

Beyond the Speech Act:
The Nonrational Ethical Imperative in J.M. Coetzee's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

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Jay Rajiva

My thesis project positions the fiction of South African author J.M. Coetzee as a critical investigation into the tradition of the European Enlightenment, which subtends, anticipates, and reifies the excesses of colonial and neocolonial imperialism. I will examine Coetzee's treatment of speech while situating his critique of capital-r reason within a larger discussion of ethical responsibility toward the Other. Using Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of the work of Immanuel Kant, I will argue that Kant's construction of reason as superior to imagination in its perception of imaginative lack when confronted with the unrepresentable, sublates the lack of control that emerges if the colonist perceives the 'savage' mass of colonial territory as anything other than infinitely beyond his imaginative capacity, and therefore beyond ethical obligation. I will also present an exegesis of J.L. Austin's speech act theory that will illuminate the alliance between reason and speech in the colonial arena, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler to locate a similarly poststructuralist impulse in two of Coetzee's early novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*. Finally, I will argue that in one of Coetzee's later works, *Disgrace*, the power of the rational speech act gives way to a respect for the Other's suffering through an emphasis on nonverbal sound, which vectors ethical responsibility away from a model of obligation and towards a model of care that must, as Spivak contends, be alive to "the intuition that ethics are a problem of relation before they are a task of knowledge."

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Introduction

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.

J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (1)

In the passage cited above, J.M. Coetzee questions the legitimacy and stability of literary representation, and the genre of realism, before he has even presented a plot. Characteristically, Coetzee's strategy troubles the territoriality of text and 'outside' — alerting the reader to the arbitrary vectoring point at which the author wills his text into existence for the reader's benefit, uncovering an interstitial state between sitting down to read and the actual experience of the author's literary invention — and secures the attention of the reader by underlining the provisionality of the power that the author wields. Coetzee's intrusion into the text, in violation of realist conventions, anticipates a 'novel' whose stylistic unconventionality resonates with the author's own background within an even more complex sociopolitical history; it propels the reader out of the ontological complacency of the novel as immersion of the self in the individually creative invention of one person without recourse to history, politics, and cultural difference. For Elizabeth Costello, the Australian writer of J.M. Coetzee's invention, concerned with the ethics of animal murder in a highly specific western context, one can never dispense with history, politics, and cultural difference, even in settings that seem to be almost completely abstract.

It is precisely this type of maneuver that incites both praise from Coetzee's

admirers and exasperation from his critics, and part of what makes Coetzee a pivotal figure in and beyond contemporary South African literature. Winner of a number of awards, including the Booker Prize (twice) and the Nobel Prize in Literature, Coetzee's accolades are as numerous as his novels are multilayered and generative of a wealth of critical commentary on his style, literary concerns, ethics, and (lack of) political affiliations. A white South African by birth, Coetzee has written over fifteen novels in the course of his career, almost all of which in some measure "present a sophisticated intellectual challenge to the particular form of colonial violence embodied in apartheid" (Head 1), though of course his ethical concerns extend beyond apartheid itself. Through the apotheosis, fracture, and eventual dissolution of the apartheid system, Coetzee's work has always resolutely undermined the axiomatics of imperialism that create and maintain systemic inequalities such as apartheid. Obliqueness, self-questioning, and allusion are some of the hallmarks of Coetzee's writing, which for some, as Benita Parry observes, renders his novels too theoretical, too concerned with self-reflexive interrogations of conventional literary styles and genres to be directly relevant to contemporary politics, "out of touch with the sensibilities of the times and indifferent to the existential conditions of contemporary South Africa" (61). This refusal to conceptualize "cultural work as praxis" (Attwell 16) or mobilize his fiction to "provide the solace of truth, of political faith" (15) has at times placed Coetzee at odds with more realist-oriented contemporaries such as Nadine Gordimer, with whom Coetzee is often compared, and for whom, as Attwell notes, "the essence of the writer's role lies in her social responsibility, and responsibility is treated primarily as a form of *witness*" (13). However, such a polarization of poststructuralist art and self-consciously 'grounded' realist literature "overlooks the potential area between the two, which is concerned to

theorize the ways in which discourses emerging from diverse contexts, and exhibiting different formal assumptions, may produce *different* forms of historical engagement” (Dovey qtd. in Attwell 2). In questioning the facile separation of form and content, Coetzee insistently establishes his own political critique and ethico-historical engagement, separating “the discourse of the novels” from “the discourse of politics” by “show[ing] up the mythic status of history — in other words, demythologising history” (Coetzee qtd. in Parry 62).

