofar as it shows her willingness to draw on the (currently unfashionable) language of ought (173). As, for Lacoue-Labarthe, it is necessary to recognize that Heidegger ought not have lent his intellectual support to Nazism, Costello is adamant that Paul West ought not have written what she thinks of as “an obscene book” (169).

The admission of having erred in the most serious of senses, of having, in Lacoue-Labarthe’s terms, done wrong (by doing what one ought not have done), is precisely what, in The Lives of Animals, Costello demands of the philosopher – and, by extension, of Western philosophy in a larger sense – whose thought rests on the hierarchical privileging of human reason: an acknowledgement that such speciesist thinking is, in itself, not only mistaken but also, crucially, an example of ethical wrongdoing. Only when the philosopher takes this step, Costello insists, will it be genuinely possible for the philosopher to break bread with an individual such as Costello who is, in Cora Diamond’s terms, “wounded” by the “horror of what we do to animals” (46).

Fundamentally concerned as the text is with the issue of how humans treat nonhuman animals, it may not be immediately evident how Coetzee’s use of Lacoue-Labarthe takes the argument of a contemporary French philosopher concerning the work of a mid-twentieth-century German philosopher out of the international and transhistorical realm in which Costello locates her discussion, and makes it relevant to his own, immediate South African situation; however, as I have been arguing, the relation of The Lives of Animals to the context of its production in early
post-apartheid South Africa, though oblique, runs deep. Given the pronounced tendency amongst apartheid apologists, including former state president F.W. De Klerk, to characterize the TRC as “a witch-hunt” (Simpson 227) and to treat apartheid as little more than an unfortunate and regrettable mistake – as a noble and potentially beneficial policy gone awry only in its implementation rather than a fundamentally unjust theory and practice – the relevance of Lacoue-Labarthe’s thought to the South African situation is quite clear: Costello’s demand to Western philosophy to acknowledge its history of wrongdoing is subtly echoed by Coetzee’s demand of the architects and supporters of apartheid who refused to grant the validity of the TRC’s efforts to historicize the apartheid era in the form of “a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing” (Posel 148).

In regards to the demands Costello makes of Western philosophy, as a heterogeneous body of thought unified by its speciesist assumptions, they are, in one sense, impossible: neither a fictional creation like O’Hearne nor an actual philosopher like Leahy (nor even, for that matter, the more distinguished company of Descartes, Aquinas and Aristotle) possesses the ability or the authority to apologize on behalf of the Western philosophical tradition for its speciesist heritage. Yet, despite the apparent impossibility of what Costello asks, the demands she makes are, in another sense, translatable into a more manageable ethical imperative: that the language of philosophy register and acknowledge the role that it has played in what is (for Costello) a crime about which it still has, or claims it has, the capacity to speak. The philosopher wishing to speak, *qua philosopher*, on the issue of how humans should treat non-human animals is thus required, under the ethical imperative laid out in *The Lives of Animals*, both to acknowledge the responsibility he or she bears in a history of wrong and to disavow the authority that usually accompanies philosophical thought (even when it takes the form of inquiries) when it comes to
non-human animals. Such an imperative is by no means easily achievable, but the stringent nature of the ethical position at the core of *The Lives of Animals* is not inconsistent with that adopted within Coetzee’s wider body of fiction which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, tends not to follow contemporary trends toward moral or ethical minimalism. If Coetzee suggests, in *Disgrace*, that meaningful reconciliation is dependent upon individuals like David Lurie being able to effect a change in who they are, *The Lives of Animals* fulfills a crucial complementary function by identifying how an individual admission of having been not mistaken, but the perpetrator of that which is ethically wrong, may preface such a change and enable the process of reconciliation, a meaningful breaking of bread, to take place.

A more modest model of reconciliation: Coetzee and the fiction of atonement

In *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee addresses the issue of reconciliation, adding his voice to a host of others interested in refining, complicating, questioning, and contesting its meaning for South Africa. Yet, despite the timeliness of these particular responses, it is my contention that the issue of reconciliation is far from new in Coetzee’s *oeuvre*. Indeed, Coetzee’s thematic interest in reconciliation in both of these works should be seen as part of a continuing engagement with the idea of reconciliation: one that both predates and anticipates its relevance in the immediate post-apartheid context; and which continues to feature in his writing in the years since the TRC completed its work.

Insofar as much of Coetzee’s writing, creative and critical, can be said to be greatly concerned with the question of *confession*, the desire to find an appropriate and effective means of acknowledging one’s having done wrong can be seen to be a major impetus behind Coetzee’s output. Many of the characters that inhabit Coetzee’s fictions find themselves uncomfortably implicated in, or complicit with, what they perceive to be wrongdoing on a grand scale. In
Waiting for the Barbarians, for example, the magistrate comes to understand that he “[is] not…the indulgent pleasure loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel” who serves an Empire that brutalizes and tortures the perceived enemies that stand outside its borders (133), but complicit with the Empire in a different way from Joll, while in Life & Times of Michael K, the medical officer’s encounter with the man he knows as “Michaels” serves to encourage the medical officer’s self-questioning of his role in a war being fought for reasons he no longer remembers (157). Even those characters whose sense of guilt, rather than proceeding from a sense of complicity with a larger system of evil, proceeds from more private sources – Dostoevsky in The Master of Petersburg, for instance, who proves to be the kind of writer more than capable of committing “an assault upon the innocence of a child” (249), or the fictionalized John Coetzee of Summertime, who “remember[s]…every day of [his] life” how he had “pulled the leg off a locust and left [his cousin Margot] to kill it” (96) – struggle to find an appropriate means of dealing with the guilt they feel, both as individuals and as members of a wider community.\(^{104}\)

J.C., the writer-protagonist of Diary of a Bad Year, expresses the dilemma facing many Coetzean characters (not to mention the dilemma of their creator) when he writes that the “generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name” (44). The problem confronting Coetzee’s characters, South African and otherwise, is not that of denying or fighting against this sense of their own metaphysical guilt and the

\(^{104}\) In his recent study of Coetzee’s writing, Secretary of the Invisible, Mike Marais convincingly contends that “[f]rom the first…Coetzee’s writing announces its preoccupation with community” (1). While it is certainly possible to say, as Marais does, that this preoccupation has much to do with Coetzee’s understanding of and emphasis upon “the exclusionary movement through which community establishes itself” (2), it is also valuable to consider, as I wish to, how Coetzee’s novels thematize and problematize acts of inclusion as well, particularly when that inclusion is actually a re-admittance of an individual into the community fold.
accompanying “continuum” of feelings – “shame, remorse, regret,” and taintedness (May 34) – that comes with it, but, rather, a matter of finding the appropriate response after the fact of their implication. Crucially, the acknowledgement of (being implicated in) wrongdoing never arrives in isolation in Coetzee’s novels: it always brings with it the attendant sense of obligation that in many ways is the starting point of Coetzeean ethics. This is precisely because, while the feeling of being implicated in wrongdoing is always already forced upon the Coetzeean character by the historical situation in which each finds him- or herself\(^{105}\) – namely, the position of “the colonizer who does not want to be a colonizer” (Watson 22) – it is the fact of this condition that, somewhat paradoxically, allows the Coetzeean character a degree of freedom to choose his or her own response to the historically-determined position bestowed upon him or her. It is precisely because, for Coetzee, obligation begins rather than ends with acknowledgement, that the acknowledgement of personal guilt or general implicated-ness is so potentially liberating. Where, Coetzee’s characters collectively ask, do I go from here? Now that I have acknowledged, or have been forced to acknowledge, my having done wrong, now that I am bowed under the shame of being implicated in wrongdoing, now that I feel remorse and regret, what comes next? What possibilities are open to me, and what can be done to make amends?

More often than not, for the Coetzeean protagonist, the possibility that is at once available and desirable is the turn to narrative. In many of Coetzee’s novels – *In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for the Barbarians, Foe, and Age of Iron* – the entirety of the narrative is coextensive with the protagonist’s oral or written discourse. In others – *The Master of Petersburg* and *Disgrace*, for instance – the protagonist’s narrative and/or artistic efforts are but a part of the wider narrative that surrounds them. Much of Coetzee’s most recent output – from his

\(^{105}\) Cf. Kaplan’s claim that in Coetzee’s novels “everyone, even children, even ‘innocent’ children, are embedded in historically determined guilt” (192).
increasingly fictionalized autobiographical trilogy to the genre-bending “novels” *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* – has effectively blurred, to an even greater extent than the earlier fictions, the line dividing author from character and authorial consciousness from confessional subject. Given that the condition of historical, existential implicated-ness is one that Coetzee’s fictions acknowledge is shared by the author and his characters, fictional surrogates, and auto/biographical selves, the novels thus invite being read simultaneously as textual acts aimed at performing a reconciliatory gesture on behalf of their author and as extended meditations on the meaningfulness of such gestures. It is in *Diary of a Bad Year* that Coetzee most overtly poses the question of whether a written text can itself constitute a reconciliatory gesture of sufficient value: J.C.’s second diary, his “gentler set of opinions” (145), is itself an attempt to reconcile with Anya via an act that is resolutely textual in nature; and yet, I want to suggest, that the question implicitly posed within this one text is a question explored by Coetzee’s writing generally. Collectively, by representing a number of characters who feel deeply the need to be reconciled with, or to be forgiven by, a varied range of individual and collective Others, Coetzee’s fictions repeatedly stage the problem of reconciliation in order to assess the possibilities for its achievement and the role that writing might play in that achievement.

The motif of breaking bread that Costello employs as a figure for reconciliation in *The Lives of Animals* recurs sporadically throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre and suggests the persistence

---

106 In *The Singularity of Literature* and in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, a text that is a “companion book” to *The Singularity of Literature* (3), Derek Attridge makes the argument “that we experience literary works less as objects than as events” (2). My suggestion that Coetzee’s novels seek to assume the properties of reconciliatory acts is perhaps indebted to Attridge’s argument but is not identical.

To read a Coetzeean novel as a literary event is not, to my understanding, to attend to the work’s directedness as a reconciliatory gesture that simultaneously interrogates the value of reconciliatory gestures. See Martin Woessner’s article, “Coetzee’s Critique of Reason” for a related but different argument concerning the nature of Coetzee’s novels as acts: for Woessner, “Coetzee’s novels are not merely lessons in generosity, but generous acts in and of themselves” (237). While I am sympathetic towards Woessner’s characterization of the Coetzeean text as a generous act, I think that Woessner runs the risk of obscuring the inevitable self-questioning that accompanies the Coetzeean act of generosity.
with which Coetzee has attempted to think through the concept of reconciliation – what it looks like, who it involves, and how it can and cannot be achieved – over the course of his career. If feelings of shame and guilt are the weights under which many of Coetzee’s protagonists labour and the conditions with which they must come to terms, the chance to break bread – figuratively or literally – with those they feel responsible for having wronged or (and this is crucial) with an acceptable surrogate, is the goal to which they aspire: their actions, either directly or indirectly, signify their attempts to give rise to the conditions under which reconciliation becomes possible.

The breaking of bread signifies, for Coetzee’s conscience-plagued characters, an end to the condition of being bowed down under feelings of guilt and shame, and an end to the burden of confession; it signals, for the wrongdoer and the person with whom s/he breaks bread, an ethical obligation carried through to its successful completion.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate wonders whether the torturer, Colonel Joll, “has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men” (12). While, in the earliest stages of the novel, the magistrate’s musings reveal that, for him, the problem of breaking bread is largely still an impersonal matter of intellectual curiosity, not far removed from his antiquarian interest in the barbarian ruins near the settlement, the magistrate’s increasing sense of his own implication in the crimes of Colonel Joll and the Empire they both serve configures many of the magistrate’s later actions – his compulsive “ritual” washing of the barbarian “girl’s” damaged feet (28, 30); his decision to return the “girl” to what he takes to be “[her] people” (57); his intervention to prevent the beating of one of Joll’s prisoners with “an ordinary four-pound hammer” (104) – as desperate attempts to make possible a future opportunity for himself to break bread. As the magistrate acknowledges, after being arrested for “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (76), he returns the barbarian “girl”
because “I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation” (79). The magistrate, perhaps as directly as any Coetzee character, recognizes and states the importance of reparation in establishing the conditions that make reconciliation a genuine possibility.

The problem facing the magistrate – and it is a problem familiar to so many of Coetzee’s protagonists – is that the magistrate cannot know, with certainty, that his actions are (or ever will be) sufficient as gestures, or even acts, of restitution, capable of making amends and of enabling the breaking of bread to take place. Even what is likely to stand out as the most conventionally heroic action on the magistrate’s part – intervening to prevent Joll from using a hammer on one of the “barbarian” prisoners – is subject to his immediate and pre-emptive dismissal of it as insufficient: for the magistrate, it is “[e]asier to be beaten and made a martyr” than “to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians” (106). Unwilling to see himself as a sufficiently authoritative arbiter capable of deciding if he has done enough to make amends for the responsibility he bears in the crimes of Empire, the magistrate seeks authoritative confirmation elsewhere.

In what is likely to stand out as an odd about-face on the magistrate’s part, he tells the barbarian “girl” of his continuing desire to cohabit with her at the very moment he has successfully carried out his intended mission of returning her to her people: “Only, now that I have brought you back, as far as I can, I wish to ask you very clearly to return to the town with me. Of your own choice” (70). The magistrate’s new desire for the barbarian “girl,” set off by his observation of her interaction with the men accompanying them on their mission, finds realization only outside the settlement when he “heave[s]” himself upon her and “wipe[s] out” five months of “senseless hesitancy” (62). Representing the fictionalization of Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, which Coetzee discusses in “Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising” (127-38), the magistrate’s sexual encounter with the barbarian “girl”, and his later
offer of cohabitation, can also be understood as the magistrate’s attempt to realize a kind of reconciliation with the individual for whose plight he feels responsible and whose authority to choose or reject reconciliation he recognizes.\textsuperscript{107} His offer is as much a request for the barbarian “girl” to break bread with him – to offer him a sign that he has successfully made amends, that he has done enough – as it is anything else. Unfortunately for the magistrate, her response – “No. I don’t want to go back to that place” (70) – forecloses on the magistrate’s opportunity to break bread with the person with whom it would be the most meaningful.

In lieu of reconciliation with the barbarian “girl,” which is denied him, the magistrate searches throughout the remainder of the novel for the means to become reconciled with(in) himself. And yet ethical uncertainty, a constant in Coetzee’s fiction, persistently plagues the magistrate and frustrates his desires. At the outset of one of the most important scenes in the novel, in which Colonel Joll has his recently-captured “barbarian” prisoners publicly tortured, this ethical uncertainty becomes particularly apparent. The magistrate struggles internally with the question of what the ethically proper response to the situation is. He notes:

I ought to go back to my cell. As a gesture it will have no effect, it will not even be noticed. Nevertheless, for my own sake, as a gesture to myself alone, I ought to return to the cool dark and lock the door and bend the key and stop my ears to the noise of the patriotic bloodlust and close my lips and never speak again…For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let is at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever someone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian. (102)

\textsuperscript{107} In an interview with Coetzee, collected in\textit{Doubling the Point}, David Attwell describes the magistrate’s desire as “confused…with feelings of eroticism and atonement” (104).
Given the magistrate’s situation, having been disgraced, removed from his position as magistrate, and imprisoned by the Third Bureau following his mission to return the barbarian “girl” to her people, the magistrate cannot be held directly or causally responsible for what is to follow; his implication in the torture of these prisoners is necessarily of a different order than the responsibility he bears for the “screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary” of which he “hear[s] nothing” while holding a position of authority (4). And yet, the passage derives its power from the magistrate’s profound sense of his own implication in events he is powerless to prevent, and his concurrent and desperate desire to alleviate that apprehension. As such, the magistrate’s ruminations have less to do with what he can do on an immediate and practical level to prevent the atrocity that is about to take place from happening (he can do very little to assure the prisoners’ wellbeing in the long term) as much as they have to do with the magistrate’s perpetual anticipation of some form of future judgment – ethical, moral, historical, legal, political, or metaphysical (the magistrate himself is unclear about which and how many of these modes of judgment he both fears and welcomes).

The magistrate demonstrates that he has internalized the various possible frameworks – a necessity given that he is uncertain even whether there will be anyone “in some remote future interested to know the way we lived”; implicitly, he acknowledges that from any one (if not many) of the available frameworks he might, and perhaps ought, to be judged unfavourably. It is as if, having conceded, in Jaspers’s terms, his legal, political, and moral guilt, the magistrate wants to establish his metaphysical innocence. In essence, what the magistrate wants to believe, but cannot fully, is that it is possible to be a good man living in bad times. Like Elizabeth Costello in The Lives of Animals, who explains that her vegetarianism proceeds from her desire to “save [her] soul” (43), the magistrate’s concern that he “save” himself bypasses the other
possible, indeed inevitable, levels of judgment to focus on his metaphysical standing. If Costello’s reference to her desire to save her soul carries with it the Christological emphasis on divine forgiveness, the magistrate’s concern with his metaphysical standing also implicitly looks forward not only to an impending judgment but also to the possibility of his being forgiven subsequently. Though he does not consciously “scheme,” as Major von Rensburg does in Life & Times of Michael K, in anticipation of the day when the barbarians will “come and put everyone on trial” (132), the magistrate shares the Major’s anxious hope that when his day of judgment comes, he will be found not unequivocally innocent but, rather, worthy of being forgiven and reconciled with.

The problem facing the magistrate, by the novel’s conclusion, is that he lacks access to the mechanisms of reconciliation. Denied reconciliation with the individual with whom he would find it most meaningful, the magistrate finds himself in a position in which the reconciliation he seeks is both radically uncertain – he cannot know whether there will be “someone in some remote future” to care how he and his fellows lived, whether that someone will have any more authority than he does to evaluate the sufficiency of the magistrate’s gestures of reparation, or whether that hypothetical someone will be any more inclined to forgive than the barbarian “girl” had been – and indefinitely deferred. The condition of suspension signalled by the narrative’s conclusion – with the outpost still in a state of wariness concerning the possibility of barbarian invasion and the magistrate committed to “press[ing] on along a road that may lead nowhere” (152) – is indicative of a situation in which the desirability of reconciliation is unequivocal but in which the mechanisms by which it can be achieved are, or at the very least appear to both characters and at least this reader, entirely unavailable.
Almost twenty years after the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in *Disgrace*, another Coetzean protagonist, David Lurie, is afforded an opportunity the magistrate never receives when he is invited by the father of Melanie Isaacs, the student with whom he has an affair, to come to their house to “[b]reak bread with us” (167). Though nearly two decades separate the publication of the two novels, in both texts the metaphor of breaking bread stands for a ritual performance in which a wrongdoer is imagined or invited to engage in a ritual that both acknowledges what he has done and, simultaneously, enables his reintegration into a community that forgives him for his transgressions. If the magistrate and David Lurie differ in terms of the access to the mechanisms of reconciliation that each possesses – the former is left uncertain if and with whom reconciliation might take place, whereas the latter need not face these uncertainties – that difference is explicable, in part, on the basis of the altered context from which their narratives come. Written during a period of South African history when the advent of the post-apartheid era could be imagined, but only in the vaguest and most speculative of terms, *Waiting for the Barbarians* can only gesture suggestively towards a future need for a public ritual of repentance that would replace Joll’s private ritual and provide the magistrate with the opportunity he so desperately desires. By the time Coetzee came to write *Disgrace*, the public ritual of repentance did not need to be imagined but was a recognizable part of everyday life in South Africa. In the latter novel, then, the language of breaking bread takes on an added degree of referential specificity by overtly playing on the much-noted, and often maligned, Christian undertones to the TRC proceedings.  

108  However, at the same time as the language of breaking bread in *Disgrace*...
connotes particularly local concerns, responsive to the novel’s South African context at the end of the twentieth century, Coetzee’s recurrent use of the motif over the course of his writing career suggests the consistency with which Coetzee has seen the idea of reconciliation as profoundly Christian(ized) and ritualized, bound up in staged performances designed to maintain a healthy and functional society, often at the expense of individuals within that society.

In the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the hypocrisy of ritualized reconciliation is obvious: Joll need not refrain from torturing his victims; instead he has only to participate in a ritual that salves the conscience of the society that tacitly accepts, even approves of, his actions. The magistrate’s imagining of Joll undergoing a ritual of purification that allows the torturer to re-enter the community as a member in good standing enables Coetzee to cast serious doubt on how meaningful such rituals can be, as Joll’s ritual of purification is designed neither to put an end to the practice of torture nor to change the character of the torturer. Indeed, the magistrate is not even certain, and cannot be certain, that Joll actually participates in any such ritual: it is not important that he *actually* do so, only that he be *imagined* to do so. In Coetzee’s hands, such imaginary rituals of penance and reconciliation reveal more about the society in which, and in the service of whom, a torturer such as Joll operates than it does about Joll. The Empire Joll serves is fundamentally more concerned with its self-interests and, especially, with its self-perception as a fundamentally just society, than it is with asking a perpetrator like Joll to grapple meaningfully with what he has done: the ritual requires no admission of either Joll or the Empire he serves having *done wrong* and so makes impossible the kind of reconciliation that Elizabeth Costello would encourage us to consider meaningful. More than anything, what Joll’s imagined private redemption” sanctioned the “wider notion of truth as testimony and confession” that “thrived” in the TRC’s hearings (110).
ritual of atonement means is that Joll’s Empire can *move on* comfortably; it can get on with its business as usual, unbothered by what has transpired within its borders.

Crucially, though this feature of Coetzee’s novel tends to be obscured by the text’s allegorical setting, in which Colonel Joll’s sunglasses are “a new invention” (1), *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to some extent a novel concerned with the condition of (late) modernity and, by extension, with the possibility, shape, and form of reconciliation under that particular condition. In a sense, the magistrate’s imagining of Joll’s participation in a ritual cleansing that is ultimately meaningless prefigures J.C.’s discussion of Machiavelli and the modern democratic state in *Diary of a Bad Year*. According to J.C., Machiavelli “inaugurate[s] the dualism of modern political culture, which simultaneously upholds absolute and relative standards of value” (17). For the author-figure at the center of *Diary of a Bad Year*, the ascendancy of the Machiavellian “guiding principle,” which holds that “infringing the moral law is justified when it is necessary” (17), offers a means of understanding Australian attitudes – as well as the attitudes of other Western democratic states – towards the use of torture in the so-called War on Terror. J.C.’s analysis of Western modern political culture is one in which the notion of *doing wrong* becomes effectively

---

109 This is one of several elements in the novel that connect it to Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” a short story that is itself about the irrevocable supersession of the old, authoritarian order of the Old Commandant, the Officer, and the inhumane apparatus by the liberal modernity of the New Commandant and the World Traveler. If Kafka’s story works to throw into serious doubt the comforting version of historical development as a narrative of progress, Coetzee’s novel takes Kafka’s questioning one step further as it both reverses the conditions of Kafka’s story – by having the authoritarian Colonel Joll temporarily replace the more liberal magistrate – and undermines the simply linear view of history common to both narratives of history-as-progress and history-as-decline. In place of the competing linear views of history, Coetzee offers, through the magistrate’s observation that “once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians” (9), a view of history as a cyclical process that neither progresses nor declines but merely repeats itself.

110 In his second diary, J.C. himself refers to his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (171); however, given that Coetzee makes it impossible for the reader completely to associate the author with his character, it is difficult to associate J.C.’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* with Coetzee’s and, therefore, to know just how reliable a commentator on Coetzee’s writing J.C. is. Nevertheless, J.C.’s commentary does provide a valuable way to think about Coetzee’s approach to the issue of reconciliation.
meaningless, superseded by the notion of necessità. This renders explicit an element of Coetzee’s thinking about reconciliation central to Waiting for the Barbarians – namely, that the value of the idea of reconciliation becomes questionable when the word “wrong” loses its ethical charge. This is the lesson that the magistrate – a member of “an old family” who “stand[s] against the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees” (81, 106) – has to learn about the new order. For although he intends to “find the words to shame” Warrant Officer Mandel and, especially, Colonel Joll, these new servants of Empire feel no shame in doing what they do (110). Breaking bread, if it even takes place at all in such a situation, is (and can only be) a simulacrum of real reconciliation – the sign without its substance, the form without the content.

In Disgrace, the ritual of breaking bread assumes a slightly different cast as the figurative breaking of bread actually takes place and is shorn of its obvious hypocrisy. Lurie’s decision to accept Isaacs’s offer to stay for dinner renders his actions overtly preferable to Joll’s. Whereas Joll is concerned only with his standing amongst the citizens of Empire who remain, by and large, unmoved and unaffected by his activities, Lurie breaks bread with the family that has been directly affected by his decision to give in to an impulse that he admits was “far from ungovernable” (52). Moreover Lurie, unlike Joll, apologizes for his actions.\footnote{Lurie’s change of course begs questions about the potential evolution of his character. The extent to which Lurie changes as a character through the course of the narrative remains a central preoccupation of much of the scholarship surrounding Disgrace. As Dooley puts it, “there is a question of whether David’s sacrifice of the dog can be seen as in any way redemptive” (188-89). The question of whether or not the evolution of Lurie’s complex attitude towards animals, particularly dogs, or the altered focus of the opera he writes constitutes evidence of a substantial change in Lurie’s character is by no means one that has been easily resolved by critics. Gillian Dooley, for example, claims that “[b]y the end of the book, [Lurie] has certainly advanced some way from the smug beginning” (56). Similarly, for Kimberly Segall, “[w]hile never the portrait of morality, Lurie does, by the end, recognize that others experience suffering: it is a shift from narcissism to a nascent awareness of others” (41). Laura Wright claims that “[t]hat David has learned how to love a fellow creature, particularly from a woman he initially finds revolting, is indicative of the potential for greater change in David, a change that will occur(if it occurs at all) beyond the frame of the narrative” (Wilderness 101). Conversely, for a critic like Isidore Diala, the much-discussed conclusion of the novel in which Lurie brings the dog who has developed a special affection for him to be euthanized by 172}
in the novel which takes place after Lurie’s own daughter becomes the victim of a gang rape, Lurie offers his apology to Melanie’s father for the harm he has caused and follows that up with a “careful ceremony” in which he “gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor” before Melanie’s mother and sister (171,173). Bizarre as they are, Lurie’s actions suggest his willingness finally to admit his having done wrong and thereby meet the minimum standard established by Costello as a necessary stage in the reconciliation process. In doing so, Lurie changes course, to some extent, giving the Isaacs family in private what he was unwilling to give publically to the university committee of inquiry.

Yet, even in offering his apology and thereby seemingly expressing the spirit of repentance demanded from him by the committee, Lurie provides Coetzee with a means to complicate the seemingly straightforward narrative being offered to us. In the first place, the narrative order of the scene – in which Lurie first arrives unannounced at Mr. Isaacs’s office with the plan of giving his own “side of the story” about how Melanie “struck up a fire in [him] (165, 166), then accepts Isaacs’s invitation that he “[c]ome for dinner” (167), and apologizes only after dining uncomfortably with the family – offers a pointed critique of a process of reconciliation in South Africa in which apologies for wrongdoing became de rigueur only after the promise of possible forgiveness was held forth by those who had been the individual and collective victims of that wrongdoing. Moreover, and more problematically, when Isaacs invites Lurie to break bread with his family, Melanie, the victim of Lurie’s offence, is absent from the meal.  

Bev Shaw demonstrates “Lurie’s abiding abdication of responsibility” (58). Alice Crary, also argues that Lurie remains fundamentally unchanged, stating that he makes “little progress in overcoming the limitations of his moral repertoire” (257). Tom Herron warns that “Coetzee’s texts discourage readings that would seem to endorse such fulsome categories as growth and transformation”; nevertheless, his sense that “something does happen to David [Lurie], something is kindled in him – and that change has something to do with his increasing engagement with animals” seems to me to be one of the more measured and convincing approaches to the question (474).
shares with the Isaacs family. Crucially, it is to Melanie’s father that Lurie apologizes. Alone with Isaacs, Lurie states, “I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief that I have caused you and Mrs. Isaacs. I ask for your pardon” (171). Even if it were possible to ignore the prevarication with which Lurie begins his apology when he asserts that it “could have turned out differently” between himself and Melanie (171), Lurie’s apology, taken at face value as a genuine admission of personal fault, constitutes an admission of wrong-doing that still raises troubling concerns about the possibilities of meaningful reconciliation based on the South African model: in having Lurie direct his apology not to the offended party but to a member of her family, Coetzee raises serious questions regarding the ability of the TRC to stand in, or to act as proxy for, an (absent) victim in accepting an apology. The scene is then expressive of what Julie McGonegal describes as Coetzee’s “concern” that the reconciliation ritual, particularly when culminating in forgiveness, “might marginalize, silence, and sacrifice the oppressed” (22). In the end, as was the case with the private ritual of purification that the magistrate imagines Joll to engage in, in which the “other men” with whom the magistrate imagines Colonel Joll breaking bread are decidedly not the victims of Joll’s ministrations, the ritualized performance in which Lurie takes part has the potential to render the victim of his crime secondary to his reconciliation with her father. Lurie and Joll, though they differ greatly in many respects, find themselves in similar situations where each need not face or be confronted with his victim, whose option to refuse reconciliation is itself withheld.

This problem of reconciliation – that it can, in fact, displace the victim, that it can take place without the victim or her approval – is one to which Coetzee returns in *The Lives of Animals*: Costello’s position in *The Lives of Animals*, stridently demanding though it may be in its implications for the philosopher, similarly runs the risk of rendering the victims of the crimes she
finds objectionable subordinate to those, like Costello, who speak, and take offence, on their behalf. As Dean Arendt observes during the dinner held in Costello’s honour, the entirety of the debate – philosophical, ethical, political, or otherwise – concerning the treatment of non-human animals by humans takes place between humans and thus continues to relegate non-human animals to the status of objects. In her words,

our whole superstructure of concern and belief is a closed book to animals themselves...vegetarianism is a very odd transaction, when you come to think of it, with the beneficiaries unaware that they are being benefited. And with no hope of ever becoming aware. Because they live in a vacuum of consciousness. (44)

The implications of Arendt’s point about vegetarianism in relation to the question of reconciliation are clear: reconciliation, if it were to take place between Costello and Leahy, or Costello and O’Hearne, or Costello and the grand philosophical tradition which stands behind Leahy and O’Hearne (were it even possible to break bread with a tradition), would place Costello in precisely the same position that Lurie’s committee seeks to occupy and which Mr. Isaacs eventually comes to occupy in Disgrace, wherein Costello would assume the right to speak, and accept apologies, on behalf of the victims with whose welfare she is concerned. Such a position is a difficult one to hold, philosophically or ethically, and it is one which neither Costello nor Coetzee behind her show much interest, or much comfort, in holding. In a very real sense, then, Waiting for the Barbarians, Disgrace and The Lives of Animals work in related ways to complicate the issue of reconciliation, and particularly the conditions of possibility for the completion of the reconciliation ritual, by questioning the validity of a procedural model that sometimes requires, when the victim is dead, absent or inarticulate, that the choice to reconcile rest with someone other than the victim.
If the related questions Coetzee’s fictions ask their readers to consider – Between whom does reconciliation take place? Who decides to reconcile? – come across as highly abstract, philosophical objections to the reconciliation process, Coetzee extends his critique well beyond this level. The challenge Coetzee offers to the TRC-led process of reconciliation involves demonstrating the ways in which its methods verge on becoming counter-productive. In *Disgrace* the role of public shaming in the work of the committee of inquiry convened to deal with Lurie’s transgression and, even more so, in the media coverage of the investigation, combine to cast doubt on the public expression of contrition, specifically on account of the means of its production. Lurie notes a “thirst for abasement” in the activities surrounding the inquiry into his actions (56), suggestively shifting the emphasis of the episode away from Lurie and towards those investigating him. Confession, the desired goal of both the university committee and the “girl” who asks Lurie if he is sorry (56), is figured in the course of an inquiry that is simultaneously private and public as a product of coercion, and therefore, paradoxically, counter-productive in the face of its stated goals. Moreover, Lurie’s attitude toward the committee, characterized, in Farodia Rassool’s opinion, by his “subtle mockery” (50) combines with the complete disdain he displays toward the media covering his inquiry112 to render the entire process farcical.

112 Although, with the recent exception of Gillian Dooley’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, discussions of Coetzee’s writing tend not to discuss the issue of humour, the interview in which Lurie takes part during a recess in his inquiry is genuinely funny:

‘Are you sorry?’ says the girl. ‘Do you regret what you did?’
‘No’, he says. ‘I was enriched by the experience.’
The smile remains on the girl’s face. ‘So would you do it again?’
‘I don’t think I will have another chance.’
‘But if you had a chance?’
‘That isn’t a real question.’ (56)
If David Lurie “reject[s] institutionalized confession” in *Disgrace* (Poyner “Truth” 74), that rejection is granted some authority by a novel that follows Lurie’s lead in treating confession and apology as matters beyond the scope of public inquiry. Lurie’s mockery of a process that demands a specific account of wrongdoing along with an expression of contrition offers a clear parody of a conceptual confusion underlying the TRC’s “truth-for-amnesty” approach, as it becomes apparent during the course of Lurie’s interrogation that the disciplinary committee finds itself caught between two kinds of truth. Wanting to know what Lurie did and simultaneously wanting to know that he feels bad about what he’s done, the committee grows increasingly frustrated by what it sees as Lurie’s semantic games and eventually comes to display hostility towards him.

On the one hand, the conceptual confusion that characterizes the committee’s approach and the frustration to which it gives rise are understandable in light of the structural divisions to be found within the act of confession itself. In *Troubling Confessions*, a wide-ranging study of confessional practice in the West, Peter Brooks notes of the historical development of confession

In the interplay between Lurie and the reporter, whose smile indicates more than a touch of prurient interest in the case, Lurie’s responses to the questions posed to him both render the reporter ridiculous and function as a critique of a media industry obsessed with getting the appropriate sound-bite. Indeed, in light of Coetzee’s earlier comments, in an interview printed in *Doubling the Point*, Lurie’s interview is simultaneously absurd and sinister. Coetzee states,

> Two traditions, it seems to me, converge and reinforce each other in the journalistic interview. The first is legal: the interviewer is a politer version of courtroom interrogation or, better, the interrogation an investigating magistrate conducts prior to the public trial. The second is most immediately inherited from Rousseau, I suppose, but it draws on the ancient strain of religious enthusiasm as well as the practice of psychotherapy: in the transports of unrehearsed speech, the subject utters truths unknown to his waking self. The journalist takes the place of the priest or iatros, drawing out this truth-speech. (65)

Lurie’s interviewer-cum-interrogator very clearly conforms to Coetzee’s sense of the essential function of the journalist. At the same time, however, the gender dynamics at play in Lurie’s handling of the reporter, described as “the girl” in the focalized narration (56), verge uncomfortably towards replicating Lurie’s strategy of handling Melanie linguistically through his greater command of the English language and of poetic diction.
that “the religious model and the legal model emerge simultaneously, in a reciprocal influence” (3). Though the religious and legal models of confession overlap conceptually, Brooks contends, they strive towards different objectives: in the eyes of the law, confession enables and validates punishment, while from a religious perspective confession “is the way to contrition and to absolution, which permits a reintegration into the community of the faithful” (Brooks 46). For Brooks, then, confession has historically been an inherently divided practice in terms of what it is supposed to achieve. The conceptual confusion facing Lurie’s committee of inquiry, and of course the TRC as well, whose hearings “were poised somewhere between judicial process and sacramental rite” (Neill 82), is an historically-determined by-product of indeterminacy built into the act of confession as it has been practiced from its institutional inception. Though, as Mathabane explains, “it is not up to [the committee] to impose penalties” (51), and as Swarts tells Lurie “[w]e would like to find a way for you to continue with your career” (52), Lurie’s route to either of the outcomes available to him – punishment in the form of career termination or reintegration into the university community following a suitable expression of contrition – is tied closely to the model of confession Lurie follows. In stating that he is “guilty of the charges brought against me” (54), and in calling on the committee to, in his words, “[p]ass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48), Lurie knowingly chooses the legal model of confession over the religious and, crucially, privileges a model of confession aligned with punitive retribution rather than communal reintegration. Lurie’s students may or may not be as “posthistorical” as he perceives them to be (32), but *Disgrace* itself is not an ahistorical text, in that it represents the act

113 The dialogue between Coetzee’s work and Brooks’s is also addressed by Julie McGonegal in her study of postcolonial reconciliation, *Imagining Justice*. As she observes, “the series of objections to confessional discourse that Lurie formulates recalls Brooks’s poststructuralist interpretation of confession in *Troubling Confessions*” (160). Though McGonegal’s wording suggests, inaccurately, Brooks’s influence on Coetzee – the reverse is actually closer to the mark, as Brooks engages with Coetzee’s essay on confession – her point about the conceptual overlap between Coetzee and Brooks is well-taken.
of confession, particularly public confession, as intrinsically divided in Brooks’ sense of the practice.

On the other hand, however, in addition to the intrinsic, historically-determined divisions in the act of confession, the public nature of the inquiry process presents the committee with an added problem that exacerbates its confusion. It is precisely because, as Swarts explains to Lurie regarding his situation, “[a]ll eyes are on the university to see how we handle it” that the university, through the committee of inquiry it designates to handle the case, continues to call on Lurie to confess and apologize (53-54). As Lurie refuses to help the university bring the matter to a satisfactory close, he earns its enmity. For Suzie Gibson, “[i]n the end, Lurie is punished not because he had sex with a student, but because he refuses to cooperate in a system of responsibility” (288). Such an inversion of priorities, in which the offended committee to some extent usurps the place of the victim and thus replicates the actions of Melanie Isaacs’s father on an even larger scale, underscores Coetzee’s distrust of such a bureaucratized form of redress, one which claims the moral high-ground but operates in terms of mere proceduralism – a getting on with business – that renders the victim’s rights secondary. That Coetzee’s skilful treatment of this episode has the potential to direct readers’ sympathies away from the tribunal ostensibly convened to protect Melanie Isaacs’s human rights suggests Coetzee’s discomfort with a process that reveals itself to be oppressive in its own right.

Coetzee’s focus on the practical obstacles to the South African model of reconciliation thus belie charges that Coetzee’s critical attitude towards the TRC and its procedures is too rarified, too opaque, and too consciously geared toward an elite readership to be concretely

---

114 The university committee’s awareness of itself as operating in the public eye offers one of the clearest parallels to the very public and high profile operations of the TRC, which, like Lurie’s committee, understood that its procedures and findings would reflect not only on itself but on the wider – in the TRC’s case, national – community it would be taken to represent.
productive. Such objections confuse author and character to some degree, for it is David Lurie, and not Coetzee, who says that his objections to the disciplinary panel convened to hear his case are “of a philosophical kind” (Disgrace 47). As Rosemary Jolly notes, Lurie is the one who has a “habit of seeing the world through metaphysical glasses” (“Going to the Dogs” 164); conversely, Lucy is “[a]lways more embodied than her intellectual father” (Peter McDonald 329). Arguably, Coetzee’s position, in Disgrace and elsewhere in his writing, marries the practicality of Lucy’s approach to the philosophical approach of her father. If Lurie rejects the model of communal reintegration on offer to him, it is not because he objects to the concept of forgiveness in principle, but rather in terms of how the committee seeks to practice it. As Julie McGonegal has it, “Disgrace is attracted to an ethic of forgiveness but is nevertheless scrupulously concerned with the difficulty of translating this ethic into action” (149).

The difficulty of translating this ethic of forgiveness into action is most obviously at stake in Coetzee’s recurrent fictional and critical considerations of the practice of confession. It is in relation to the matter of confession that Coetzee both imaginatively anticipates, in his apartheid-era writing, and responds to, in his post-apartheid work, reconciliation as a profoundly complex, and perhaps necessarily imperfect and ongoing process. In Disgrace, Lurie notes that what the committee of inquiry really wants is a confession (52). Throughout the process Lurie knows that if he provides the committee with what it seeks, the security of his job is assured and he can move on with his life: confession is the one and only step Lurie need take on the road to official forgiveness; reintegration into the academic and wider community will follow from Lurie’s acquiescence to the demands of the committee. Yet, a confession – or at least one that the

---

115 I am thinking here principally of objections like those made by Sam Durrant, when he argues that the “elite nature of Coetzee’s readership” renders his work an ineffective alternative to the TRC (“Bearing Witness” 430, n. 1).
committee deems acceptable – is exactly what Lurie refuses to provide. Whatever his faults, and they are many, Lurie’s refusal to give the committee the confession it seeks cannot but garner at least a modicum of respect for the problematic protagonist from the reader.

In the end, however, Lurie does confess to Mr. Isaacs: he informs Melanie’s father that he “lack[s] the lyrical” and “manage[s] love too well” (171). The obvious change of course in Lurie’s behaviour invites speculation into the nature of his confession. As far as confessions go, Lurie’s is likely to appear meagre. Nevertheless, it is worth contrasting this confession with Lurie’s earlier confession, extorted from him by the committee that in turn rejects it, and noting the shift that takes place between the two:

The story begins one evening, I forget the date, but not long past. I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms. Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.” (52)

Lurie’s first confession is, as the committee is fully aware, patently insincere. Confessions are, by their nature, reliant on “stock stor[ies]” (Brooks 61); by calling attention to the narrative conventions of confession, Lurie’s first confession renders itself inadmissible as confession. Though Lurie’ later confession retains some of the mystifying and unsatisfying ambiguity of the first one, potentially suggesting that Lurie does not fundamentally change much from the beginning of the novel, the nature of the confession Lurie offers to Mr. Isaacs is substantially different from the one he gave to the committee earlier. In the first place, Lurie does away with the self-consciousness of his first confession. Secondly, rather than focusing on what his relationship with Melanie meant for him, as he had done earlier, Lurie confesses to Mr. Isaacs in such a way that indicates an attempt on his part to imagine Melanie’s experience of their relationship and what it meant for her. That Lurie is mistaken in characterizing the nature of his
offence as the excessive management of love is undeniable: it is hardly the offence that most
readers are likely to consider Lurie’s worst, especially as few are likely to share Lurie’s rather
generous characterization of his forcing of himself on Melanie as “[n]ot rape, not quite that” (25).
Nevertheless, that Lurie even manages to attempt to view his relationship with Melanie through
her eyes is significant in that, like Lurie’s growing awareness of the plight of animals, particularly
dogs, it hints at the possibility of a nascent empathic capacity developing within Lurie. If Lurie’s
interaction with the university committee proves dissatisfying on account of the “subtle mockery”
in Lurie’s tone and falters especially on the issue of Lurie’s “sincere feelings” which he is
unwilling to “demonstrate” to the committee’s satisfaction (52,54,55), the new, limited empathy
Lurie displays in making his confession to Isaacs once again raises the spectre of sincerity.