My thesis project positions Coetzee’s oeuvre as a critical investigation into the unacknowledged tradition of European Enlightenment — specifically the work of Immanuel Kant — that subtends, anticipates, and reifies the excesses of colonial and neocolonial imperialism. I will examine Coetzee’s treatment and deployment of speech while attempting to unpack and situate his critique of capital-r reason within a larger discussion of ethical responsibility toward the Other. In debt to Enlightenment thinking but clearly wary of the consequences of its philosophy in colonial and postcolonial contexts, Coetzee mounts a dedicated challenge to the ‘rationality’ of the imperial project by indicating the formation of the rational will within western cultures which then systematically deny any trace of this formation by classifying themselves as universal. Using Gayatri Spivak’s interrogation of Kantian rationalism, I will illustrate that Kant’s construction of reason as supreme faculty, superior to imagination by its perception of imaginative lack when confronted with the unrepresentable (or sublime), functions as a sublating mechanism: a way of expiating the lack of control that emerges if the colonist perceives the ‘wild,’ ‘savage’ mass of colonial territory as anything other than infinitely beyond his imaginative capacity, and *therefore beyond ethical obligation*. I will also present an exegesis of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory that will illuminate the reciprocal

alliance between reason and speech in the colonial arena, drawing on the deconstructionist work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler to locate a similarly poststructuralist impulse in two of Coetzee's early novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*. Finally, I will argue that in one of Coetzee's later works, *Disgrace*, the hegemonizing power of the speech act, subtended by reason, gives way to a privilege of the embodied facticity of the Other's suffering through an emphasis on deculturated (nonverbal) sound that vectors ethical responsibility away from a model of obligation and toward a model of care that is alive to "the intuition that ethics are a problem of relation before they are a task of knowledge" (Spivak, *Wrongs* 180).

The evolution of Coetzee's work

The son of middle-class, anglicized Afrikaners, John Maxwell Coetzee grew up speaking English at home but Afrikaans to both his larger family and friends outside the Coetzee household. The cultural plurality of his position perhaps laid the groundwork for his later wariness of the unproblematic undivided identity implicit in the term 'Afrikaner', which, as he himself notes, suggests at least three distinct definitions: one whose first language is Afrikaans; the political movement borne of the anti-British resistance in late-nineteenth-century South Africa; and "the external activity of naming, a brand imposed on the basis of historical association" (Head 7). Despite an early and lasting interest in the works of Joyce and Beckett, Coetzee's time at the University of Cape Town, combined with his experience growing up in Cape Province's Karoo, created an indelible attachment to the cultural and historical specificity of his own country, evidence that "in the early to mid-1970s certain Western intellectual discourses offered to South Africans the possibility of cogent and liberating critiques of local conditions"

(Attwell 4). Emigrating to the United States to pursue his degree in English in Austin, Texas, Coetzee's perspective began to be shaped by his encounters, direct or indirect, with colonial imperialism and its legacies, both in his country of birth and in his country of study: the ethical concerns of the Vietnam War coincided with the assassination of South African Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd, one of the founders of the apartheid system. At the end of his stay in the U.S., two novellas had taken shape: one, a Conrad-inflected account of an American scientist's experiments in psychological warfare during the Vietnam War, the other, a semifictional narrative of a remote ancestor named Jacobus Coetzee, who slaughters an entire indigenous tribe out of little more than spite and wounded pride. The two novellas would later comprise Coetzee's first work, *Dusklands*, published in 1974.