Sincerity is a crucial concept in Disgrace, as it is in the later Coetzean oeuvre as a whole.
On the one hand, Lurie’s decision to confess to Isaacs is free from the shadow of expediency that
hovers over the committee’s attempts to garner a confession from Lurie. For this reason, it has
the ring of sincerity about it. However, as Desmond Swarts, Dean of Engineering at Cape
Technical University and a member of the committee of inquiry, tells Lurie earlier in the novel,
“there is a difference between pleading guilty to a charge and admitting you were wrong” (54).
In expressing this view, Swarts echoes Costello’s opinions in The Lives of Animals, and, beyond
her, Lacoue-Labarthe’s central argument regarding Heidegger’s famous support for Nazism.
From the beginning of the novel to the end, Coetzee never grants the reader the ability to be
certain as to whether or not Lurie ever moves beyond admitting his guilt to acknowledge his
having done wrong. When apologizing to Melanie’s mother and sister, Lurie meets their gazes
and, upon meeting the eyes of Melanie’s younger sister, “again the current leaps, the current of
desire” (173). Far from being completely transformed, Lurie reveals himself to be, internally,
much the same man as he was at the beginning of the novel, driven by the same desires that possessed him when, as he tells the committee, “Eros entered” his relationship with Melanie (52). Such a response cannot but raise troubling questions about the sincerity of Lurie’s apology.

The question of Lurie’s sincerity raised by his confession, if perhaps unavoidable, proves to be a dead end in *Disgrace*. Isaacs, the recipient of Lurie’s apology is uninterested in determining Lurie’s sincerity: as Isaacs puts it, the “question” facing Lurie and those like him “is not, are we sorry?...The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?” (172). Ultimately, in the context of secular confession Coetzee has argued, in his much-discussed essay “Confession and Double Thoughts,” the question of sincerity is ultimately undecidable. Although, Coetzee writes, the “end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself” (291), it “is in the nature of the truth told to itself by the reflecting self not to be final” (263). Sincerity is one issue which, as Coetzee’s fiction stages it, involves a “regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt” (274). As such, and as Lurie’s arousal at the sight of Melanie’s younger sister demonstrates, the question of sincerity – in Lurie’s case, the extent to which he sincerely believes that his actions in regards to Melanie were wrong – remains unanswerable, even to the confessing subject.

Though Coetzee argues, in “Confession and Double Thoughts,” that the truth of confession is always questionable, and though Lurie’s complex confession demonstrates that the sincerity of a confession is always subject to doubt, the deliberate turn away from sincerity as a criteria for evaluating the worth of a confession signalled by Isaacs’s response to Lurie’s confession crucially suggests that the forestalling of certainty that Coetzee depicts as inherent to the practice of secular confession is neither entirely pessimistic in its implications, nor does it necessarily entail a denial of the possibility of reconciliation, but rather a reconfiguration of it:
epistemologically crippling as Coetzean confessions may be, they are, paradoxically, ethically enabling. In “Confession and Double Thoughts,” Coetzee notes that confession is but “one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular” (251-52). The demonstration of the unstable certainty and questionable sincerity of secular confession takes on meaning in light of Coetzee’s understanding of it as part of a larger narrative. What Coetzee’s troubling of confession does, then, is interrupt that larger narrative and delay its arrival at the moment of narrative closure that is absolution.

Disgrace, at its core, is a novel that profoundly troubles the idea that reconciliation, dependent as it is on confession, is a process that can be completed. Juxtaposing Lurie’s refusal to apologize to the committee with his eventual apology to Melanie’s father, Coetzee points to the value of a continuous re-iteration of confession, in the context of a situation in which confessional sincerity is always, necessarily, uncertain. As a potential substitute for absolution in an ongoing process of reconciliation, the re-staging of confession that takes place in the novel is less a replaying, in fictional form, of Coetzee’s critical argument about confession, as it is an attempt to explore how the radically and self-consciously uncertain nature of confession need not be inhibitive but productive of a modified form of reconciliation. As Lurie tells Melanie’s father,

In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. (172)

Following, as it does, Isaac’s question – “what are we going to do now that we are sorry? (172) – Lurie’s reference to his daily living out of “a state of disgrace” tacitly reconfigures the meaning
of the confession he offers Mr. Isaacs as it points forward not to absolution, but to an ongoing performance of penitence.

As an answer to Isaacs’s question of what he intends to do now that he is sorry, Lurie’s living in a state of disgrace is not, in any uncomplicated way, unequivocally satisfactory or sufficient. Attridge’s warning about the dangers of misreading Lurie’s “behaviour to suggest that he taking on an existence of suffering and service as expiation for his sin” is certainly apt here (“Age of Bronze 116”). Crucially, however, the penitence takes the form not only of Lurie’s work with Bev Shaw in the animal clinic, but also of his aesthetic efforts in composing Byron in Italy, the chamber opera on which Lurie works throughout the novel. From the beginning of the novel, we are made aware that Lurie has spent the “last few years…playing with the idea of a work on Byron” and that being “tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard,” he has desires of writing “a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (4). During the course of the narrative, however, Lurie’s sense of what Byron in Italy will be about changes and that change is bound up with what happens to Lucy and to him in the attack and with Lurie’s growing interest in “say[ing] the honour of [the] corpses” of the dogs euthanized at the animal clinic (146). Rather than writing “a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man,” Lurie “tries to pick Teresa up in middle age…a dumpy little widow installed in the Villa Gamba with her aged father” and finds that where “Teresa leads…he follows” until he allows the [u]nlovely, unloved, neglected” voice of Byron’s daughter, Allegra, to emerge “from the dark” (180, 181, 186). In exploring, through his art, the question of whether he can “find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman” (182), Lurie’s opera, in a manner reminiscent of Coetzee’s writings generally, takes on a confessional cast just as much of Coetzee’s own writing can be said to do the same.
complicated way, it constitutes Lurie’s confession to a long personal history of unethical relationships that by no means begin, as Disgrace does, with the prostitute Soraya nor end with Melanie, while simultaneously performing a kind of penitence by seeking to acknowledge the worth of the subjectivities Lurie would previously have been inclined not to value. If Lurie’s living out a state of disgrace constitutes, in part, his answer to Isaacs’s question of what he plans to do now that he is sorry, the composition of an altered version of the chamber opera he had initially planned to pen completes the answer.

The value of Lurie’s aesthetic enterprise, I suggest, rests precisely in the way it interrupts the process of absolution or expiation. As Coetzee’s novels are themselves, in Attridge’s terms, literary events, Lurie’s penning of Byron in Italy is a mise-en-abyme, an artistic event in its own right that resists the kind of closure attendant upon notions of absolution and expiation, as each encounter with Byron in Italy would, of necessity, signify differently to its audience, just as each reading of Disgrace is inherently unique, producing not only different interpretations, Attridge insists, but different texts. As an artistic event, in this sense, Byron in Italy can no more bring an end to a narrative that begins with transgression than a more straightforward confession can: each

116 It is worth keeping open the question of what value Lurie places on women sexually. Lurie’s eventual affair with Bev Shaw, who he initially perceives as “a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck” (72), is ambiguous in its meaning. On the one hand, Lurie’s adoption of a partner who is more “acceptable” for being closer to Lurie’s age than Melanie might invite a sympathetic reading in which it is a sign of Lurie’s emotional and ethical maturation (the extra-marital nature of the affair notwithstanding). On the other, it also invites a pair of far less sympathetic readings: the affair might signify a modified version of Lurie’s instrumentalist view of the “problem of sex” (1) in which the disgraced academic grudgingly accepts that sex from much younger women will not be forthcoming. After a sexual encounter between Lurie and Bev, the narrative focalization that makes us privy to Lurie’s thoughts would seem to confirm such a reading when Lurie admits that “this is what [he] will have to get used to, this and even less than this” (150). Or, it might signify a disturbing variation on an idea that Lucy attributes to her rapists; where Lucy posits that her rapists may “see [her] as owing something” and that her rape “is the price [she] has to pay for staying on” (158), Lurie may pursue the affair with Bev in part because he believes, in an unconscious way, that it is the price he has to pay for his transgressions. In engaging in sexual intercourse with Bev, Lurie takes pride in the fact that he “does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either” (158). In either of these readings, Lurie’s sexual valuation of Bev is non-existent.
encounter an audience has with Lurie’s chamber opera will result in variations in the confession it offers; it will, as Disgrace does, continuously re-stage confessions of an always varied nature.

In this regard, each narrative production of a Coetzean character concerned to confess to some (implication in) wrongdoing, which is often coextensive with the Coetzean text itself, gets figured as a continuous process of confession and atonement. With this in mind, the significance of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to Life & Times of Michael K is unquestionable, not least of all because, as Northrop Frye has it, Coleridge’s poem centers on a figure who “tell[s] a story whose moral is reintegration with nature” (18). In the novel’s second chapter, narrated by the medical officer who encounters the eponymous protagonist, the medical officer makes references that align him with the mariner of Coleridge’s poem: he refers to the man he knows as Michaels as “the albatross around my neck” (146) and, even more significantly, imagines a conversation with K in which his “glittering eye would have held [K]” (164). Such references serve to position the medical officer as a Mariner figure as, in Coleridge’s poem, the Mariner’s “glittering eye” holds the attention of the wedding guest (3, 13), enabling the Mariner to tell his tale and, in the *telling of it*, atone for his killing of the albatross. This connection to Coleridge’s Mariner suggestively reflects back both on the medical officer’s narrative in *Life & Times of Michael K* and on Coetzee’s writing generally: Coetzee’s writing itself becomes a kind of enactment of atonement in and through narrative. Each text in the Coetzean corpus individually re-enacts the event of atonement through narrative, figuring it as a narrative without conclusion, while at the same time each new addition to Coetzee’s *oeuvre* can thus arguably be read as indicative of the way in which Coetzee himself, like the Mariner, is compelled continuously to narrate his guilt. Unlike Coleridge’s Mariner, however, who attempts to atone for one specific act of wrongdoing through the narrative recreation of it, Coetzee’s writing responds to a *condition* of metaphysical
guilt that necessitates a “narrative” – the Coetzean oeuvre – that continuously evolves and changes as it repeatedly returns to narrate that condition in ever-changing ways. As a model of confession, then, Coetzee’s writing, as a whole, takes for granted that the work of confessing is never complete. In place of a singular confession for a singular act, it privileges a confessional practice that, through its self-conscious attention to its own uncertain claims to truth, recognizes the ethical value of confession that refuses narrative closure and, accordingly, the complete and final attainment of absolution.

As Disgrace indicates, the value of Byron in Italy as a product of penitence is further complicated by the fact that it is unlikely to be heard or noticed; as Lurie himself acknowledges, he will not “be returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera” (214). Like Mrs. Curren before him, who cannot be certain that her letter to her daughter will reach its intended recipient, and like the magistrate, who cannot be sure there will even be “anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we live” (102)\textsuperscript{117}, Lurie cannot be certain that anyone other than himself will even encounter Byron in Italy. And yet, in each case, the written narrative that each produces accrues value not in spite of, but because of, the fact that its instrumental value is uncertain. What the magistrate, Curren, and Lurie all accept, for different reasons and in different ways, is that reintegration into their respective communities is not and cannot be the final goal of their narrative efforts. In this, their narrative confessional practice differs profoundly from the confessional practice at the heart of the TRC’s amnesty hearings, for such confessions, where made, implicitly or explicitly looked forward to communal reintegration and, indeed, express a sense of entitlement to it. Coetzee’s characters confess knowing that forgiveness may well not be forthcoming, knowing that reconciliation may well not

\textsuperscript{117} Compare the magistrate’s uncertainty with Lurie’s doubts as to whether there will still be scholars in the future (214).
take place, knowing that their very claim to community is provisional at best: therein, Coetzee suggests, lies the value of their confessions, for in refusing to assume that they are entitled to forgiveness, simply because they have confessed, Coetzee’s confessing subjects recognize the authority of the Other(s) they have wronged to grant or withhold forgiveness and reconciliation.

As texts to be read, Coetzee’s novels position their reader in the position of the Other, with the attendant authority to grant of refuse forgiveness. At the same time, as I discuss in my previous chapter, the reader of a Coetzeean novel is also implicated in the crimes to which Coetzee’s novels bear witness. In a complex gesture, then, Coetzee’s writing both invests the reader with the authority to judge and undermines that authority at the same time. I want to suggest, now, that that double movement is crucial to Coetzee’s efforts to re-imagine reconciliation, for the “ethic of forgiveness” that McGonegal notes is of importance to Disgrace and which I want to suggest is important to Coetzee’s writing more generally, is bound up with Coetzee’s interest in exploring a secular model of grace.

As much as Waiting for the Barbarians may work to undermine the authority of any reader to forgive the magistrate for the things for which he is unable to forgive himself, there can be little doubt that the magistrate – in his tortured self-examination -- wants his reader/judge to want to forgive him at the very least. In Age of Iron, Mrs. Curren cautions her daughter (and the reader) to “attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye” (104); however, the perpetual principle of self-questioning embedded in the passage – in which Curren’s metafictional acknowledgement of the textuality of her epistle (as she puns on the etymological link between the words text and weaving) that renders its truth value suspect, is itself subject to a further level of interrogation – points to the eventual enactment
of readerly authority, in the form of forgiveness, as the only way out of the hermeneutic and ethical impasse in which she finds herself.

If Coetzee’s protagonists tend to be unforgiving of themselves, appealing instead to the reader for a forgiveness that cannot be earned, in his autobiographical works Coetzee is even harsher in his self-castigation. The narrative voice of Youth, for instance, is relentless in subjecting the text’s protagonist to heavy doses of self-irony, particularly when it comes to young John’s sexual encounters – from his relationship with Jacqueline, the older woman with whom he cohabits and who “searches out his diary and reads what he has written about their life together” (8), to Sarah, the “solid-boned..fresh-faced..but healthy through and through” (33) young woman he gets pregnant only to stand by her in a state of “squeamishness” and “useless[ness]” while she aborts their child (34, 35), to his cousin Ilse’s virgin friend Marianne with whom he acknowledges he “behave[s] dishonourably” (130). Young John’s inability to signify as a great romantic hero in his own life narrative is part-and-parcel of the text’s representation of its protagonist’s broader ethical shortcomings – his “horror of physical ugliness” (30), for instance – which in turn relates closely to his struggle to become an author.

Summertime, the next work of an autobiographical (albeit overtly fictionalized) nature in Coetzee’s oeuvre, picks up on and extends a number of threads from Youth. The “fantasy” of “walking the streets of London with a tall Aryan huntress at his side” that causes an “erotic tingle” in young John (Youth 126), gets transformed into an extended episode in the later text in which John, older and once again living in South Africa, takes his cousin Margot on what can only be seen as a narratively conventional date: beginning with his invitation, “Would you like to go for a drive this afternoon?” (103), continuing through his offer to stop “for a cup of coffee” (104), and culminating in the breakdown of John’s truck which leaves the two stranded in the
veld twenty kilometres from Merweville (109), the episode is a self-consciously scripted and
stylized recreation of a conventional romantic plot. Given the incestuous connotations of the
scene, coupled with John’s obvious inadequacies as the hero of such a narrative as he “fiddles
with hoses and clamps” and “tries again and again to get the engine going” (109), John ultimately
comes across (in Margot’s eyes and quite possibly in the reader’s) as “comical” in his futility
(111), but also deeply flawed. Such impressions recur in his interactions with Adriana, in whose
eyes he “did not have a quality that a woman looks for in a man, a quality of strength, of
manliness” (171) and in his “erotic entanglement” with Julia, who cannot bring herself “to love,
really love, someone as radically incomplete as John” (59). As in Youth, John’s romantic and
sexual failures relate closely to an evaluation of his writing that is simultaneously aesthetic and
ethical: Julia’s suggestion that Dusklands is possessed of a passion that is “obscure” (58) overtly
links the protagonist’s romantic and aesthetic shortcomings, while also suggesting that the
novel’s “exposé of the cruelty involved in various forms of conquest” finds its “locus…within the
author himself” (58). Given that it is Coetzee himself who stands behind this reading of his first
published book, it is hard not to detect a complex and deeply confessional impulse on the author’s
part in Julia’s analysis.

In both Youth and Summertime, then, Coetzee engages in a complex game of self-analysis
that, despite the questions of sincerity that their increasingly overt fictionalization might
otherwise raise, relates closely to the ethic of forgiveness that I have been charting. Youth
“contrives,” in Dominic Head’s opinion, “to depict [Coetzee’s] youthful self in as poor a light as
possible” (Cambridge Introduction 15), but it does not do so with the aim of suggesting that
either protagonist or author is irredeemable; rather, as with Summertime, which “is so self-critical
that it…begs the reader to contradict the harsh judgments it makes” (Dooley 70), Youth asks its

191
In Coetzee’s fictional and auto/biographical writing, then, no character or auto/biographical self can be certain of objectively, definitively, and authoritatively earning the forgiveness each seeks, and yet, somewhat paradoxically, that acknowledgement constitutes their strongest claims on forgiveness and reconciliation; as, in Attridge’s terms, a literary event, the Coetzean text, more often than not, seeks not only to represent the dilemma of reconciliation for the reader, but also invites the reader to become a participant in the process of reconciliation by presenting readers with an opportunity to forgive those whose “right” to be forgiven rests uncomfortably on their acknowledgement that no such right exists. Attridge explains that grace “is by definition something given, not something earned” (“Age of Bronze” 110); in asking his readers to choose forgiveness, to choose to bestow grace in the absence of any argument or reason to do so, while the reader is simultaneously encouraged to recognize that he or she is similarly in a position of being in need of reciprocal acts of grace, Coetzee suggests the ways in which reconciliation may be productively re-imagined as a secular version of grace, one that is provisional and incomplete because unearned and that continually asks more of the recipient of reconciliation.
Chapter 5

Coetzee and the Limits of Liberalism

The place of liberalism in South African political life has changed significantly during the country’s recent history. During the apartheid era, liberalism was subject to criticism both from the apartheid establishment and from anti-apartheid activists, white and black. For the governing National Party, liberal multiracialism, however qualified it was, was incompatible with apartheid ideology; while not quite as objectionable to the governing party as Marxism, the apartheid government saw liberalism as dangerous to white South African interests.\textsuperscript{118} However, the National Party’s rejection of liberalism did not translate into its embrace by apartheid’s opponents. If, as far as the National Party was concerned, liberalism was idealistic and wrong-headed in its approach to racial difference, for many anti-apartheid groups it was too compatible with National Party ideology and policies and accordingly suffered from what Rob Nixon calls “a vast credibility problem” (79). As such, many South African opponents of apartheid turned away from liberalism, and its generally reformist spirit of working within the parliamentary system, in favour of more overtly aggressive oppositional positions. As Nixon puts it, “the principal contenders” in South African politics from 1960 to 1990 “were polarized between a muscular right and a muscular left, with an emaciated liberalism in-between” (79). Officially opposed to apartheid on an ideological level, liberals found little support from either side in the struggle over apartheid and were consequently marginalized politically during the apartheid era.

\textsuperscript{118} The connection between foreign liberals and Marxists was one made by the Nationalists, who “perceived Western Liberals as the shock troops of Soviet Communism” (Nixon 60).
To a significant degree, apartheid-era valuations of liberalism persist in post-apartheid South Africa. As Randolph Vigne notes, the 1996 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English* lists the word “liberal” as a term of abuse (ix). Yet, despite its marginalization during the apartheid era, political liberalism staged a miraculous recovery following the end of apartheid. Assuming power in the Government of National Unity (GNU) after the elections of 1994, the ANC, itself a frequent critic of political liberalism during the anti-apartheid struggle, immediately adopted a number of familiar liberal perspectives and policies, drafting a new constitution and Bill of Rights and abandoning its traditional ties to Marxism in favour of market-centered policies. With the end of apartheid, then, liberalism moved from an oppositional, if criticized and marginalized, position to a position of political power and preeminence.

From the beginning, J.M. Coetzee’s writing returns again and again to the question of liberalism. Even if liberalism wasn’t a thematic concern of Coetzee’s, there would be sufficient reason to consider his relationship to it: as an author capable of writing in English or Afrikaans, Coetzee’s decision to write his novels almost exclusively in English positions him within a literary tradition possessing, in Brian Macaskill’s terms, “a narrative legacy of liberal realism in white writing inherited from Olive Schreiner and passed down through Alan Paton, Phyllis Altman, Harry Bloom, Dan Jacobson, [and the] early Nadine Gordimer” (66). Yet, liberalism is a concern in Coetzee’s writing. Identifiably liberal characters inhabit his fiction and Coetzee’s work often writes back to earlier liberal texts and engages with liberalism on a number of levels at once. Indeed, as I argue throughout this chapter, Coetzee’s fiction is thoroughly informed by

---

119 The South African edition of *In the Heart of the Country* is an interesting exception in Coetzee’s oeuvre, as the narrative is written in English but the dialogue that characters exchange is Afrikaans.
the various modes of liberalism – political, aesthetic, and philosophical\textsuperscript{120} – with which it critically engages. Coetzee’s writing thus participates in the longstanding South African practice of questioning liberalism’s value and its place in the nation’s life. Though Coetzee’s thematic interest in liberalism is a constant in his writing, his treatment of it is far from static, continuously altering in response to liberalism’s shifting political fortunes in South Africa. *Age of Iron*, which was written during the country’s State of Emergency and takes that context as its subject, portrays the drawn-out death of a Classics professor and explicitly links her death to that of South African political liberalism. When Mrs. Curren describes herself as “some wingless, ineffectual bird…the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying” (28), her depiction of herself as a figure of extinction anticipates the outcome of the increasingly violent and desperate struggle over apartheid to be the final death of political liberalism in the country.

If *Age of Iron* depicts liberalism as a dying force in South Africa, the majority of Coetzee’s apartheid-era fictions respond to liberalism as a critical and oppositional politics and aesthetics. In contrast, his post-apartheid writing responds to liberalism as the ruling political paradigm in the country (and the West generally). In this chapter, I will focus primarily on three works – *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, and *The Lives of Animals* – that make liberalism a central issue of concern. I will show how Coetzee’s *oeuvre* adapts its approach over time, at each stage offering distinct challenges to liberalism as a political dispensation and as an ethics and aesthetics that strive to accommodate difference. Ultimately, I argue that, despite the evolving

\textsuperscript{120} This is not to suggest that liberalism comes in political, aesthetic, and philosophical varieties that are easily separable from each other; certainly, the term are not mutually exclusive, but, rather, overlap in important ways. Liberalism is a multi-faceted affair, rooted in philosophical justifications of politically pragmatic policies, each of which becomes the stuff of aesthetic representation that, in turns, helps shape the political landscape and engages with the philosophical undergirding of liberalism. Nevertheless, insofar as it is possible to consider the various facets of liberalism separately, this chapter addresses first the politics of liberalism, then liberalism’s aesthetic legacy, before concluding with a discussion of liberalism as an ethical philosophy.
nature of Coetzee’s critique, his fiction persistently reveals liberalism’s conceptual limitations and undermines its self-justifications.

Waiting for the Barbarians: The Inherent Violence of Liberalism

Coetzee’s third novel, Waiting for the Barbarians, was the first of Coetzee’s novels to garner him a significant international readership. In its thematic concern with torture, the novel overtly addresses the issue of colonial violence and, as critics have observed, dramatizes the connection between violence and the construction of the Other against whom the Empire can define itself. Because the magistrate is both a functionary in service of Empire and an opponent of its excesses, his is a radically divided consciousness: as W.J.B. Wood writes, the “tension between Self and Office engenders in the Magistrate profound doubts about both” (134). In “Into the Dark Chamber,” one of Coetzee’s best-known essays, Coetzee describes Waiting for the Barbarians as a novel about “the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience” (363). Coetzee’s description of his novel suggests the value of reading Waiting for the Barbarians as a work that represents the powerlessness of the liberal humanist in an authoritarian context. If the magistrate is the man of conscience in Coetzee’s novel, Colonel Joll, as the torturer, occupies the opposite side of the spectrum. The opposition between the magistrate and Joll is one around which the novel overtly structures itself. In sharing Joll’s interest in the barbarian “girl,” particularly by focusing on her (tortured) body, the magistrate engages Joll in a sexual rivalry: he laments that, unlike Joll, his “loving leaves no mark” (132). At the same time, the rivalry between the men transcends the personal and sexual levels and

121 Cf. Rosemary Jolly’s Colonization, Violence, and Narration: “The novel emphasizes the violence necessary for the manichean economy to be implemented in the form of imperialist relations” (124).
122 Cf. Dominic Head’s J.M. Coetzee: “At a basic level, the magistrate’s story suggests an allegory of the situation of the contemporary South African liberal” (75). Bill Ashcroft writes that Coetzee “allegorizes the dilemma of any dissenter in an oppressive regime” (104).
functions ideologically as well. As control of the colonial outpost passes from the magistrate to Joll and back again, the two men compete for the sympathies of the colonists.

The magistrate, in his position and in his opinions, embodies the rule of law. When he is arrested by Joll’s forces, he insists he “will defend [himself] in a court of law” (82) and later assumes that, as “a prisoner awaiting trial”, he will be “maintained out of the public coffer” since “[t]hat is the law” (123). As Theresa Dovey explains, the “sentiments and attitudes the Magistrate is made to express represent a traditional liberal humanist position” (“Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories” 142); it is the magistrate’s faith in the law as a guarantor of individual rights, more than anything else, which reveals his political liberalism. In contrast, Joll is a figure of extra-legality. Joll arrives in the colony “under emergency powers” (1) and, along with his subordinate, Warrant Officer Mandel, displays nothing but contempt for the rule of law. Despite imprisoning and torturing the magistrate, Mandel informs the magistrate that he is “not a prisoner” and is instead “free to go as [he] please[s].” Taunting the magistrate with the proceduralism that is the hallmark of the rule of law, Mandel continues: “How can you be a prisoner when we have no record of you? Do you think we don’t keep records? We have no records of you. So you must be a free man” (123). The contest between the magistrate and Joll’s forces takes shape as a contest between the rule of law, with its respect for individual rights, and authoritarianism, with its emphasis on the maintenance of state power above all else.

Given this ideological difference between the magistrate and Joll, it is unsurprising that they come into open conflict. The magistrate even sees this conflict as signaling a distinct difference between himself and Joll. After being arrested, the magistrate momentarily rejoices: “I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man” (76). The irony underlying
the magistrate’s belief that his arrest affords him the *freedom* to oppose Joll replicates an irony facing South African liberals: disapproving of the policies of their government, but in a position of relative powerlessness, South African liberals could feel liberated by their inner opposition regardless of their inability to effect real change. The magistrate’s imprisonment allows him, for a time at least, to perceive himself as fundamentally different from the officials who replace him; though he stands only for “an archaic code of gentlemanly behavior towards captured foes” (106) it is the ability of this archaic code to oppose, and provide an alternative to, “the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees” (106) that Coetzee wishes to explore.

The magistrate’s ability to believe in a simple opposition eventually fades as he comes to recognize a fundamental similarity between himself and Joll. In an oft-quoted passage, the magistrate admits, “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 harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less” (133).¹²³ This revelation, the moment towards which the novel builds, is central to the text’s undermining of liberalism as an alternative to the illegal brutality against which it pits itself. Though the magistrate does not equate himself with Joll (with good reason), he acknowledges an underlying, deeper, similarity that makes him more like Joll than unlike him. As Michael Valdez Moses persuasively argues, the novel deconstructs “an entire set of significant distinctions – between liberalism and authoritarianism, between the rule of law and the rule of force” (123). The magistrate, while continuing to assert a recognizable difference between himself and Joll, finally acknowledges the continuity between the modes of colonial

¹²³ Not all readers of *Waiting for the Barbarians* have accepted the magistrate’s insistence on his fundamental similarity to Joll. According to W.J.B. Wood, “the Magistrate deserves to be regarded as a *truth*-loving opposite to the Colonel, who epitomizes the denial of truth” (136). For Wood, the obvious differences between the magistrate and Joll invalidate the magistrate’s self-implicating revelation. However, positions like Wood’s rely on a fundamental misreading of the nature of the magistrate’s admission.
governance they represent. That continuity is borne out in the relatively peaceful transitions in power from the magistrate to Joll and back again, just as it has taken place historically in South Africa and elsewhere.¹²⁴

David Attwell is thus incorrect when he suggests that “[t]he outpost was…always fundamentally illiberal” (J.M. Coetzee 84). Looking back on a time before Joll’s arrival, the magistrate recalls telling an army deserter, before meting out his punishment, that “we live in a world of laws…a world of the second-best…We are fallen creatures. All we can do is uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade” (136). The liberal magistrate can only offer the law in place of justice and it is liberalism’s privileging of the law over justice that is at issue here. Coetzee does not suggest that liberalism’s privileging of the law renders it indistinguishable from Joll’s authoritarianism. On the contrary, though Joll’s Third Bureau takes “the administration of justice…out of the hands of civilians” like the magistrate (87), it is ultimately disinterested in questions of justice and is concerned only with maintaining the Empire’s power. As the magistrate states, “[o]ne thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era” (131). The magistrate, though unequipped to provide truly just colonial governance, possesses the power to prevent public instances of gross injustice, as when he stops Joll from beating a prisoner with a hammer (104-5). Yet even in the performance of this action, the magistrate is forced to acknowledge that such actions, though brave, constitute a fundamental evasion of questions of justice: “Justice: once that word is uttered, where will it all end? Easier to shout No! Easier to be beaten and made a martyr.

¹²⁴ The National Party did not assume power in South Africa following a coup, nor, Paul Rich argues in White Power and the Liberal Conscience, were there racial policies radically different from the more liberal United Party government(s) that preceded them. South Africa followed the path of a number of other colonies in its transition from a relatively liberal government to a more authoritarian regime interested in protecting white power that was in increasing danger.
Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?” (106). Looking back on the incident with the army deserter, the magistrate remembers feeling an “uneasy shame” concerning his actions (136). That sense of shame originates in the magistrate’s incipient sense that the maintenance of the rule of law, at least in a colonial setting, is bound up in a similar process of prolonging the life of Empire.

Waiting for the Barbarians ultimately suggests that the liberal privileging of the law, in place of justice, both aligns liberalism with colonial authoritarianism and undermines liberalism’s claims to offer the most just mode of governance. If Waiting for the Barbarians undermines political liberalism’s ability to oppose authoritarian colonial rule, Foe similarly highlights liberal failures, though in the case of the latter novel it is liberal aesthetics, the performance of liberal politics and ethics in and as literature, that is one of the text’s core concerns.

Foe: Re-writing the liberal novel

A rich, theoretically-informed rewriting of Robinson Crusoe, Foe exemplifies Theresa Dovey’s categorization of Coetzee’s writing as “criticism-as-fiction or fiction-as-criticism” (9). The imaginative story it tells is inextricably bound up with the simultaneous reading/rewriting of Defoe’s novel that it provides. However, Foe (which also makes repeated inter-textual references to Roxana and other works by Defoe) is more than a rewriting of an individual, albeit important, text or author. As Derek Attridge puts it, the novel is “a representation in writing of writing” (“Oppressive Silence” 172). In his well-known essay, Attridge convincingly reads Foe as a commentary on the processes of canonization, arguing that Coetzee challenges an “unproblematised notion of the canon” that is “complicit with a mode of literature – and of criticism – which dehistoricizes and dematerializes the acts of reading and writing while
promoting a myth of transcendant human truths and values” (171). From Attridge’s perspective, *Foe* is as much concerned with how literary works are received and valued as it is with any individual text. While Attridge’s piece offers a compelling reading of Coetzee’s *general* challenge to the canon, there is more to be said about the *particular* form that this challenge takes. Coetzee’s rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, specifically, forces us to ask what about *Robinson Crusoe* (or its author) makes it a suitable starting point for an engagement with notions of canonicity. Given *Foe*’s explicit thematic concern with issues of parentage and origins, it makes sense to read Coetzee’s novel, as many critics do, with an eye to Defoe’s status as the father of the (English-language) novel. Beginning from this point, Susan Gallagher offers a potentially productive way of reading Coetzee’s novel when she argues that the novel’s four sections “represent four different narrative modes which parallel the development of the novel” (186). As such, *Foe* could be read as a fictionalized history of the novel as a literary genre. Accordingly, though for Attridge *Foe* is concerned with canonical *writing*, I suggest *Foe* is more specifically concerned with canonical *novels*.

If Attridge is correct to suggest that the traditional canon dehistoricizes and dematerializes the acts of reading and writing, *Foe* rehistoricizes and re-materializes these acts. For Theresa Dovey, the spaces of the “discursive arena” in which *Foe* operates are constituted by “nothing less than the discourses of feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism” (310). As

---

125 Gallagher explicitly links this paralleling of the novel’s development to the suggestion of a “new feminine literary history” (186). While the one-to-one correspondences that Gallagher sees between the novel’s four sections and four distinct literary periods are ultimately not always convincing, Gallagher’s suggestion that *Foe* traces the historical development of novelistic discourse is valuable. Offering a related interpretation of how *Foe* could be read as a compressed literary history, Michela Canepari-Labib writes that the novel “re-enacts the history of literature from its oral origins…to the postmodern and experimental narrative of the last chapter” (107). In my view, Canepari-Labib’s argument nicely complements Gallagher’s: as is so often the case in his work, Coetzee’s particular focus – the more limited literary history of the (English-language) novel indicated by Gallagher – maps nicely onto a broader perspective – the more general literary history described by Canepari-Labib.
such, *Foe* is very much, and quite self-consciously, a product of the late twentieth-century, bringing three contemporary critical discourses to bear in a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*. In bringing the critical powers of these three discourses (that are themselves both literary and academic) to bear on one highly significant novel, Coetzee outlines the way in which these discourses liberate the novel from its traditional form. *Foe*’s overt metafictional style distances it from the writing of Defoe, whose employment of “formal realism” Ian Watt singled out as instrumental to the development of the novel. Coetzee’s non-realist aesthetic writes back to Defoe’s techniques in *Robinson Crusoe* and his other novels, laying bare the compositional strategies at work in order to reject them.  At the same time, Coetzee’s inclusion of a female perspective in a notoriously male-dominated narrative constitutes a feminist critique, pointing to Defoe’s exclusion of female experience from his narrative of exploration and colonization. As Susan Gallagher explains, Coetzee suggests how Defoe “[writes] the woman out of *Robinson Crusoe* only to insert her two of his other fictions. The woman has no place in the political and religious story…instead, her place is within the psychological drama of mother-daughter relationships” (178). If Coetzee’s inclusion of a female castaway suggests a feminist approach to Defoe’s novel, the presence of a black, mute, and potentially mutilated Friday on the island suggests a similar post-colonial reworking of *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Decolonising Fictions*, Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin argue that post-colonial authors write decolonizing fictions, “texts that write back against imperial fictions and texts that incorporate different ways of seeing and being

---

126 From the perspective of Linda Hutcheon who has written specifically about *Foe* elsewhere, the novel is a narcissistic narrative in that it is “process made visible” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 6). See Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative* for a discussion of the difference between realism of product and realism of process, which she sees as constitutive of metafictional writing.

127 The question of feminism in *Foe* is one that has not been resolved in the critical discourse surrounding it. While critics like Susan Gallagher see the novel as engaging in a feminist critique of literary history, others like Josephine Dodd see the novel as participating in the same patriarchal system it exposes and critiques.
in the world‖ (11). *Foe* certainly writes back against an important imperial fiction, and the perpetually silent and potentially mutilated\(^\text{128}\) Friday that Coetzee incorporates into the text embodies a different way of being in the world. Indeed, it is Friday’s consciousness and experience of the world that come to obsess Susan as the novel progresses, which contrasts greatly with Defoe’s disinterest in Friday’s point of view in *Robinson Crusoe*. Coetzee chooses Defoe, then, because Defoe’s work exemplifies a mode of writing bound up with the material and discursive processes of colonization.\(^\text{129}\)

*Foe* thus addresses itself to Defoe’s intertwining of formal realism with patriarchal and colonialist discourses. Coetzee writes back to Defoe to write against modes of patriarchal and colonialist writing that are perhaps implicit in the realist novel: *Foe* is a revisionist text that returns to the novel’s origins to perform corrective feminist and post-colonial readings of Defoe’s work by pointing to the various silences – gendered and racial – that underwrite *Robinson Crusoe*, and, by implication, much of the English novel tradition. Consequently, *Foe* explores the extent to which the novel form itself can be freed from the gender biases and colonialist impulse with which it has been imbued from the beginning.

\(^\text{128}\) Lewis MacLeod points out that critics typically assume that Friday’s tongue has been mutilated and argues that this assumption problematically forecloses on the novel’s meaning. Though Cruso tells Barton that Friday’s tongue has been cut out, Susan never looks into Friday’s mouth and so never confirms Cruso’s claim. Thus, MacLeod argues, it is “possible to suppose that Friday possesses a tongue” (7). MacLeod is correct to stress the possibility of Friday having a tongue: it is precisely because the question of Friday’s silence must remain unanswerable that Friday’s presence in *Foe* is both so central and so troubling.

\(^\text{129}\) The idea that *Robinson Crusoe* is crucial in the development of colonialist fiction is one that has been taken up by others. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said makes a connection between European acts of territorial expansion and aggression and the increasing concern with space in narrative. Said writes, “I do not mean that only the novel was important, but that I consider it the aesthetic object whose connection to the expanding societies of Britain and France is particularly interesting to study. The prototypical modern realistic novel is *Robinson Crusoe*, and certainly not accidentally it is about a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island” (xii).
It is in *Foe*’s much-discussed fourth chapter, the most overtly metafictional and challenging of the novel’s four sections, that Coetzee brings this issue to a head. The chapter details the descent of an unidentified narrator into the wreck of a sunken ship. The narrator’s assertion that the ship “is not a country bath-house” (156) and is instead “a place where bodies are their own signs” (157) recalls an earlier conversation between Susan Barton and Foe about death and the afterlife (114). The novel’s final section, then, locates itself in a kind of literary afterlife. The “death” that *Foe*’s fourth chapter suggests, I believe, is that of the type of novel initiated by, and associated with, Defoe. The interaction of feminist, postmodernist and post-colonial discourses with *Robinson Crusoe* render a novel of its type an impossibility for an author like Coetzee, or rather, an unethical possibility. Friday’s body can only be its own sign, Coetzee suggests, when the novel form liberates itself from modes of writing that unite a realist aesthetic with problematic implications concerning gender and race.

Insofar as *Foe*’s final chapter represents a literary afterlife, it renders it own textuality spatial: the text that is *Foe*, that constitutes the novel we read, in which the discourses of postmodernism, post-colonialism, and feminism come together to transform *Robinson Crusoe*, is itself the site where a new mode of writing can be housed. In that the unidentified speaker in *Foe*’s fourth chapter moves from the physical space that is the house of “Daniel Defoe, Author” (155) to the shipwreck that is “not a place of words” (157) by reading, in an exquisitely metafictional moment, what appears to be the manuscript of *Foe* itself, the speaker moves into the space that is *Foe* in what is a potentially liberating moment. I say potentially liberating because in no way does *Foe* hold itself up as a liberated mode of writing in which racial and gendered bodies can be their own signs. In the novel’s concluding paragraph, when Friday’s mouth opens and “[f]rom inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption” (157), Coetzee
symbolically represents a mode writing capable of allowing Friday to speak; yet, since what
issues from Friday’s mouth is not speech but rather something else, the ending of *Foe*
suggestively anticipates a future in which it will be possible for an author, like Coetzee, but also
like Susan Barton and *Foe*, to represent their Others. The novel ends, therefore, very much in the
present moment of its composition, where the liberatory discourses that have torn down the house
of Daniel Defoe have yet to build a new house for fiction.

In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee characterizes postmodernist aesthetics as a
biding of one’s time. He tells Attwell,

> Illusionism is…a word I use for realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the
> most convincing realist effects. Anti-illusionism—displaying the tricks you are using
> instead of hiding them—is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is
> only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only a
> marking of time, a phase of recuperation in the history of the novel. The question is,
> what next? (27)

In light of Coetzee’s comments, it becomes possible to see that ways in which *Foe* positions itself
in, and as, a moment of suspension, a kind of literary interregnum that mirrors South Africa’s
political interregnum as it was famously described by Nadine Gordimer. *Foe*, particularly in
its final chapter, becomes the space in which the old form of the English novel is dying but in
which the new form has not yet been born. The motif of anticipatory suspension that recurs
throughout Coetzee’s fiction – from the colonists awaiting the supposedly impending barbarian
assault in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to Mrs. Curren’s existing in a “hovering time” that is “not
eternity. A *time being*” in *Age of Iron* (176), to Dostoevsky’s “waiting for a sign” from his dead
son Pavel in *The Master of Petersburg* (83), to Elizabeth Costello’s suspension “At the Gate” in a

---

130 The epigraph to Gordimer’s novel, *July’s People*, taken from the Italian Marxist, Antoni Gramsci, reads
as follows: “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum there arises a great diversity
of morbid symptoms.”
kind of overtly literary afterlife at the end of *Elizabeth Costello* (193-225), to the young John Coetzee of *Youth*, who, at the end of the text, is “afraid of writing, afraid of women,” waiting to become the author who, it is hinted, will go on to write “a book [about South Africa] as convincing as Burchell’s,” a book known to Coetzee’s readers as *Dusklands* – is put to use, in *Foe*, to represent, in figurative terms, the transitory phase in which the novel finds itself.