In order to defuse a certain critical concern that Coetzee's work is too abstract and depoliticized to be an effective commentary on colonial and postcolonial South Africa, we must examine his juxtaposition of the two historically disparate narratives in one novel, which indicates, as Attwell notes, that Coetzee's "figuring of the tension between text and history is itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power" (3). In his field reports, Eugene Dawn rhapsodizes over photographs of American soldiers killing or displaying the corpses of Vietnamese civilians, who "screamed and gushed like our most negligible phantoms" (18), while Jacobus Coetzee, in his assault on the indigenous tribe for personal slights and humiliation, has "become Power itself now and she is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away" (61). Here, then, we find a chilling critique of colonial violence that deftly links South Africa with a larger imperial framework in which colonized, racially othered bodies are "absolutely congruent with [the colonist's] will"

(61). Coetzee uses the novel form as a shuttle between textual instability and sociopolitical critique, permanently and decisively destabilizing the reader's refuge both in realist literary forms that enact liberal humanist morality and in politically 'neutral' postmodern discourses "where form must register pure doubt and where all attempts to produce meaning appear clownish or vacuous" (Attwell 37). Eugene Dawn's supervisor is a man named Coetzee, with whom he has an uneasy and adversarial relationship, while Coetzee the author lists himself as a translator to Jacobus's story, and furthermore, mentions an apparent descendant of Jacobus named S.J. Coetzee, who has edited the account and provided an afterword in which he hopes that he has "succeeded in evoking something of the reality of this extraordinary man" (121). The novel finally concludes with a brief section entitled "Appendix: Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee (1760)," a parody of the colonial travel report with its mechanical, stilted language, hyper-focus on taxonomic detail, and complete occlusion of any mention of violence toward the indigenous inhabitants. Far from embracing postmodern "forms of reflexive play that elsewhere seem to have made a virtue of relativism" (Attwell 10), Coetzee uses the methodology of deconstruction to question the legitimacy of Eugene and Jacobus as narrators, figurative voices, and moral arbiters, grounding the novel in an evolving examination of the issue of agency within colonial and postcolonial contexts, forcing the questions: "Who is the self-of-writing? What is his or her power, representativeness, legitimacy, and authority?" (3).

In tackling these questions, Coetzee stakes his claim to political and ethico-philosophical relevance, despite the objections of the realist and activist camps, both within and beyond South Africa, where apartheid was only formally abolished in 1994, searching for "appropriate points of entry into the narrative of colonialism for the

specific interventions of which a self-consciously fictional discourse is capable” (Attwell 14). Coetzee’s critique of European intellectual and literary canons in his work takes place in full awareness of his own reliance on those same canons, which, combined with his own reluctance to subscribe to the anti-colonial movements that aimed to “unite different oppressed groups under a common symbolic framework” (16), separates him from both the fiercely defiant guerilla aesthetics of the Soweto poets and the earlier, more bourgeois writers of Sophiatown’s *Drum* magazine, who sought to expose political and socioeconomic inequalities using the rhetorical flourishes of classical European figures (Shakespeare being a prime example). In this respect, Coetzee aligns himself with white South African writers such as Gordimer, who notes that “although white support is expected to be active, it is still also expected that whites’ different position in the still-standing structures of the old society will require actions, that, while complementary to those of blacks, must be different from the blacks’” (267). Regardless of the place of the author with respect to activism, Gordimer and Coetzee do share a concern for the limits and ethics of representing apartheid struggle in South Africa as *white* writers. Coetzee differs from Gordimer, however, in his rejection of the realist genre, which he sees as all too often complicit with a historical discourse that “is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other” (qtd. in Attwell 16). Returning to *Dusklands*, the parallels between eighteenth-century and contemporary colonial projects allow Coetzee to mount a determined critique of the ostensible objectivity of imperialist discourse, which claims primacy by carefully masking the traces of its subject-position both historically and socioculturally. For Coetzee, the rhetorical substitution of the divine right of the western civilizing mission for the material, oppressive facticity of western colonial power is the moment of aporia that later masquerades as a first cause, disqualifying itself

from further inquiry. *Dusklands* embeds a sustained critique of rationality in the text's more overt challenge to the legitimacy of imperialism both as world-philosophy and as concrete practice, a critique that Coetzee "historicizes [...] with reference to the history of philosophical rationalism" while uncovering "the subject-positions and ethical duplicity that are masked by rationalism's objectivist pretensions" (Attwell 37).