If *Foe* suggests that the contemporary novel needs to move beyond the legacies bequeathed to it at its inception, even if its final destination is uncertain, there is yet another implication to be taken from Coetzee’s decision to rewrite Defoe’s novel(s). Insofar as *Robinson Crusoe* is in part an apology for colonialism,131 or an argument in favour of a particular kind of colonialism, Defoe’s ideas are shaped by the liberal politics manifest in his writing. The influence of John Locke, the first significant (English) liberal political philosopher, is evident throughout *Robinson Crusoe*. In his *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that one’s labour transforms unused land into personal property. Locke writes, “[a]s much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property” (113). On the island, Crusoe replicates Locke’s position: “In a Word, The Nature and Experience of Things dictated to me upon just Reflection, That all the good Things of this World, are no farther good to us, than they are for our Use…we enjoy just as much as we can use, and no more” (110). *Robinson Crusoe* performs Lockean political theory, providing, on Crusoe’s island, an arena for the confirmation of Lockean doctrine: when Crusoe is marooned on the island he initially terms it the “Island of Despair” (60), but after cultivating it comes to think of it as his. Locke linked his

---

131 Maximillian Novak claims that “*Robinson Crusoe* is less a defense of colonialism than it is a direct attack on the treatment of natives by the Spanish in their conquest of America” (51). Novak is right to stress Defoe’s criticism of Spanish activities in the Americas, but it is important to note that that criticism was an integral component of Defoe’s advocacy of British colonialism: it was the differences between British and Spanish colonialism that made British colonialism legitimate as far as Defoe was concerned.
theorization of property rights to a justification of English colonialism. The colonization of America was legitimate, for Locke, because the native inhabitants had not made appropriate use of the land; prior inhabitation was thus no obstacle to a legitimate process of colonial dispossession. In Defoe’s novel, Crusoe considers the island to be his, despite its previous use (for ritual cannibalism) by the indigenous peoples. The unquestioned naturalness of Crusoe’s right to claim the island as his property indicates just how thoroughly Defoe accepted Locke’s defense of the colonial enterprise. Locke’s influence is further evident in Defoe’s depiction of colonialism as universally beneficial. Locke’s Second Treatise argues that personal property enables the betterment of both the individual and the wider community: “God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated” (114). Crusoe’s transformation of the island from an undeveloped place into a fertile colony is a story of personal and social betterment: when Crusoe is rescued, the now productive island is capable of supporting the community he leaves behind.

_Foe_ undermines this familiar element of colonialist rhetoric and thus points to the liberal underpinnings of Defoe’s colonialist novel. As in _Robinson Crusoe_, labour figures prominently in Coetzee’s novel. Cruso and Friday labour ceaselessly in transforming the island, moving “a hundred thousand or more” stones to create terraces, but when Susan asks when he will do the planting, Cruso responds, “The planting is not for us…We have nothing to plant…The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed” (33). Coetzee’s Cruso does not labour for the betterment of anyone, not even himself. Coetzee’s parody of the liberal justification of colonialism contributes to his wider rejection of liberalism’s pretensions to being the political philosophy best adapted to provide the best way of life for self and other. _Foe_’s
debunking of an essential part of liberal thinking – a debunking, it should be noted, that incorporates an eco-critical element that increases its urgency – is bound up with Coetzee’s larger challenge to liberalism as an alternative political philosophy.

If Defoe can be seen as the father of the liberal novel, Robinson Crusoe is arguably fiction’s first distinctly liberal hero. Crusoe invokes a Lockean justification of his own political rule on the island, once he is no longer the island’s sole inhabitant, by allowing “Liberty of Conscience throughout [his] Dominions” (203). Crusoe’s practice of religious tolerance recalls the political strategy advocated by Locke, which linked religious tolerance with good governance. While tolerance was, for Locke and also for Crusoe, a pragmatic solution to the “problem” of religious difference, later liberal thinkers, most notably John Stuart Mill, elevated the concept of tolerance to an ethical and political virtue. At times, Robinson Crusoe moves closer toward adopting the latter stance. Although Crusoe is initially disturbed by the ritual cannibalism he witnesses, he concludes that “these people were not Murtherers in the Sense that I had before condemn’d them” and that “it could not be just…to fall upon them” for that would “justify” Spanish “Barbarities” in the Americas (145). Though Crusoe’s idea of religious tolerance resembles Locke’s in its pragmatism, Defoe’s novel mobilizes Crusoe’s doubts concerning his right to condemn and kill the native cannibals as a means of engaging with ethico-political questions about how best to cope with difference. Crusoe’s adoption of a culturally relativistic outlook suggests Defoe’s belief in the capacity of liberal toleration to allow for an ethically preferable alternative representation of the colonized. In Roxana (an intertext nearly as important to Foe as Robinson Crusoe) Defoe displays a similar desire to offer an alternative, and more tolerant, representation, this time of the fallen woman. Rejecting the marriage proposal

132 See Locke’s A Letter Concerning Toleration.
133 The protagonists of the two texts share the same first name.
of a suitor, Roxana espouses a proto-feminist criticism of the institution of marriage: for her “a Woman was a free Agent, as well as a Man, and was born free, and cou’d she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that Liberty to as much Purpose as the Men do… the very Nature of the Marriage-Contract was, in short, nothing but giving up Liberty, Estate, Authority, and everything, to the Man” (147-8). *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* both display a degree of imaginative sympathy (for the colonial other and the fallen woman) that is inseparable from the texts’ tolerant outlooks. In writing back to these two texts, then, *Foe* reads these works by Defoe as texts that are fundamentally concerned by the “problem” of difference and so probes the limits of the liberal novel’s capacity to respond ethically to difference.

As a literary origin, Defoe arguably stands at the beginning of a novelistic tradition that came to be exemplified by its liberal aesthetics. If *Foe* is a kind of literary history of the novel, it is significant that, as Gallagher observes, Coetzee charts the trajectory of the novel’s development through a careful mimicry of the styles and forms of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, but excludes the other commonly recognized “father” of the English novel, Henry Fielding (187). Fielding’s writing distinguishes itself from that of Defoe and Richardson not only in terms of its style, but also in terms of its politics. While Defoe and Richardson display recognizably liberal sensibilities, Fielding does not share these authors’ political outlook and, instead, performs in his fictions a conservative critique of the emergent liberal, modern dispensation – celebrated in the novels of Defoe and Richardson – that was coming into being in eighteenth-century England. Fielding’s exclusion, then, points to Coetzee’s reading of the (English) novel as a genre with fundamentally liberal tendencies.\(^{134}\) Coetzee does not suggest that all (canonic) novels are

\(^{134}\) This is an outlook shared, though from a Marxist perspective, by Terry Eagleton. In *The English Novel: An Introduction*, he writes that “the refusal of both nostalgia and utopia means that the realist novel,
politically liberal, which would be absurdly reductive; instead, it is the liberalism of the novelistic
canon, not the liberalism of individual novels per se, that is the issue in *Foe*. *Foe* rewrites the
liberal novel as much as it does the realist, patriarchal or colonialist novel, though *Foe* links these
four modes of writing. *Foe* responds, therefore, to a literary tradition characterized by its
liberalism and directs its corrective impetus toward that tradition. Coetzee’s positioning of his
own novel in a literary history that begins with Defoe might suggest Coetzee’s self-identification
as an international, cosmopolitan author and thereby obscure his position as a South African
author writing in the mid-1980s; however, if Coetzee writes back to Defoe as a means of
highlighting the novel’s inherently liberal form, *Foe* can then be said to reflect, in a very real
way, on a South African literary tradition characterized by the dominance of political and
aesthetic liberalism. *Foe* writes back, then, both to an older metropolitan literary tradition and to
a local South African one to challenge the liberal underpinnings of these two literary traditions,
not because Coetzee is unsympathetic to the goals uniting them, but because he finds the liberal
novel unable to achieve the goals it sets for itself.

Ultimately, if *Foe*’s final chapter suggests, even calls for, the death of the novel as it
descends from Defoe, it demands that the novel move beyond the liberalism it inherits from him.
In that *Foe* acknowledges the need for alternative representational strategies when it comes to
race and gender, it is very much of a piece with Defoe’s writing, which sought to offer
alternative, and more sympathetic, views of the fallen woman and the colonized other. It is for
this reason that Coetzee’s evaluation of Defoe is rather complex. As David Attwell says, the
novel is “a respectful parody of Defoe” (*J.M. Coetzee* 74). The care with which Coetzee
emulates eighteenth-century diction and style speaks to his appreciation of the aesthetics of the

politically speaking, is for the most part neither reactionary nor revolutionary. Instead, it is typically
reformist in spirit” (7). Reformism is typically associated with political liberalism.
era, but it also reflects Coetzee’s fundamental *sympathy* for Defoe’s aims as a novelist; however, *Foe*’s critical impulse ultimately reveals that Coetzee cannot share Defoe’s “solution” to the problem of difference: the post-colonial and feminist re-writings of Defoe in which Coetzee engages suggest the limits of Defoe’s liberal tolerance, which can only offer more sympathetic representations rather than truer and more just ones.

In suggesting the need for the novel to move beyond its liberal origins, *Foe* does not limit this need to transcend liberalism to the novel alone. Indeed, the text takes literary criticism, and the academy more broadly, as its field of interest as much as it does specific novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Attridge’s reading of *Foe* as primarily concerned with notions of canonicity and Gallagher’s reading of it as a kind of literary history are particularly attentive to this aspect of Coetzee’s novel. However, readings of *Foe* that begin by taking Defoe’s status as the father of the novel for granted, and proceed from there, are in need of further nuance because they partially obscure the complicated temporality at work in Coetzee’s novel. As is true of all of Coetzee’s novels, *Foe* deliberately signals its own production in a specific historical context. Though the bulk of *Foe*’s narrative is set in the eighteenth century, the story it tells is self-consciously mediated by its awareness of itself as a product of the late-twentieth century. Coetzee’s *Cruso* displays none of the material or spiritual growth of Defoe’s protagonist, making him, in the words of Charles W. Pollard, “an ontological castaway of the twentieth century” (162); Susan Barton, the female castaway who narrates the majority of the novel, shows signs of being well read in the twentieth-century feminist writings of Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich (51-2, 142)\(^{135}\); and *Foe* espouses a familiar Derridean position when he informs Susan that writing “is not doomed to be

\(^{135}\)According to Patrick Hayes, in “‘An Author I Have Not Read,’” Susan also displays familiarity with Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* in the third section of *Foe*. 211
the shadow of speech‖ (142). Clearly, then, Coetzee’s eighteenth-century narrative does not efface the signs of its own historically-determined production. The strategic anachronisms Foe employs allow it to read Robinson Crusoe, and other works by Defoe, from a specific temporal position, one informed by late twentieth-century academic criticism and theory. As such, Foe addresses itself, and its corrective impetus, as much to the present of its composition as to the eighteenth-century past that it depicts.

Foe’s rewriting of the novels of Daniel Defoe, specifically, is crucial to the text’s grounding of itself in the late twentieth century because the text is marked by its familiarity with Ian Watt’s seminal Rise of the Novel (1957). Foe signals its familiarity with Watt’s work when Susan articulates her theory of fiction to Cruso. In Susan’s opinion,

seen from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity. All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway...The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance, such as: When you made your needle (the needle you store in your belt), by what means did you pierce the eye? When you sewed your hat, what did you use for thread? Touches like these will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word (18).

Susan’s emphasis on particularity is telling. For Watt, the novel came into being when writers (Defoe and Richardson especially) decided to forego traditional stories, with allegorical, universal protagonists, in favour of stories that focused on particular individual experience. The adoption of what Watt calls “formal realism” as the novel’s governing strategy was bound up in the novelistic commitment to produce “what purports to be an authentic account of the actual 136 Other instances of Foe’s self-contextualization come to mind. In the novel’s third section, Susan and Foe discuss how Friday would fare if left to his own devices in London. Foe informs Susan, “There are more Negroes in London than you would believe. Walk along Mile End Road on a summer’s afternoon, or in Paddington, and you will see” (128). In this section, Foe speaks to important issues in contemporary English political discourse; the 1980s saw important developments, in academic thought and in the arts, that questioned the link between English national identity and white racial identity.
experiences of individuals” (27). Susan’s emphasis on the connection between the particularity of detail and the reception of Cruso’s story as truthful is therefore deeply indebted to Watt’s pioneering work.\(^{137}\) The attention that Susan pays to particular details, the needle Cruso stores in his belt, for example, even replicates elements of Defoe’s style that Watt privileged in his analysis. Moreover, Susan’s repeated references to the “truth” of Cruso’s experiences on the island (and repeated use of the word “truth” throughout Foe) make explicit an element implicit in Watt’s analysis – that the origins of the English novel rest in the seemingly paradoxical attempts by eighteenth-century authors to tell the truth in and through their fiction. In that Foe, with its explicitly metafictional elements, eschews the formal realism that Watt argues is intrinsic to the modern novel, it simultaneously points to the failure of formal realism to tell the truth and attempts to assess the possibilities of truth-telling in non-realist (or perhaps antirealist) fiction.

Since the publication of Watt’s Rise, Defoe’s place in literary studies has been significantly altered. Today it is easy to forget that Defoe has not always been near the centre of literary critical concerns, nor has Defoe always been the canonical “father” of the novel; Watt’s study initiated renewed critical interest in the writing of Daniel Defoe and the role of eighteenth-century authors in the development of the novel, countering the prevailing Leavisite valorization of Jane Austen as the origin of the “great tradition” of the modern English novel. Subsequent criticism has since had to deal with Watt’s elevation of the novels of three eighteenth century novelists as the true origins of the modern English novelistic tradition.\(^{138}\) Watt opened up the

---

\(^{137}\) Dominic Head also stresses the importance of Watt’s work to Coetzee’s novel. Head writes that Coetzee “undertak[es] an ambivalent writing back to Ian Watt, and his classic work, The Rise of the Novel, which establishes Defoe’s formative role in the history of the genre” (J.M. Coetzee 113).

\(^{138}\) In Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott, Homer Obed Brown writes of Watt’s Rise that it “effectively combined historical with formalist considerations to recuperate the eighteenth-century novel as a modern form of literary art” (x”). Criticism that followed Watt which has rejected (elements of) his
novelistic canon by making a case for Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding as practitioners of great art. His work, then, exemplifies the kind of corrective critical impulse that characterizes later attempts to make the canon more inclusive, an impulse *Foe* shares. If Defoe was “on the margins of literary study” until the 1950s (Bell 1), then the (re)positioning of Defoe and Defoe’s most famous novel as canonical literature is truly the product of the literary criticism of the latter half of the twentieth century. As it is transmitted to readers today, then, *Robinson Crusoe* is both a work of literary imagination and a text that emerges from the discourse of an academic critical industry. Accordingly, Defoe’s novel, as it is transmitted to readers today, is, in a complex way, a textual product both of the early-eighteenth and late-twentieth centuries: it is *this* text that Coetzee’s novel rewrites.

Watt’s opening up of the novelistic canon, though widely accepted in subsequent criticism, has not gone unchallenged. Critics of Watt’s work have noted the gender bias in its promotion of three men as the fathers of the novel genre. *Foe* points to this problem as well: in addition to posing a feminist challenge to a specific literary work, the novel also poses a broader challenge to literary criticism. The novel’s central conceit – that Defoe stole his most famous story from a female author, excising her from *Robinson Crusoe* – draws on Defoe’s status as a literary origin/father even as it disrupts that status. Susan Barton’s stated desire to “be father to [her] own story” and her depiction of herself as a Muse that “must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring” recall Defoe’s status as the father of the novel (123, 140); her words

---

139 An important distinction needs to be made here. What Bell points to is the marginal status of Defoe in *literary criticism*, as opposed to general cultural marginality. In fact, *Robinson Crusoe* has long been a central text in the Western imagination. Brown explains “While *Robinson* generally was granted “classic” status, it was most frequently referred to as a classic of children’s literature” (174). *Robinson Crusoe* exemplifies what Brown says about Defoe’s writing generally when he explains “Throughout the history of the institutionalization of the novel, from his time to ours, Defoe’s works have occupied a curiously ambiguous but pivotal place, at once there and not there” (172).
invoke the patrilineal language that most often characterizes literary history in order to critique it. *Foe* becomes, then, a challenge to the patriarchal nature of both an individual work and a critical tradition.

The nature of *Foe’s* challenge to the canon is inseparable from the context in which it was produced. The novel was written during a time when feminist and post-colonial studies (in concert with feminist and post-colonial creative writing) were engaging in vigorous, and often acrimoniously contested, challenges to the traditional Western canon\(^{140}\): *Foe* thus dramatizes the kinds of challenges being posed to the canon by feminist and post-colonial texts. Indeed, *Foe* thematizes the corrective impulses of the type of critical rewriting in which it partakes. Coetzee’s inclusion of a female castaway and an African, possibly tongueless, Friday points both to a pair of silences in Defoe’s novel and in (literary) history generally and to a contemporary practice of attempting to undo the problems attendant to past practices by allowing more voices to be heard. Susan Barton’s struggle to have her story told points, in part, to the limitations of such corrective projects, even as Coetzee’s text acknowledges the ethical necessity of these projects.

*Foe* intertwines its rewriting of a literary text with its rewriting of academic literary criticism in order to problematize criticism’s tendency to privilege itself, in a paradoxically uncritical fashion, as a corrective to the limitations of both fiction and other, earlier criticism. The writing back to formative creative and critical works (Defoe’s and Watt’s) in which Coetzee engages suggests the supersession of these texts by the contemporary critical discourses of feminism, post-colonialism, and postmodernism, implying a degree of progress. Additionally, the sequential nature of Coetzee’s narrative, in which the novel’s sections seem to align, however imperfectly, with discrete historical periods, plays on the notion of progress that underlies a great

\(^{140}\) For an especially unsympathetic appraisal of contemporary challenges to the traditional Western canon, offered from a position of literary arch-conservatism, see Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*. 215
deal of post-Enlightenment Western historiography generally and literary history and literary criticism more specifically. The notion of progress embedded in the Enlightenment and the specialized disciplines emerging from it has played a significant role in buttressing colonialist ventures and it is one that Coetzee troubles in Foe. Coetzee’s rewriting of Ian Watt, who has himself been criticized for his teleological approach in *The Rise of the Novel*, suggests that literary criticism has not freed itself from this concept. Foe acts as a warning, then, against the dangers of too-readily believing that the necessarily corrective nature of both revisionary fiction and institutional academic criticism is a manifestation of some sort of progress. Foe’s assertion, that writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech, renders him an anachronistic Derridean character. The association between Daniel Defoe and Jacques Derrida is deliberately unusual, the implications of which are not so much to read Derridean deconstructive ideas into Defoe’s writing, but to suggest a fundamental continuity, and thus likeness, between the products of the eighteenth-century literary imagination and of the twentieth-century academy.

While an awareness of the problematic elements of Defoe’s novel, engendered in part by the academy, necessitates their acknowledgement, Foe’s intertextual relationship with Defoe’s novel reveals, or is perhaps itself symptomatic of, the inability of critically corrective readings to “kill off” the offending canonic text. Indeed, the power of the object of criticism to survive critical interrogation is a recurrent theme of Coetzee’s. In “What Is A Classic?” Coetzee argues for a nuanced understanding for the relation between the classic (for which one might substitute the canonic) and its critics. Coetzee ventures that “the fear that the classic will not survive the de-centring acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, 141

---

141 Cf. Blakey Vermeule’s argument in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* She notes that the discipline of literary criticism “itself derives from the Enlightenment, and the marks of enlightening and sloughing off the veil of superstition is everywhere in its writings” (16).
criticism, and indeed criticism of the most sceptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival” (19). Coetzee’s speculations on the classic’s capacity to survive have clear implications for *Foe*; in effect, the novel stages the critical de-centring Coetzee alludes to in his lecture, in turning three prominent critical discourses on *Robinson Crusoe*, and implies that threat posed by these discourses is limited.

Haunting is a pervasive motif in *Foe*. References to ghosts and ghost stories inhabit its pages: Susan writes that “the townsfolk pay [her and Friday] no more heed than if we were ghosts,” comes across a ghost story written by Foe, and wonders if the girl claiming to be her daughter is substantial (87, 134, 152). In a novel that suggests that need to move beyond, even to kill off, texts like *Robinson Crusoe*, the spectral presences that haunt *Foe’s* pages connote the ability of Defoe’s writing to survive; contemporary criticism may make us read it differently, but we will still read it. *Foe* cannot completely move beyond *Robinson Crusoe* but must perpetually rewrite it. This is more than just a rearticulation of Linda Hutcheon’s point about the necessarily incomplete nature of postmodern parody. Instead, Coetzee’s novel highlights a critical willingness to tolerate even those texts whose ethical undesirability has been revealed by critical discourses like feminism and post-colonialism. This, by the way, is the subtler point of Chinua Achebe’s reading of “Heart of Darkness”: that the academy can and will tolerate the racism of Joseph Conrad, even as it tolerates the post-colonial reading of Conrad’s work by Achebe. *Foe* thus points, however obliquely, to the liberal ethos that pervades contemporary academic criticism and the Western academy more generally. Though receptive to critical discourses (that

---

142 *Cf.* Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. For Hutcheon, “postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways” (23). She defines postmodern parody as “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (26). Certainly, much of what Hutcheon says about postmodern practice is applicable to *Foe*, however, in its simultaneous enactment of feminist and post-colonial practices, *Foe* manages to go beyond the limits of postmodern parody.
it also produces and disseminates) which seek to reveal the ethically and politically problematic implications of past canonical works, the academy remains at least equally receptive to those very texts targeted by the various critical discourses.