If *Dusklands* offers a self-consciously antirealist critique of the imperial chronotype, fettered by its self-referential teleology, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee's third novel, returns to novelistic conventions — linear narrative, "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin qtd. in Anderson 24) expressed in the narrative trajectory of events taking place within a single season, a conventional first-person narrator — only to underline the extent to which historical convention, in literary terms, works to contain "formless chronicity, as part of the work of culture" (Attwell 86). Ironically, Coetzee's adoption of realist conventions marks his departure from the authority of realism itself, from "the construction of a coherent image of historical time" (86). Within the larger critique of imperialism that sustains the narrative, *Barbarians* "works the other way around: it must dissolve such an image, and it does so by setting it in relation to its opposite" (86). This interpenetration of 'form' and 'content' — indeed, a transverse redistribution of critical forces, redrawing the enclosure of critical inquiry to destabilize such binary and oppositional schemas — allows Coetzee to investigate the problem of how imperial power represents itself, and its dialectical relation to the colonized Other whose nonhumanity indicates the threshold between self and Other, empire and barbarian, human and animal. *Barbarians* also signals, as Attwell notes, a fundamental shift in Coetzee's writing in its preoccupation with the ideologically inflected, historical structures that bound, subtend, and reify imperial practices. Where *Dusklands* and *In The*

Heart of the Country treat the weight of imperial history as an a priori superstructure within which characters transact the everyday business of empire, *Barbarians* thrusts the concept of history itself into the discursive field, juxtaposing the artificiality of history with the violence and brutality of those who create it: the Empire of which the Magistrate and Joll are different if equally complicit agents. The notion of history as telos, the uninterrupted progression of (western) civilization, sustains the imperial agents, renders their actions intelligible within a constructed ethical framework, and allows them to superimpose historical time onto unsegmented, ahistorical time, which offers, in Coetzee's view, neither certainty of the empire's survival nor legitimation of the empire's righteousness. The Magistrate, the central character of the novel, is a faded civilian administrator trying desperately to maintain peace in the face of the new military authority, Colonel Joll, who initiates a series of brutal 'interrogations' (torture sessions) on the barbarians to discover their plans to attack the settlement. The Magistrate's involvement with a barbarian girl eventually leads to his arrest on charges of conspiring with the enemy; as he faces imprisonment, public humiliation, torture, and starvation, he reflects on the imperial hegemony that produces 'truths' of its own historical inevitability, a discourse that stands in direct contradiction to the inner space of the torture chamber, the site at which the confessor's 'truth' is emptied of meaning, becoming no more than a method of protecting imperial interests purely through its material form.

Coetzee's next novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, provides an even more harrowing look at the futility of representation within a colonial discourse that can only ever stand at arm's length from the Othered subject, grasping at meaning that convulsively reveals its lack. Published in 1983 during the white National party's hollow attempt to integrate 'multinationalism' with its essential racist and segregationist policies, *Michael K*

details the struggles of the titular protagonist in a grimly imagined future of concentration camps, labour camps, prisons and medical detention centres. Deemed simple-minded, and thus defective, at birth, K struggles to evade the vast machinery of a thinly veiled future South Africa — power deployed, as Attwell notes, in a manner that in some measure exceeds the Foucauldian sense, in which typically “power is not only pervasive but also productive; in the novel, although power penetrates through the layered relations of the social and the subjective, it is also much more corrosive” (95). The novel chillingly foreshadows the period between 1985 and 1990 when the country was rocked by mass protests, demonstrations, economic crises and brutal state repression, invoking Kafka in its “concern for the notion of a breakdown in the experience of time ... confronting its own limits of possibility, indeed, its own death” (102) — the unravelling of apartheid-era South African society.

Critics questioned Coetzee’s unemotional presentation, conservative third-person omniscient style, and consistent refusal to envision any sort of organized resistance to power, denouncing his seeming aloofness as evidence of a profound “revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions” and a failure to “recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves” (Gordimer qtd. in Attwell 92-93). To answer these charges, it is necessary to recall what Attwell refers to as “Coetzee’s sensitivity to the problem of authority within the fractured and unequal context of South African nationhood” (Attwell 93): Coetzee’s unwillingness to articulate a codified, fully realized politics of resistance alerts us both to the limits of the imperialist’s ability to conceive of the Other and the metafictional richness of figurations of coloniality that “dramatize narration’s own limitations, that is, its own willed limitations, [producing] an image of aporia, or stalled meaning” (98). As

Derek Attridge explains, Coetzee's choice of free indirect discourse to narrate K's story sets a presumed narrative transparency against the inner life of K himself, exemplified by the recurrence of "sentences that begin as statements about K's mental world but which carry on in language that hardly seems his" (50). There is no comfortable penetration into K's thoughts, only the "authorial voice's inability or reluctance to speak for the character" (50). This concern with 'stalled meaning' in self-representation through speech surfaces again and more explicitly in Coetzee's next novel *Foe*, a response to Daniel Defoe's canonical novel *Robinson Crusoe* that elucidates "the position of the complicitous author needing to write about — without writing for — the Other" (Head 128).

Susan Barton, a castaway, find herself shipwrecked on an island, where she encounters Cruso and his servant Friday, whose tongue has been cut out. After the three are rescued and return to England, Susan seeks out the author Daniel Foe, whom she hopes will be able to publish her account of her stay on the island. However, Foe is more concerned with adding "the guns and tools that Cruso does not have" (114) to the narrative than he is with detailing the unrelenting interiority, bare "subsistence and sterile work" (114) that characterize Cruso in Susan's account. In *Foe*, historical specificity and the power of authorship surface in a series of intertextual and historical relays that work to destabilize the conventional authority of the western novel (which Defoe helped to pioneer). Plagued by a mysterious woman who continually claims to be her daughter, Susan evokes the courtesan Susan of Defoe's *Roxanna*, whose unclaimed daughter returns to permanently shatter Susan's dreams of being financially and sexually independent of her husband; 'Foe' is Defoe's surname prior to its gentrification; Cruso, as opposed to Crusoe, takes his name from Defoe's real-life friend Timothy Cruso; and the publication

date of the original *Robinson Crusoe*, in 1719, at the start of Dutch settlement in South Africa, anticipates “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” by roughly 40 years. Making deft use of historical, political, and literary convergence, Coetzee “sheds a ‘preliterary’ light on his protagonists in order to place the transformations of the ‘literary’ in question” (Attwell 107), providing a compelling canvas on which to examine the selfhood and possibility for speech of Friday, the absolute colonized Other who, in Coetzee’s *Foe*, steadfastly defies attempts at representation through western language and speech.

Friday remains, to the last, an unsettling figure at the margins of the text, signalling “an unvoiced history which is acknowledged, a silence with a moral compulsion that, itself, silences the authorial figure who is obliged to cease his narrative in its presence” (Head 126). *Foe* locates and dislocates the postcolonial moment both abstractly and historically, referencing colonial history and contemporary politics, by problematizing the task of assigning a voice to the absolute Other, uncovering the material and epistemological relationship between the western writer or interlocutor and the ‘object’ of his writing: power is implicitly present in the act of speaking for the Other, attempting to represent experience through speech, cohering and articulating subject-positions in writing. The novel functions as both an extension of the almost Lacanian failure of language in self-representation of Michael K, who imagines “a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words” (150-1), and an anticipation of Coetzee’s later work, such as *Disgrace*, in which tentative, provisional solutions to the problem of representation and agency through speech begin to emerge.