The academic opening up of the traditional canon to allow for greater canonic inclusiveness is a fundamentally liberal gesture. Yet *Foe* suggests that to open up the canon without fundamentally questioning the nature and value of the existing canon is to allow for the continued dissemination of ethically problematic texts. Similarly, *The Lives of Animals* concerns itself with this liberal gesture of inclusion. Like *Foe*, *The Lives of Animals* suggests that liberal inclusiveness does not provide a sufficiently ethical approach to difference.

The Lives of Animals: Rejecting Liberal Inclusiveness

At first glance, *The Lives of Animals* may seem far removed from contemporaneous South African concerns. On the one hand, the work is overtly and ostensibly concerned with animals and, as Lucy acknowledges in *Disgrace*, “On the list of the nation’s priorities, animals come nowhere” (73). On the other hand, because *The Lives of Animals* both took the form of an academic address to (and performance for) a Western audience and represents a similar address, its primary audience seems not to be South African. Indeed, in representing the performance of a post-colonial author for a metropolitan academic audience, Coetzee replicates the concerns voiced by W.J.T. Mitchell in his essay, “Postcolonial Culture, Postimperial Criticism” concerning the perpetuation of unequal power relations between former colonizers and the formerly colonized. As such, *The Lives of Animals* seems to direct itself to its metropolitan Western audience. However, to read *The Lives of Animals* as being only, or even primarily, concerned with issues of relevance to a Western audience is to do the text a disservice.
The interrogation of Western philosophy that *The Lives of Animals* performs reveals much about J.M. Coetzee’s approach to the philosophical questions facing South Africa immediately after the end of apartheid. Insofar as Elizabeth Costello’s criticism of philosophy is Derridean in its scope, taking the entire Western philosophical tradition to task for its failure to recognize a sufficient ethical obligation to nonhuman animals, it may be difficult to see how Coetzee localizes his philosophical concerns in a South African context. Yet, *The Lives of Animals* is very much engaged with issues directly relevant to the South African situation. Costello’s identification of the specific philosophers and philosophical traditions that she will address points, obliquely, to the grounding of *The Lives of Animals* in contemporary South African concerns. Costello declares that the language on which she draws is “the language of Aristotle and Porphyry, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgely and Tom Regan” (22). The philosophers Costello lists reveal her engagement both with a wider Western philosophical tradition and with an ascendant *liberal* branch of that tradition. By ending her list with Bentham, Midgely and Regan, Costello acknowledges liberalism’s philosophical *and actual* preeminence in the modern world: *The Lives of Animals* is a product of an era in global history in which liberal political philosophy and liberal democratic practice hold a position of global dominance.\(^{143}\) Though Costello challenges the Western philosophical tradition as a whole, that challenge culminates in a challenge to liberalism, specifically, as the prevailing orthodoxy of political philosophic thought.

The specifically liberal character of the philosophers with whom Costello ends her list suggests the text’s relevance to the specifically South African context from which Coetzee wrote

---

\(^{143}\) The permanence of this state of affairs is of course a matter of debate, particularly given the controversy surrounding Francis Fukuyama’s triumphalist announcement of the end of history following the collapse of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.
it. The end of the apartheid era in South African history marked the beginning of the nation’s adoption of a Western-style liberal democratic regime; the electoral defeat of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party (a party long hostile to liberalism) signaled the rise of liberal ideology in South African politics. The creation of the TRC, whose mandate included compilation of a narrative outlining a history of gross human rights violations in South Africa, and the drafting of a new constitution and a Bill of Rights, showed the South African government’s commitment to fostering a culture of human rights in the New South Africa. The national development of a culture of human rights attempts to prevent a repetition of the abuses of the past. If “Never Again!” has become a common refrain following atrocity in the post-Holocaust world, South Africa’s official commitment to human rights culture constitutes its attempt to actualize the motto. Insofar as *The Lives of Animals* displays an interest in interrogating and, I argue later, problematizing the language and content of animal rights, it indicates its engagement with South African concerns by responding to the liberalization of South African politics: equally, insofar as a primary function of the roughly contemporaneous *Disgrace* can be said to be the demonstration of the failure of the recently-transformed post-apartheid state to achieve the actualization of these human rights, *The Lives of Animals* can be seen to fulfill the complementary function of contextualizing and explaining that failure as being endemic to the project of liberal inclusiveness itself.

Animals in *The Lives of Animals* (and also in *Disgrace*) reveal a key conceptual limit to the idea of human rights and suggest, through their exclusion from the realm of human rights, the

---

144 Richard Wilson insists that this adoption of a culture of human rights “needs to be understood in the context of a sea-change in global politics, and the rise of human rights as the archetypal language of democratic transition” (1).

145 The title of the report written by Argentina’s truth commission after the country’s “dirty war” is *Nunca Más*, which translates to “Never Again.”
potential for a continuance, in different forms, of the types of atrocities that characterized apartheid. Costello’s discussion of animals, in *The Lives of Animals*, functions to offer an oblique rejection of the implicit triumphalism of rhetoric of the “New South Africa,” which treated the establishment of a new culture of rights as a measure capable of preventing a repetition of a history in which the perception of difference (racial, gendered, or otherwise) acted as justification for abuse. Simultaneously, Coetzee responds to the animal rights movement, displaying a powerful sympathy for its primary cause – better treatment for nonhuman animals – while also revealing the conceptual limitations it faces due to its reliance on liberal political theory: despite the perhaps unavoidable possibility that a discussion of nonhuman animals may be *received as having to do with something other than* (and thus implicitly *more important than*) its manifest content, *The Lives of Animals* is deeply concerned with animals as animals, and the kind of critique of liberal theory that I argue Coetzee engages in is unthinkable if references to nonhuman animals in the text function only to register concerns that pertain only to human interaction.

What is shocking about Costello’s position in *The Lives of Animals* is not simply that she compares contemporary treatments of animals to the Holocaust: Costello is not the first person, fictional or otherwise, to make this comparison and she is unlikely to be the last. Nor is it shocking that Costello asserts a hierarchical relation between the terms of her comparison: by asserting that the injustices animals face “dwarf” the Nazis’ crimes, Costello acknowledges that to make Holocaust comparisons is simultaneously to liken and to reckon. What *is* shocking about Costello’s comparison, then, is that she reverses the orthodox hierarchy that presupposes the Holocaust to be the greater atrocity. This reversal distinguishes Costello from others who make similar comparisons.

Given Costello’s position, it might seem counterintuitive to suggest that *The Lives of Animals* is *not* a text that advocates animal rights, at least as the idea of animal rights is commonly understood; yet this is precisely the argument I wish to make. I pursue my argument by claiming neither that Coetzee ironizes Costello and her position nor that he undercuts her sentimentalism in order to communicate what he “really thinks” about how humans treat animals. Rather, I frame my argument by pointing to the widespread tendency to group all positions that seek to raise the moral worth of animals under the general heading of “animal rights,” a tendency that is exacerbated by writers such as Peter Singer who eschew the philosophical concept of rights but who also occasionally draw upon the familiar language of rights. The use of the term “animal rights” to describe not only Tom Regan’s rights-based approach but also Singer’s liberationist approach thus muddies the picture, causing confusion about what diverse pro-animal accounts suggest about animals and why they should obtain greater moral recognition. While grouping these diverse positions under the heading of animal rights obscures important differences in approach, it is also useful, and perhaps unavoidable, for two reasons: it illustrates an important ideological connection that links the different approaches in that most are reliant upon liberal political philosophy and it is no more obscure a label than “pro-animal.” Therefore, when I suggest that *The Lives of Animals* is not an animal rights text, I mean it in two senses. On the one hand, *The Lives of Animals* does not follow Regan’s approach in extending the philosophical concept of rights to animals. On the other hand, Coetzee’s writing

---

147 To do so would be to attribute Costello’s sentimentalism to her gender and suggest that Coetzee’s own (superior) position derives from privileged male rationality. Given that *The Lives of Animals* offers an extended critique of rationalism (or at least a form of rationalism that privileges instrumentality and that accordingly divorces reason from ethics) it makes little sense to attribute a superior, more rational perspective to Coetzee.
similarly cannot be counted among animal rights texts, in the broader sense, because Coetzee rejects the liberal underpinnings of such approaches.

*The Lives of Animals* constitutes Coetzee’s oblique engagement with, and rejection of, the philosophical underpinnings of liberalism as well as his undermining of liberalism’s self-representations. Coetzee’s challenge is less to liberalism as a political practice that characterizes Western democracies – although this challenge is present as well – than it is to liberalism as a political philosophy that avowedly recognizes the need to respond morally to difference. Nonhuman animals in *The Lives of Animals* both signify, and are manifestations of, radical difference, and accordingly enable Coetzee to reveal the limits of liberalism’s commitment to recognizing the moral worth of that which is different. While Coetzee’s challenge is not limited to liberalism, this critique implicitly demands that liberalism, currently the dominant political paradigm in the West, ask itself seriously about its commitment to providing the most ethical approach to difference. Costello’s discussion of Western philosophy from the time of Aristotle through to the present day suggests that the ethical problems that arise with the creation of a division between human and nonhuman transcend the historical particularity of the modern era (which is largely coextensive with the rise of liberal political theory); nevertheless, given the current historical situation, in which liberal political theory – and liberal democratic political practice – have achieved a position of dominance in the West, Coetzee’s text speaks directly to a prevailing liberal ethos whose pronouncements on itself waver between self-justification and self-congratulation.

Taking as its departure point liberalism’s avowed capacity to value difference as difference, *The Lives of Animals* questions this capacity by problematizing the very notions of tolerance and rights, whether human or animal, that are hallmarks of liberalism and so central to
its self-justification. Costello’s lectures initially appear to align Coetzee’s text with a liberal political tradition, in that her concern for animals recalls liberal attempts to re-evaluate and elevate the moral worth of animals. Costello’s critique of Western rationalism is part and parcel of her more immediate concern – meat consumption. Coetzee stresses Costello’s contentious and overt dietary proscriptions from the beginning. Indeed, before Coetzee identifies Costello’s son by name, we learn that John is not looking forward to his mother’s visit because “[h]is wife and his mother do not get on” (15). Shortly thereafter, it becomes apparent that Costello’s militant vegetarianism is the root cause of her daughter-in-law’s hostility: Costello’s grandchildren do not eat with their grandmother because “Elizabeth does not like to see meat on the table, while Norma refuses to change the children’s diet” (16). As the story progresses, Costello’s beliefs about meat-eating remain a potential source of tension, so much so that, during the dinner in his mother’s honour, John feels fortunate that the menu is “not his responsibility” (38). Costello’s strong vegetarian stance is not only logically consistent with her belief that animals possess greater moral worth than they are accorded; it also recalls the positions of Peter Singer in Animal Liberation (1975) and Tom Regan in The Case for Animal Rights (1983), two major works in animal rights. Though the authors construct their arguments on different grounds – Regan actually devotes a large portion of his book to arguing against Singer’s reasons for re-evaluating the moral worth of animals – both conclude their respective discussions with reasoned arguments in favour of vegetarianism. Moreover, as Garner explains in The Political Theory of Animal Rights, most of the accounts that justify a case for higher moral status for animals “are written

---

148 The discourses of toleration and rights are not exclusive to liberalism. However, because Coetzee writes within and against a set of specifically liberal traditions – both in terms of a broader Western tradition, one that includes a concern for the treatment of animals, and in terms of a more specific South African literary and political tradition – The Lives of Animals needs to be read in light of Coetzee’s engagement with these traditions.

149 Singer even includes recipes for vegetarian meals.
from within the liberal tradition” (6). Singer’s Animal Liberation, for example, offers utilitarian justifications for the practice of vegetarianism and the elimination of speciesism. Regan rejects Singer’s utilitarian arguments but grounds his own justifications in a different liberal political tradition by adopting Kantian, non-consequentialist reasoning and extending the concept of human rights to include all beings that are “subject-of-a-life,” a category that is coextensive with normal mammalian animals aged one or more. Philosophically, Singer and Regan differ significantly, but both are reliant upon liberal political theory in making their cases.

The emphasis Coetzee places on Costello’s vegetarianism prompts readers to expect a familiarly liberal position concerning animal rights. Yet, The Lives of Animals actually plays on its audience’s mistaken assumption of familiarity. Writing in 1991, during the final years of apartheid, Susan Gallagher explained that Coetzee’s audience at that time consisted primarily of “South African academics and well-educated Western readers concerned about oppression and injustice” (49). Though Coetzee has produced a substantial body of writing since Gallagher made this observation, Gallagher’s point concerning Coetzee’s primary audience continues to be apt, even if the context from which he writes has changed dramatically with the collapse of the apartheid regime. Moreover, Gallagher’s account of Coetzee’s primary readership indicates an important feature of Coetzee’s audience in relation to the ethico-political engagement his work  

---

150 Garner identifies three prominent approaches to reassessing the moral worth of animals that originate in liberal thinking: utilitarian arguments, rights-based arguments, and contractarian arguments. In The Moral Menagerie, Marc Fellenz characterizes most pro-animal approaches as being “extensionist,” in that they attempt to extend philosophical approaches that ordinarily concern themselves only with humans to nonhuman animals. Fellenz refers to the same three philosophical traditions as Garner and adds a fourth position, one that reworks Aristotelian virtue ethics. Of the four approaches Fellenz identifies as extensionist, only the fourth does not derive immediately from liberal origins. For both Garner and Fellenz, then, liberal approaches dominate attempts to think about animal ethics.  

151 Marc Fellenz notes that Singer’s utilitarianism is somewhat complicated in Animal Liberation. According to Fellenz, “at the heart of Singer’s type of argument is a critical tension between the utilitarian goal of maximizing total fulfillment and the liberationist goal of equality” (64). It is worth noting that some notion of equality is central to most pro-animal positions, including Singer’s liberationist and Regan’s animals rights positions. By contrast, Coetzee is not as interested in making an argument about equality.
manifests: an audience consisting of academics and well-educated Western readers is one whose concerns about oppression and injustice suggest it to be (broadly) liberal in its politics and, accordingly, sympathetic to an author whose works were obviously opposed to the ideology and practices of apartheid and to injustice generally.\textsuperscript{152} Because opposition to apartheid in the United States “relied centrally on a liberal constituency” (Nixon 78), Coetzee’s American audience, in particular, was likely to read Coetzee’s politics in relation to its own. Accordingly, Coetzee’s audience could remain secure in its assumption that Coetzee similarly rejected the racial classification and racial hierarchy that was the cornerstone of apartheid. Though the nature of Coetzee’s audience rendered unnecessary any attempt by Coetzee to convince it of the moral repugnancy of apartheid, it would be a mistake to believe that Coetzee’s relationship to his audience has been an entirely comfortable one that has enabled his readers to remain secure in their own morally inviolable positions. Reliant upon the ethico-political sympathies of its audience in order to garner a readership for itself, Coetzee’s writing asks this audience to account for the grounds of its sympathies. From the beginning, then, Coetzee’s fiction has challenged its readers to explore the possibility that their own positions are ethically suspect.

The actual and fictional academic settings of *The Lives of Animals* render this well-educated, liberal audience central to the text. The attention Coetzee calls to his audience by including it in his narrative illustrates a change in the nature of Coetzee’s challenge to his audience. Coetzee’s apartheid-era writing typically challenges its readers’ sensibilities in a relatively indirect manner. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, and *Age of Iron*, in particular, Coetzee invites his reader to sympathize with a particular character, \footnote{In *The Lives of Animals*, specifically, the liberal leanings of Coetzee’s core audience is reflected in the accompanying essays by authors like Peter Singer, whose utilitarianism places him squarely within the liberal camp.}
usually but not always the protagonist, before revealing the ethically complicit positions these characters occupy. In contrast, in Coetzee’s earliest post-apartheid fiction, particularly *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*, the protagonists tend to begin from a position less likely to engage the sympathies of Western liberal readers. David Lurie views women as interchangeable consumable products that enable him to solve “the problem of sex” (1). His instrumental view of women’s role in his sexual life turns readers against Lurie from *Disgrace*’s opening sentence. Similarly, the comparison that Costello makes near the beginning of her first lecture is one with which Coetzee cannot and does not expect an audience to be already in agreement. The anticipated unsympathetic response to Costello’s lecture, that manifests itself in “hackles rising” in the audience (49) and in Abraham Stern’s letter explaining his refusal to “break bread” with Costello (49-50), is essential to Coetzee’s ability to challenge his audience’s liberal leanings: rather than beginning from a position of rapport with its core audience, Coetzee’s text begins by offering its challenge directly to the ethico-political outlook that had enabled Coetzee to garner a readership in the first place. Whereas Coetzee’s early novels allowed his liberal audience to perceive an expression of ethico-political *sameness* in them, *The Lives of Animals* overtly establishes its *difference*. By confronting its audience with a different ethico-political position, *The Lives of Animals* indicates its desire to challenge its audience’s liberal approach to difference.

*The Lives of Animals* is concerned with animals both as *manifestations* of difference and as *figures* of difference. Costello explains, “When Kafka writes about an ape, I take him to be talking in the first place about an ape; when Nagel writes about a bat, I take him to be writing, in the first place, about a bat” (32). Coetzee acknowledges that an animal’s meaning is never

---

153 The obvious exception to this practice in Coetzee’s early works is *Dusklands*, whose two narrator-protagonists are the least sympathetic in Coetzee’s *oeuvre* and invite the least readerly identification.

154 Marxist-influenced criticisms of Coetzee’s early novels also encouraged liberal identification with Coetzee’s works.
entirely its own: the need Costello feels to assert her literal reading of two different kinds of texts – one literary, the other philosophical – highlights the inability of the animal to resist the potential to be read figuratively rather than literally. Coetzee’s text is, and cannot be anything other than, simultaneously about and not about animals. This irreducible duality at the heart of *The Lives of Animals* underscores liberalism’s inability to accommodate difference, both in terms of differences *among* humans and in terms of differences *between* humans and nonhuman animals. The text’s academic setting is crucial here. Given that *The Lives of Animals* is, at one level, an allegory of South Africa’s attempt to come to terms with its past via the TRC, it is significant that, as Jacqueline Rose observes, universities were “institutions of civil society into which the Commission did not reach” (191). The role of South African universities in the ideological maintenance of apartheid is an important subtext to *The Lives of Animals*, but Coetzee ostensibly addresses his narrative to a metropolitan Western academy. In doing so, he reminds it (and its South African counterparts) of its potential complicity in an ideology and practice to which it was ostensibly opposed. Coetzee thus undermines the university community’s confidence that its liberally inclusive approach to difference renders it fundamentally incompatible with a regime that perceived intrahuman difference as sufficient grounds to deny that large segments of its population possessed moral worth. The university community’s refusal to recognize a greater moral worth in animals aligns it with the racist South African government. Costello explains that “a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and nonhuman depends on whether you have a white or a black skin, and a philosopher who says the distinction between human and nonhuman depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more alike than they are unlike” (66). Costello highlights the connection between racism and speciesism, suggesting that widespread academic speciesism undermines the academy’s desire to
perceive itself as irreconcilable with racism. Indeed, the attention that Costello calls to the mastery of the rules of language, specifically, as being a necessary condition of humanity suggests a conceptual link between a uniform formal education, based on Western values, and the logic of discrimination. Subtle echoes of familiar liberal rhetoric are detectable here: in South Africa, for instance, liberal support for universal suffrage was often qualified by demands that nonwhites demonstrate proof of being “civilized” – that is, like South African whites. *The Lives of Animals* is therefore a text concerned with speciesism and racism alike; this conceptual link is crucial to Coetzee’s work, because he ultimately suggests that any attempt to eliminate racism (or speciesism) that relies on the promotion of *sameness* will continue to reinforce a conceptual connection between difference and moral worthlessness.

If the Western university has been complicit historically in providing philosophical justifications for racism, it is equally the site of a failure to conceptualize an ethically acceptable relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. As Robert Garner explains in *The Political Theory of Animal Rights*, academies “have played an important role in both the women’s movement and the civil rights movement, and the political science literature has been affected significantly by their work. The animal rights or liberation movement, by contrast, has made fewer political, social, and academic advances” (1). Beyond the general failure of the university to enable ethical relationships between humans and nonhuman animals, it is the academy’s *liberalism*, in particular, that has been unable to think its way into a new paradigm. Garner continues: “In the West at least, it is – with few exceptions – the ideological norm to accept that animals have at least some moral worth, that what we do to them matters to them and ought to be guided by some kind of moral framework” (3). Yet, the acknowledgement of animal’s moral worth has not given rise to more just and equitable treatment. As Garner points out, “[m]any of
the key names in contemporary liberal political theory – most notably John Rawls – while accepting that animals have some moral worth, still insist that they are not morally significant enough to be included, along with humans, as recipients of justice” (10). For Garner, this attitude towards animals constitutes the liberal moral orthodoxy.

*The Lives of Animals* does not emerge from a vacuum. Rather, it represents, responds to, and partakes of a growing debate in which the terms of the debate are primarily framed by the language and philosophy of liberalism. If orthodox liberal considerations of animals’ moral worth exclude animals from the realm of justice, *The Lives of Animals* attempts to include them in that realm. In this way, the text continues the critique of liberal justice begun in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: where the latter text challenges liberalism’s privileging of the law over justice, *The Lives of Animals* challenges liberalism’s limiting of questions of justice to an exclusive (human) group. By implicitly writing back to key animal rights texts and by addressing his performance and his text to a liberal academic audience, then, Coetzee does not address an audience unsympathetic to the project of creating and fostering ethical relationships between humans and their nonhuman others, but one whose liberalism has failed to translate itself into concrete results.

If, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*, Coetzee deconstructs liberal politics and aesthetics, it is the philosophical basis – the ethics – of liberalism that is Coetzee’s concern in *The Lives of Animals*. Coetzee’s challenge in *The Lives of Animals* is to liberalism’s claims to offer ethically sound grounds, if not the most ethically sound grounds, for relations between self and other.

“Liberalism” is a broad term with a long and complex history, and so I will identify what I mean when I suggest that Coetzee’s challenges the philosophical underpinnings of liberal thought in *The Lives of Animals*. Depending on whom you ask, liberalism originates with thinkers as
It is certainly possible to get lost among all of liberalism’s historical and national variations: as Hans Oberdiek observes, liberalism “comes in nearly as many varieties as Christianity. There is no single value, or its priority, on which all liberals agree” (112). Nevertheless, I follow John Gray’s lead when he suggests that, although “liberalism has no simple, unchanging nature, it has a set of distinctive features which exhibit its modernity and at the same time marks it off from other modern intellectual traditions and their associated political movements” and so “constitutes a single tradition rather than two or more traditions or a diffuse syndrome of ideas” (Liberalism ix, xi).

Expressing a similar understanding of the term, Andrew Foley writes that liberalism “[f]or all its plurality,” “remains a single, integral tradition, rather than two or more traditions, or merely a diffuse syndrome of ideas” (9). Meanwhile, for Oberdiek, liberals “accept an overlapping cluster of values” (113).

In *Liberalism and the Limits of Toleration* Susan Mendus points the way towards conceiving of liberalism as a unified tradition when she argues that liberalism “begins from a premise of individual diversity” (75). Foley agrees, noting that liberalism “is founded upon the basic premise that human beings are unique, autonomous individuals with different interests, desires and views of life” (9). Accordingly, the origins of liberalism, at a philosophical level, rest

155 This conforms to what I would call the orthodox historiography of liberalism.

156 Given his explicit project of justifying state power in *Leviathan*, the identification of Hobbes with liberalism may seem surprising, but recognizing Hobbes’s contribution to liberalism has become de rigeur. See John Gray’s *Two Faces of Liberalism* for a persuasive reading of Hobbes as an important contributor to liberal thought.

157 Pierre Manent, in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, argues that liberalism begins with Machiavelli’s desire to separate church and state. He explains “the political development of Europe is understandable only as the history of answers to problems posed by the church… The key to European development is what shall be called, in scholarly terms, the theologico-political problem” (4). Manent sees the desire to solve this problem by separating the realms of religion and politics as distinctively liberal.
with the perception of difference; difference becomes the central “problem” that liberal political philosophy aims to address.

Historically, liberal thought has relied upon two interrelated concepts as a means of resolving the problem of individual diversity: rights and tolerance. Hobbes famously claimed in *Leviathan* that the state of nature was a state of war against all and built upon this understanding of the state of nature to justify unlimited state power as a means of protecting the individual from other individuals. Based on his understanding of the state of nature, Hobbes articulated one natural right: the right to life. Locke also drew upon a conception of the state of nature to justify a theory of rights but for him, the natural state of man was one “in which men are free and equal” (Bobbio 15); individual freedom thus became a second, essential right. While few since Locke have accepted his (or Hobbes’s) grounding of rights in natural law, Hobbes and Locke initiated a crucial element of liberal discourse in that each sought to solve the problem of individual diversity through recourse to a theory of rights.

Contemporary liberalism shares classical liberalism’s desire to solve the problem of individual diversity as well as its capacity to imagine the Self as Other. Oberdiek identifies the values central to the liberalisms of Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Joseph Raz as being, respectively, equality, justice, and freedom (113). Despite their differences, these contemporary liberal philosophers understand liberalism as a political philosophy concerned primarily with individual diversity. Compared to other political philosophies, then, liberalism sets itself apart with its avowed attentiveness to the rights and interests of each individual other.

---

158 Significantly, in *Giving Offense* Coetzee manifests his familiarity with a number of key liberal thinkers, including Ronald Dworkin. Coetzee’s concern with tolerance – evident in his references to Susan Mendus’s *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* and John Gray’s *Mill on Liberty: A Defense* – has more to do with his interest in censorship than with tolerance as a broader philosophical concept, but it does indicate Coetzee’s familiarity with and interest in liberal political philosophy.
Like the notion of rights, tolerance has figured prominently in liberal discourse since the seventeenth century. Related to the notion of rights, the concept of tolerance constitutes a particularly liberal strategy for dealing with individual diversity. Recognition of the need for toleration does not begin with liberalism, critics agree. Yet Mendus also notes that toleration “has a special and privileged status in the liberal tradition” and that “it is the liberal tradition which has most robustly defended toleration as a good in itself” (3). John Gray admits that while toleration “did not begin with liberalism…the ideal of a common life that does not rest on common beliefs is a liberal inheritance” (Two Faces 2). If classical liberal rights, such as the right to life and to freedom of conscience, are ideals that the liberal values, toleration is the practice on which liberalism is most reliant in order to make its ideals a reality. It is through its valorization of the concept of tolerance and the practice of toleration\(^\text{159}\) that liberalism posits its privileged position as a mediator between sameness and difference. Toleration, then, is a practice, potentially though not necessarily tied to an attitude of tolerance, that liberalism claims as definitive of itself and which has become naturalized in liberal discourse.

Setting itself apart from other philosophical traditions, liberalism attempts to signal not only its difference but also its superiority. In Postcolonial Liberalism, Duncan Ivison suggests that liberalism is characterized by its “justificatory ambitions” (15). “Liberalism,” in Ivison’s words, “aims to justify the political arrangements of a state, and arguably the world, to each and every person subject to those arrangements” (14). This has meant, in political terms, that liberalism is the demand “for government by consent of the governed” (Minogue 64). Liberalism justifies itself both as a political philosophy and a form of government by suggesting that it, more than any of its rivals, has the capacity to accommodate \textit{difference} in its articulation of the rights,

\(^{159}\) I am indebted to Oberdiek’s distinction between tolerance as an attitude or virtue and toleration as a practice or action (4).
interests, and freedoms of the individual. Of course, liberalism’s historical track-record, particularly \textit{vis a vis} its justification of European imperial ventures\textsuperscript{160} renders its self-justifications suspect. Nevertheless, liberalism’s failure to grant sufficient ethico-political consideration to Europe’s Others, does not mean that liberals do not perceive themselves to be concerned about oppression and injustice, particularly when that oppression and injustice is based on difference. It is precisely this failure of liberalism to accomplish what it avowedly sets out to do, that is central to \textit{The Lives of Animals}, to which I now return. \textit{The Lives of Animals} attempts to undermine liberal self-confidence, ultimately suggesting that liberalism is philosophically ill-equipped to foster and maintain ethical relationships with those that are radically and irreducibly different.

The history of toleration reveals that liberalism has always been more committed to the practice of toleration than to the attitude of tolerance. John Locke is not only one of the fathers of liberal political theory but also of the practice of toleration, and his contribution to the justification and promulgation of toleration cannot be over-estimated. According to Oberdiek, Locke’s \textit{Letter on Toleration} “exert[ed] enormous influence over subsequent thinking about toleration, and not just among (or even primarily among) philosophers” (vii). Contemporary liberalism inherits its concept of toleration to a large degree from Locke. Locke limited his position, however, to the promotion of toleration as a policy. Writing almost two centuries after the beginning of the Reformation, with decades of bloody and costly religious wars in-between, Locke’s justification for toleration was, above all, pragmatic: toleration was a means of enabling

\textsuperscript{160} See Uday Singh Mehta’s \textit{Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought} for a discussion of the role of thinkers like John Stuart Mill in actively legitimizing and advocating Britain’s imperial ambitions. One can, of course, go back to Locke for further examples of liberal justifications of colonialism. Locke’s \textit{Second Treatise of Government} exemplifies early liberal rationale for the appropriation of Native American land.
the peaceful coexistence of different varieties of Christianity. As John Gray contends, Locke’s defense of toleration “was that it enables us to discover the best life for humankind. He never doubted that there was such a thing” (Two Faces 2). Intolerance, as far as Locke was concerned, was not morally incompatible with good governance; rather, it was counter-productive. Philosophically, Locke did not value difference for its own sake, as a later liberal, John Stuart Mill, would famously do; and Locke’s advocacy of toleration did not, therefore, divorce difference from justifications of persecution, but instead prioritized the stability of government over the pursuit of religious truth.\footnote{This is not to say that Locke necessarily prioritized secular power over religion. As Ian Shapiro rightly notes, Locke’s insistence on the separation of church and state was as much a benefit to religion as to the state because Locke’s goal “was to protect religion by freeing it as much as possible from state interference” (xiii). If, for Locke, Christianity was the road to the good life, then the separation of church and state did not deny that vision of the good life but became a practical means of assuring its survival.} So long as religious toleration was a means of securing secular allegiance, particularly from dissident religious groups numerous and powerful enough to be a potential danger to the government, Locke was in favour of toleration. If religious toleration was not a means of securing secular allegiance, Locke did not advocate it.\footnote{This was the basis of Locke’s willingness to discriminate against Catholics and Muslims. It was not their religious difference \textit{per se} that Locke objected to, but the fact that their secular allegiance was suspect.} The issue of power, therefore, is central to the concept of toleration as it comes down to us from Locke. Toleraton is something that can be granted only by the powerful, and the recipients of tolerance can only be less powerful than those who tolerate them. Toleration was to be exercised not toward the different, \textit{per se}, but for the different and \textit{potentially} powerful and threatening.

For Coetzee, the issue of power is inseparable from the treatment of difference that liberalism enables. Costello states, “In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more
power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us” (*Lives* 25). Costello indicates that when that which is different is also fundamentally weaker, liberal strategies for dealing with difference, including toleration, are insufficiently able to recognize difference as being *in itself* worthy of moral consideration. Costello stresses that animals, not in possession of what humans regard as language, cannot voice their moral worth, suggesting that it is precisely because nonhuman animals are unable to command respect for themselves that liberalism cannot accommodate the difference of the animal. Because nonhuman animals are in no position to be, or are considered not to be, *reciprocally* tolerant, they are unworthy of respect from humans; they are, according to Rawls, not to be included in the sphere of justice (Garner 10). The *Lives of Animals* poses a challenge to liberalism, implicitly suggesting that liberalism needs to move beyond the pragmatism at the core of its desire to coexist with difference.

Not all liberal justifications of toleration are based solely on pragmatism, however. Influential liberals like John Stuart Mill privilege tolerance as a virtue over toleration as a practice. According to Mendus, where Locke argues only against intolerance, Mill puts forth a case for “the importance of diversity” (45). Mill justifies tolerance by reference to autonomy (Mendus 55) and “the autonomy argument is sometimes referred to as the characteristically liberal argument for toleration” (Mendus 56). On the surface, then, Mill’s defense of tolerance over toleration seems better equipped to accommodate difference *as* difference than Locke’s case for toleration. However, upon closer inspection, Mill’s defense of tolerance does not hold up. As Mendus argues, Mill is not really ready, on the basis of his privileging of autonomy, to accept *all* difference: Mill, because he favours autonomy as a source of “individual improvement, societal

---

163 Rawls’s argument suggests that animals have no place within the sphere of politics but do have a place in moral thought. If my reading of *The Lives of Animals* is at all persuasive, it should be apparent that Coetzee is not interested in relegating animals to realm of ethics only.
progress and the growth of “civilization” (59), when pressed “is not at all convinced that human beings are irreducibly diverse” (65). Mill’s conviction that autonomous individuals would eventually gravitate towards similar interests and ways of life renders his acceptance of diversity incomplete: Mill’s privileging of autonomy was based on the premise that it would ultimately reduce difference rather than sustain it. If liberalism “begins from a premise of individual diversity” (Mendus Toleration 75), it also retains its desire that (human) diversity will inevitably will itself out of existence. From this perspective, a time limit becomes implicit in liberalism’s approach to difference. The time limit implicit in liberal commitment to tolerance is precisely what makes liberalism’s avowed respect for diversity reconcilable with its advocacy of imperialism. Mill’s privileging of “civilization” allowed him to advance a case for Britain’s imperial stewardship over colonial possessions, particularly India. A similar rhetoric of civilization also played a role in South Africa, working to justify continued white control amongst liberals. Liberalism bases its advocacy of toleration and tolerance on the promise of a future in which intrahuman difference will be non-existent.

As Coetzee reveals, animals, irreducible manifestations of difference, push the limits of liberalism’s ability to approach diversity justly. In the end, Coetzee suggests, liberalism’s commitment to treating that which is different as worthy of respect collapses in the face of irreducible difference. At the formal dinner in Costello’s honour, Professor Wunderlich articulates liberalism’s conceptual limits when he states that “all this discussion of consciousness and whether animals have it is just a smoke screen. At bottom we protect our own kind. Thumbs up to human babies, thumbs down to veal calves” (45). It is not simply that human babies are a

---

164 John Gray argues that liberalism “has always had two faces. From one side, toleration is the pursuit of an ideal form of life. From the other, it is the search for terms of peace among different ways of life…In the first, liberalism is a prescription for a universal regime. In the second, it is a project of coexistence that can be pursued in many regimes” (2).
different species than veal calves. Human babies, like veal calves, are manifestations of life different from fully rational human adults; but while human babies are not human persons in the full sense, they possess the potential to become fully human adults, to make the transition from manifestations of difference to manifestations of sameness whereas veal calves are not, and cannot be, potential humans in the same way. It is this irreducible difference that establishes the species boundary, enabling Costello’s liberal audience not to perceive the treatment veal calves as oppression or injustice. Wunderlich’s assertion, that we protect our own kind, highlights liberalism’s underlying desire to reduce difference to sameness: the conceptual apparatus that liberalism brings to bear in its approach to difference flounders on its ability to value only humankind fully. Liberalism thus not only fails to provide the conceptual framework for thinking oneself out of speciesism: liberalism is itself predicated on speciesist logic.

At the end of *The Lives of Animals*, Costello is overcome by the massive evil she sees all around her. She tells her son, John,

> It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences…I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human-kindness. (69).

It is not human *kindness* – decency, generosity, sympathy – that Costello perceives, but, crucially, the hyphenated alternative: *human-kindness*. Engaging in wordplay – interestingly enough, more readily available to Coetzee’s readers than to his original, fictionalized audience – Costello indicates that it is this human-kindness, this being of the human kind, that she ultimately feels overwhelmed by. Costello’s words recall Wunderlich’s and re-work the meaning of “kindness,” linking the word to a practice of exclusion. Seeing all around her humans concerned about oppression and injustice, Costello also sees around her humans indifferent to the plight of
animals. This simultaneous concern and indifference is only explicable, Coetzee implies, in the framework of a liberalism unequipped to place the irreducibly different, that which is not of the human kind, in the realm of the morally significant.

Even liberal attempts to undo the connection between human concern and human-kindness, in Coetzee’s sense, fail to do away with the need for sameness. Liberal animal rights philosophy, particularly that of Tom Regan, which seeks to extend the status of the subject-of-a-life to normal mammalian animals aged one or more, attempts to break down the species barrier. From Coetzee’s perspective, however, at the same time as Regan makes inclusive gestures across the species boundary, he simultaneously re-asserts the need for sameness, for a complementary act of exclusion. Regan’s case, after all, is not that all life-forms one year old or older are subjects-of-a-life; only mammals qualify as subjects-of-a-life. Accordingly, Regan challenges speciesist understandings of what it means to be the same as the human, but still retains the category of sameness as a means of marking the bounds for who or what is worthy of moral consideration. Regan’s gesture of inclusiveness is simultaneously, and necessarily, a gesture of exclusion, even as it limits the range of life-forms that are subject to this exclusion. Going back to Locke, who in limiting his advocacy of toleration to fellow Protestants made an inclusive gesture in recognizing that not only Anglicans were in possession of civil rights while simultaneously excluding Catholics and non-Christians, it becomes apparent that liberalism’s strategies of inclusion flounder on the privileging of a notion (albeit an expanded notion) of sameness.

Coetzee rejects the unavoidable exclusionary impulse that accompanies liberal gestures of inclusiveness. Costello herself signals liberalism’s simultaneously inclusive and exclusionary tendencies: her use of the word “we” (20) gestures towards a radically inclusive category – to
humanity as a whole – before revealing that this inclusiveness is unattainable, and indeed, misleading. The “we” that Costello refers to, the we that continues to look askance at generations of Germans and South African whites, is a broadly inclusive category, one that potentially includes the whole of humanity but that actually refers to a much more limited group; it refers, that is, to Coetzee’s smugly complacent liberal audience, secure in the comfort of its assumption that it could never be tainted by guilt in the same way as those it judges. Coetzee challenges the sense of ideological innocence possessed by liberals.

In “Ideology, Moral Complicity and the Holocaust” David Cooper discusses ideological complicity, arguing that “an ideological tendency is strongly complicit in a programme when it endorses or justifies it. It is weakly complicit when, though not endorsing the programme, it is without the resources morally to condemn it” (10). In that liberalism takes animal difference as sufficient justification for animals possessing lesser moral worth, it is strongly complicit in a crime that Costello (and Coetzee) believe to be on the same scale as the Holocaust. However, Coetzee makes an even more radical criticism of liberalism, suggesting that its inability to divorce difference from decreased moral worth makes it weakly complicit, in Cooper’s sense, in the Holocaust (and other historical instances of widespread human rights abuses) as well.

---

165 Interestingly, the opening sentence of Diary of a Bad Year – “Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that “we”—not we the readers but some generic we so wide so as to exclude no one—participate in its coming into being” (3) – similarly plays on the slipperiness of “we” as a signifier. It is precisely when, as in The Lives of Animals, the word “we” aims at universal inclusiveness, as it does in the social contract theories J.C. references, that Coetzee demonstrates its fundamental inability to achieve that aim: in Coetzee’s fiction, inclusion inevitably presupposes exclusion.

166 The thoroughgoing critique of liberalism that Coetzee offers in The Lives of Animals importantly complements a similar function in Disgrace. In Anker’s words Disgrace “enacts key philosophical and practical challenges to human rights discourse as well as to discrete rights enforcement, and it thereby identifies damaging limitations inherent to the logic of rights at the same time as it asserts the need for a tempering and modification of our expectations for social justice, thus offering a pointed rebuke to prevailing accounts of human rights.” (234) The critique of contemporary human rights discourse’s deficiencies is inseparable from what Derek Attridge describes as Coetzee’s “immense distaste” for a “new global age of performance indicators and
Where animal rights philosophy derived from political liberalism depends upon the reduction of difference in order to make an argument for greater moral consideration of animals, Coetzee’s project in *The Lives of Animals* is to divorce difference from moral worthlessness. At the end of the first section of *The Lives of Animals*, Costello concedes that the animals we eat possess “[n]o consciousness that we would recognize as consciousness,” but continues by adding “What I mind is what tends to come next. They have no consciousness *therefore*. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to kill them?” (44). In this passage, Coetzee, through Costello, takes a step that liberalism is philosophically unwilling to take by divorcing our ethical concern from a need for sameness. It is for this reason that I maintain that *The Lives of Animals* is not an animal rights text, properly understood: to read the text as an animal rights text would be to perform a *misreading* in the sense that it would ignore the manner in which Coetzee signals liberalism’s limitations and also the need to move beyond liberalism to a truly post-liberal ethics.

outcomes measurement, of benchmarking and quality assurance” (“Age of Bronze” 105). It is as a discourse not only contextualized by but also implicated in this new global age that liberal human rights talk, in *Disgrace*, reveals its limitations. Ultimately, as Rosemary Jolly argues, human rights in the contemporary world have become commodified, “undertaken in the name of ethics, but in actuality in service to business” (“Desiring Goods” 694); “Freedom of speech, the right to privacy, the right to be free of discrimination, and other rights traditionally considered attributes of a free society, are viewed not as inalienable in and of themselves, but as environmental factors that are literally good for business” (712-13).
Chapter 5

Conclusion

It is a truism concerning J.M. Coetzee’s writing that it evinces a strong concern for the Other. Derek Attridge may put it best when he writes that Coetzee’s novels “can be read as a continued, strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity” (J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 12). Attridge eloquently represents the manner in which Coetzee’s writing recurrently, some might say obsessively, confronts the issue of otherness, but precisely what it means to suggest that Coetzee strives to acknowledge alterity is perhaps open for debate. On the one hand, it may mean the recognition and the promotion of the Other’s basic individual rights as they are laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Given the contexts – local and global – from which Coetzee wrote and continues to write many of his novels, such an understanding seems justifiable: the willful refusal – by individuals and the state alike – to acknowledge the basic rights of others was a mainstay of day-to-day life in apartheid South Africa (as could and can still be said about many nations) and Coetzee’s fiction contains a number of figures of otherness whose access to basic rights is highly circumscribed. It is perhaps tempting, then, to read Coetzee’s fictions as objections to the local and international violations of human rights that routinely take place and as texts that document such abuses so as to press for the stronger protection of human rights globally.

As appealing as such a reading might be, however, it runs into objections almost immediately: given Coetzee’s thematic concern with the plight of nonhuman animals, most
prominent in *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace* but also present in many of his other works, the very idea of *human* rights comes under suspicion of being complicit with a worldwide dispensation that is not only anthropocentric but also fundamentally unjust when it comes to humanity’s nonhuman Others. Even with this objection in mind, acknowledging alterity in Coetzee’s writing might still convincingly be said to revolve around the issue of the Other’s *treatment*. Coetzee’s writing calls attention to what Coetzee calls, in an interview with David Attwell, the “fact of suffering in the world,” which entails, crucially, “not only human suffering” (*Doubling the Point* 248). If the fact of suffering is present in Coetzee’s work, it is the fact of the Other’s suffering with which Coetzee’s novels are most often concerned. Arguably, acknowledging alterity for Coetzee has much to do with calling attention to this disturbing “fact” and attempting to communicate with his readers the ethical imperative he registers to change how we treat suffering Others.

On the other hand, the acknowledgement of alterity in Coetzee’s writing may, instead, be bound up with the issue of *representation*. Acknowledging alterity from this perspective refers to Coetzee’s commitment to representing the Other in ways that register, but do not replicate, the problematic representational strategies of the past. Frequently taking the past and its textual inscription *qua* history as a primary thematic focus, Coetzee’s fictions simultaneously acknowledge the problems that have accompanied previous attempts to represent the Other at the same time as they seek out new and better ways of doing so. The representation of the Other is, in Coetzee’s fiction, consistently a self-consciously perilous path for the author to take, wherein representation verges closely on paternalism smugly paternalistic mastery. For this reason, the representation of the Other in Coetzee’ fiction tends, paradoxically, to involve an assertion of the inappropriateness of claiming to be able to represent the other. As Gareth Cornwell puts it,
Coetzee “has always been scrupulously respectful of ‘otherness’ and sensitive to questions of the artist’s authority to represent or speak for ‘the other’” (319). Michael Marais shares a similar view: “Coetzee’s concern with alterity is evident in the way in which he refuses to represent the Other in his fiction” (“Little Enough” 161).

Coetzee’s refusal to represent the Other is apparent in the many shadowy figures of otherness that haunt Coetzee’s novels. The barbarian “girl,” Michael K, Friday, Vercueil, Melanie Isaacs, Pollux, Petrus and Lucy Lurie: these characters, subjectivities fascinating and incomprehensible to those around them, invite being read as much in light of what is not said or shown about them as what is. Shadowy as these figures of otherness in Coetzee’s writing tend to be, their mysteriousness and unknowable subjectivities do not signify their inherent “inscrutability,” a common description of the non-European Other in colonialist – and particularly orientalist-colonialist – a discourse, but, instead, their capacity to resist comprehension. As Uday Singh Mehta explains, there is an important difference between “something that resists comprehension and something that is inscrutable. The former description permits of a future change in which the object may, finally, become comprehensible…In contrast, inscrutability designates an unfathomable limit to the object of inquiry without implicating either the process of inquiry or the inquirer” (68). Others in Coetzee’s fiction resist comprehension in precisely the manner Mehta describes: they are reminders to Coetzee’s protagonists, to his readers, and to the author himself that it is our knowledge, our understanding, our very ability to acknowledge alterity, that is lacking. Coetzee never leaves the reader in doubt that it is the magistrate who does not see what has been “staring [him] in the face” (Waiting for the Barbarians 152), that it is the medical officer who can see “no story of the slightest interest to rational people” in Michael K (Life & Times 142), or that it is David Lurie who is left to ponder if
he “ha[s] it in him to be the woman” (*Disgrace* 160). The challenge to succeed where these characters do not is ours, as readers, but it is a challenge about which we are not permitted to assume a false confidence, for, in every instance in Coetzee’s fiction it seems, the failure to understand the (experience of) the Other is due to a failure or an insufficiency in the perceiving Self. In representing the many failed efforts to understand or to achieve some form of community with the Other on the part of his protagonists, Coetzee confronts us with our own epistemological and, ultimately, ethical shortcomings.

Out of the Self’s inability to understand the Other, or, in the case of a character such as Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, an unwillingness to try to acknowledge the Other, comes the suffering of the Other that insists on being recognized in Coetzee’s work. From K’s refusal to tell the medical officer his “story” (140) to Vercueil’s mysterious grins, to the secret of Friday’s tongue, the mysteries surrounding these figures of otherness plague Coetzee’s protagonists by confronting them with their limited understanding at the same time as the frequently scarred, malformed, or damaged bodies of the othered figures both bear witness to the fact of suffering. In the end, the acknowledgement of alterity in Coetzee’s writing entails both the insistence that the fact of the Other’s suffering be admitted and, simultaneously, the search for a new way of representing the Other. Coetzee’s novels suggest that issues of treatment and representation are thus inextricably interrelated: the creation of an ethics and a politics equipped to ensure the just treatment of the Other is bound up with the quest for a new representational paradigm.

Representational paradigms are not coextensive with philosophical, political, or ideological paradigms; but neither are they entirely separate from them. Rather, representation takes place within, in conjunction with, and against the other paradigms of which they are constitutive and by which they are constituted. In a sense, then, the alternative representational
strategies that Coetzee seeks imply a corresponding attempt to bring about change in these other arenas as well.

If, as I argue in my previous chapter, Coetzee’s *oeuvre* can be read as contesting the capacity for liberalism – understood philosophically, politically and/or aesthetically – to provide the most compelling rationale for the ethical treatment of the Other, it remains to discuss what alternatives, if any, Coetzee suggests are available from which ethically preferable approaches to alterity might be conceptualized. With what more ethically preferable paradigm(s) might Coetzee want to replace the prevailing ones? How might paradigmatic change be brought about? These questions take on added complexity in the historical context in which we find ourselves in which, despite persistent and persuasive critiques of it, “liberalism remains the framework from within which we imagine modifications on this world” (Mehta 45). If liberalism, as an ethico-political philosophy that brings with it a range of representational strategies, is frequently the target of Coetzee’s deconstructive energies, it also provides the framework from which Coetzee, an author obviously well-versed both in its canonical texts and in its popular conceptualization, launches his critique. For this reason, then, Coetzee’s critique of liberalism deserves to be seen as an *immanent* critique.

In making this suggestion I am indebted here to Simon Jarvis’s distinction between immanent and transcendent critiques. Jarvis explains that an immanent critique is one that “remains within” what it criticizes and “starts out from the principles of the work under discussion,” by “us[ing] the internal contradictions of a body of work to criticize that work in its own terms,” while a transcendent critique is “a critique from the outside” that “first establishes its own principles, and then uses them as a yardstick by which to criticize other theories” (6). Operating within a broadly liberal literary tradition in an era in which liberalism is the ruling
paradigm, the pre-eminent ideology, or, possibly, “meta-ideology” (Bellamy 2), Coetzee’s texts perform an immanent critique as they work within this liberal framework to interrogate it and expose its internal contradictions.

Insofar as liberalism can arguably be regarded as modernity’s preferred ideologico-political manifestation, at least in the West, I suggest that Coetzee’s critique of liberalism is very much of a piece with the related and much-noted contestation of an uncritically celebrated notion of reason that appears so frequently in his writing. Indeed, both the development liberal political philosophy and the elevation of instrumental reason (and the concomitant rise of specialized knowledges that came with it) represent different aspects of a Western model of modernity that emerged concurrently, a model of modernity that found expression in the discourses of liberalism and Enlightenment which constituted it. My description of Coetzee’s performance of an immanent critique of liberalism thus applies equally well to the broader and related critique of modernity in which his fiction engages. As such, I am inclined to position Coetzee’s genre-challenging fiction, fiction that Teresa Dovey aptly describes as “criticism-as-fiction or fiction-as-criticism” (9), not only within the various literary traditions – South African, postcolonial, modernist, late modernist, postmodernist, post-Holocaust – which have a legitimate claim on it, but also in an aesthetico-philosophical tradition that makes the immanent critique of Western modernity its project.

Coetzee emerges, then, as an inheritor of an aesthetic and philosophical tradition of thinking critically about Western modernity from within that very same condition. A number of the poststructuralist and deconstructivist theorists and thinkers whose influence critics have been quick to observe in Coetzee’s writing – from Jacques Lacan to Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques
Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Blanchot\textsuperscript{167} similarly engage in related projects which offer thoroughgoing, self-directed challenges to Western modernity; or, if they do not perform this work themselves, have had their work employed to such ends.\textsuperscript{168} And yet, I want to suggest that while poststructuralism and deconstruction both engage in related though non-identical interrogations and critiques of a set of concepts that are the hallmarks of Western modernity, and that come together in the figure of the rational Cartesian Self, the intellectual affinities that critics have noted in linking Coetzee’s fiction to the work of some of the most significant postmodern theorists do not sufficiently account for the nature and scope of the tradition on which Coetzee’s writings draw. This is because the celebrated (and denigrated) interrogations and critiques that have been products of the postmodern epoch of late-twentieth century Western history have intellectual roots that go back to well before the onset of postmodernity, the emergence of poststructuralism, or the institutionalization of deconstructive reading strategies.

Indeed, Coetzee’s fiction provides the grounds for seeing the immanent critique of Western modernity on which he draws, and which he continues to perform, as dating back hundreds of years, to the beginnings of Western modernity itself. For instance, Elizabeth Costello’s discussion of Jonathan Swift’s \textit{Gulliver’s Travels} and, especially, “A Modest Proposal” in \textit{The Lives of Animals} addresses precisely this aesthetico-philosophical heritage.

Turning to the eighteenth-century satirist, Costello notes the apparently “easy to digest” premises

\textsuperscript{167} Coetzee draws on the work of some of these figures in his own critical practice. His discussion of Erasmus’s \textit{In Praise of Folly} in “Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry,” for instance, draws liberally on the work of Derrida and, especially, Foucault. Paul de Man, not listed above because not frequently utilized in discussions of Coetzee’s writing but without doubt part of the same intellectual movement to which Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida belong, figures prominently in Coetzee’s discussion of Rousseau in “Confession and Double Thoughts.”

\textsuperscript{168} Of the authors mentioned, it is really only Foucault who historicizes modernity in order to make it the focus of his writing. Derrida’s famous arguments concerning logocentrism and Lacan’s psychoanalytical insights, by comparison, have far less to do with modernity specifically than do Foucault’s arguments in texts like \textit{Discipline and Punish} or \textit{A History of Sexuality}. 248
of his fables that lend themselves to an “orthodox reading” and produce “overwhelming agreement on how to read a book” (56). What Costello describes, then, in her magisterial overview of Swift criticism, is an author seemingly far removed from the author standing behind Costello, whose aesthetic practice generates a plurality of readings. And yet, in having Costello turn to the writings of Swift, Coetzee obliquely calls attention to the affinities he shares with an author whose skepticism concerning the instrumental use of a reason constitutes a critique of it on ethical grounds. For what is important about a work like “A Modest Proposal,” I want to suggest, has nothing to do with the factual accuracy of the narrator’s various reckonings, calculations and computations (12, 13, 16), but, rather, has to do with Swift’s insistence that instrumental reason, even if perfectly applied, can still be wrong: the problem with Swift’s narrator’s “remedy for this one individual kingdom” (16) is not of a mathematical nature but is, rather, morally and ethically suspect. Published in 1729 on the cusp of the formal era of the Enlightenment, whose intellectual trajectory was already apparent to Swift, “A Modest Proposal” stands as an important precursor to a text such as The Lives of Animals, and, indeed, other of Coetzee’s writings, in that it locates the grounds for its immanent critique of Western modernity in its laying bare of the ethical and moral blindspots of a particular version of reason. In Swift, then, Coetzee identifies an author whose challenge to modern Western rationality resonates with his own. By having Elizabeth Costello draw on Swift in the course of her discussion, Coetzee both restages an immanent critique of Western modernity that dates back to its very earliest stages and, given Costello’s deployment of Swift in service of her argument concerning the treatment of nonhuman animals, suggests a new avenue through which the ethical urgency of Swift’s immanent critique might be admitted.
It is a curious feature of Coetzee’s writing, both fictional and critical, that many of the authors who seem to hold the greatest fascination for Coetzee, and for whom Coetzee has the greatest regard – I think here of authors such as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy – tend to be positioned historically at the inception of the modernist turn in their respective nations’ life. In the case of Defoe, the English author’s most well-known fiction – *Robinson Crusoe* – is very much a fable of the modern economic man, in line with the philosophical doctrines, particularly those of John Locke, that were signaling the onset of modernity in England. Though I don’t wish to overstate the significance of what may be, to some extent, historical coincidence, it is undeniable that those authors who make modernity their theme or who, by historical chance, found themselves writing concurrently with the development of Western modernity, figure prominently in Coetzee’s prose.

The reasons for this are unquestionably complex, and it is beyond the scope of this conclusion to explore them fully; however, I want briefly to explore the possibility that it is Western modernity itself that is an overriding concern in much of Coetzee’s fiction. For if it is fair to say that Coetzee’s writing displays a concern with themes that are transhistorical and transcultural – one need only think of Coetee’s focus on the role language plays in the process of othering here – it is equally fair to say that two of the defining “events” of the twentieth century that are of great importance to Coetzee’s writing, the Holocaust and apartheid, are the products of a Western model of modernity whose value Coetzee questions.

If, as Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, “the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic forms of institutionalization…made

---

169 The onset of modernity in Russia, the orthodox argument runs, was delayed vis a vis the rest of Europe, beginning only in 1861 with the Emancipation of the Serfs.
Holocaust-style solutions not only possible, but eminently ‘reasonable’” (18), then modernity can be characterized by its potential to eventuate in an event such as the Holocaust: the Holocaust and apartheid, or events like them, are embryonic possibilities inherent to the model of modernity that came into being in the West. What Coetzee’s fiction gestures towards, then, is the need to conceive of modernity anew – to reconfigure modernity to rid it of its inherent genocidal potentialities, potentialities that are implicit in its uncritical elevation of instrumental reason and even, ultimately, in the liberalism to which it stands in reciprocally constitutive relation.

The possibilities for reconceiving modernity, for Coetzee, rest, crucially but far from unproblematically, in the creative artistic endeavor. It is worth noting, along with Attridge, that since 1994, the year of the publication of The Master of Petersburg, “there has been a noticeable increase in depictions of artists” (“Coetzee’s Artists” 26); that increase, I suggest, relates to Coetzee’s interest in exploring the extent to which art can open up new spaces for acknowledging alterity. It is in writing – in fiction, and in poetry, not to mention music, particularly opera – that Coetzee locates a limited hope, for it is in and through such enterprises that the crucial faculty of sympathy becomes available. In The Master of Petersburg Dostoevsky, the eponymous master author, explains the freedoms offered by the act of reading to the uncomprehending policeman, Councillor Maximov: discussing his dead son Pavel’s “fantasy, written in the privacy of his room” (42) of the violent murder of a lecherous old landowner named Karamzin by the tale’s young hero, Dostoevsky tells Maximov that “reading is being the arm and the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering” (47). It is the written word, then, that has the potential to erase distance, to bring different, sometimes opposing subjectivities into conflict with one another in such a way as to enable to enable the sympathetic imagination to take hold. If, as David Lurie contends in his lecture on Byron’s poetry in
Disgrace, we “are asked not to condemn” Lucifer, “this being with a mad heart” (33), it is precisely in and through Byron’s poetry that we are able to inhabit, even if in an approximate way, the subjectivity of a being who may be, for Christian readers at the very least, hateful. Such potentialities are ethically liberating Coetzee suggests: for Elizabeth Costello, the “horror” of the Nazi camps is the fact that

the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, ‘It is they in those cattle-cars rattling past.’ They did not say, ‘How would it be if I were in that cattle-car?’ They did not say, ‘It is I who am in that cattle-car.’ They said, ‘It must be they who are being burnt today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.’ They did not say, ‘How would it be if I were burning?’ They did not say, ‘I am burning, I am falling in ash.’ (The Lives of Animals 34)

Fiction offers the reader the ability to make the attempt to occupy the position of another, to be the Other, however briefly, and however imperfectly. Moreover, it is in fiction’s capacity to confront us with the fact of suffering, to demand that we acknowledge the Other’s suffering and pain, that it is ethically enabling. As the Holocaust was taking place, and during the apartheid era of South African history, and, in less spectacular fashion, in countless situations around the globe, it was and is the ability of the bystander to refuse to acknowledge the Other’s suffering that has made it possible for that suffering to continue to exist. This ability becomes a point of focus for Coetzee’s critical energies in his fiction. For Woessner, Coetzee “pushes [pain] into the space of the imagination where it can be accessed by others” (234). In my reading of Coetzee, it is not so much that pain is accessible, as Woessner states, as it is that Coetzee’s writing suggests that we ought to make the attempt to access pain – that is the obligation Coetzee suggests belongs to the reader and with good reason, for it is the ability and the willingness to make the attempt to access another’s suffering that separates a protagonist such as David Lurie, who is hard to like, from the more psychotic of Coetzee’s protagonists and supporting characters.
If modernity is characterized, for Coetzee, by an unfeeling, ethically dangerous form of rational consequentialism wherein the acknowledgement that nonhuman animals possess “no consciousness that we would recognize as consciousness” (Lives 44) leads to a most problematic leap to an unethical therefore – “Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends? Therefore we are free to kill them?” (Lives 44) – it is through the activation of the sympathetic imagination that may take part during the experience of reading that such thinking can most effectively be questioned and interrupted.

Coetzee writes with the awareness that the very media he celebrates in a qualified fashion – art, the written word, fiction – share blame for a wide range of abuses. The novel – Coetzee’s chosen genre – was intrinsic to the colonialist enterprise, as Edward Said argues in Culture and Imperialism. The artistic journey of discovery, defended by the “claims made by poets over the ages to speak a higher truth, a truth whose authority lies in revelation” and claims made with renewed vigour “in Romantic times” went hand-in-hand with “unparalleled geographic exploration” (Elizabeth Costello 172). Even the very means by which Coetzee constructs his novels – language itself – Coetzee repeatedly reminds us, is bound up intimately with the process of othering which is but one stage in a process that has culminated in the infamies of an Auschwitz, of a Sharpeville.

Nevertheless, whatever the implication of art, of literature, of the written word, and of language generally in some of the worst of historical crimes and abuses and in the bringing about of the condition of modernity that engendered them, it is through the same avenues, historically-informed and self-consciously aware of their own implication, that /Coetzee finds hope. If, for J.C. in Diary of a Bad Year, it is Machiavelli who “inaugurated the dualism of modern political culture” (17), and in some sense set the West on the course to the condition of modernity, it is
Machiavelli’s writings – most notably *The Prince* – that have created such conditions. Texts do not simply represent the world, for Coetzee; they create it as well. The implication to be taken from this, I contend, is hopeful. If modernity – brought into being via a number of philosophical, political, and artistic writings – has been created in the particular shape it now possesses, there is reason to believe that it *might* be reconfigured to take on a more ethical shape. At the conclusion of *The Unnamable* Samuel Beckett writes, “where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414). Coetzee’s fiction suggests ways in which we might go on.


---. “Coetzee’s Artists, Coetzee’s Art.” Bradshaw and Neill, J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities. 25-42.


---. “Literary Form and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J.M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron.”


Attwell, David. “J.M. Coetzee and South Africa: Thoughts on the Social Life of Fiction.”

Bradshaw and Neill, *J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities*. 163-76.


Cooper, War Crimes. 291-310.


Boraine, Alex. “Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: The Third Way.” Rotberg and


Browning, Christopher R. “Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans.” *Unwilling Germans?* 55-73.


Buur, Lars. “Monumental Historical Memory: Managing Truth in the Everyday Work of the


---. “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky.” *Doubling the Point*, 251-93.


---.  “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa.”  *Doubling the Point*, 361-68.


---.  “Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor.”  *Giving Offense*, 147-62.


Finkelstein, Norman G. and Ruth Bettina Birn. *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and*


McDonald, Bill. “‘Is it too late to educate the eye?’: David Lurie, Richard of St. Victor, and ‘vision as eros’ in *Disgrace*.” McDonald, *Encountering Disgrace*. 64-92.


McDunnah, Michael G. “‘We are not asked to condemn’: Sympathy, Subjectivity, and the Narrator of *Disgrace*.” McDonald, *Encountering Disgrace*. 15-47.

McGonegal, Julie. *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and*


Novak, Maximillian. “Defoe as an innovator of fictional form.” John Richetti (ed.) The


Schaap, Andrew. “Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility: Arendt, Jaspers and the


Shattuck, Sandra D. “Dis(g)race, or White Man Writing.” McDonald, *Encountering Disgrace*. 138-47.


Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee. 13-36.