Coetzee’s early work, then, “constitutes an attack on the rationalist, dominating self of colonialism and imperialism” (Attwell 5), but an attack that resides uneasily

between the “positivist conversation of the South African liberal tradition” (1) and the more explicitly polemical and activist responses to South African oppression, occupying a determinedly ambiguous political space by deliberately troubling ethical engagement predicated on interventionist western models. At every turn, the dilemma presents itself: “what is our responsibility to the other?” (Attridge xii). How do history, cultural contingency, and power mediate this responsibility? Coetzee’s ability to circumvent and challenge the conventional stylistic binary opposition of political realism and apolitical postmodernism highlights these questions by demanding engagement with ethical responsibility in the colonial and postcolonial moments on their own terms. He draws on European literature (Beckett, Defoe, Kafka) and philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard), in order to let “these modern Western intellectual currents flow into the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid” (Attwell 10). Critical of realist convention, he nonetheless embeds realist devices (third-person omniscience in *Life and Times of Michael K*, linear narrative in *Waiting for the Barbarians*) in “non-realistic, self-referential fiction that constantly highlights its own unreliability” (Gallagher qtd. in Head 9). The result is a “formal duality” (Head 10) that advances Coetzee’s own skepticism of the act of bearing witness to historical trauma by drawing a parallel with socially progressive South African realist fiction. Where Gordimer, for example, asserts that public speech will never be as “true” as her fiction (264), Coetzee’s relationship to the transparency of disclosure through speech and writing is more ambivalent, fraught with doubt over the viability of the confessional model in which speech traps, contains, and ultimately obliterates the experience of suffering. In the following chapter, I will examine the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, using the Kantian privilege of capital ‘R’ reason as a crucial example of the Enlightenment origin of rational, public speech as the supreme arbiter of ethics.

Furthermore, I will offer a brief summary of post-Enlightenment responses to Kantian rationalism, ending with the work of Gayatri Spivak and Jacques Derrida, in order to demonstrate Coetzee's ethico-philosophical kinship with deconstructionist methodology, and to show that while "Coetzee respects the claims of both reflexivity and historicity, he does not seek a mediating or neutral role in the field of cultural politics" (Attwell 3).

Chapter One

In 1784, an article appeared in a German newspaper entitled “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, which called on man to employ the faculty of reason without recourse to another’s understanding to allow the human race “an exit from its self-incurred immaturity” (Kant 58). Thus defined, reason is tethered to progress, and progress to the salvation of humanity as a whole: elevated through the judicious exercise of his own reason, ‘man’ became the model citizen in the public sphere, freed from the tyranny of the monarchic government by making ‘his’ opinions known in rational, public debate. Well-documented as a polemical, exhortative piece on the concept of Enlightenment, Kant’s article nonetheless provides an encapsulation of the primacy of reason in Enlightenment thinking. The faculty of reason — rational intelligence, cognitive judgment — allows man to reach the highest peaks of his existence, separating him from animal, establishing man as noumenon, as subject of a civilizing telos, permitting him to grasp “the incomprehensible property of freedom [which] is revealed by the influence of reason on the inner lawgiving will” (Kant, *Morals* 215). Somewhat similarly, Hegel saw the use of reason as a way for man to transcend matter and enter into communion with the divine spirit: rationally, visualizing a concept and its opposite constituted dialectical thought and allowed truth to emerge in the unity and disunity of contradictory ideas. But to the extent that both Kant and Hegel, as representatives of a particular ethical and philosophical moment at the turn of the nineteenth century, privileged the faculty of reason, we may say that each drew on the ancient Greek term *logos*, constructing a tightly argued set of formulations on the importance of cognitive judgment and practical reason in producing ethically robust citizens who, as Kant says, are “able to use their own reason confidently and properly [...] without the guidance of another” (*Enlightenment* 62).

I provide a detailed analysis of the Enlightenment's ethical reliance on reason, and its implications in the postcolonial arena of Coetzee's fiction, later on in this chapter. For now, however, I am content to sketch an outline or impression of a moment at the beginning of the nineteenth century — a moment crystallizing a particular ethical movement, embodied by scholars such as Kant, that was already providing the impetus for the 'civilizing' apparatus of European imperialism. As I refine and deepen my analysis, I hope to establish the link between the facticity and theoretical justification of colonial projects and the kernel of Enlightenment thinking: rational (European) man, exercising cognitive and moral judgment in the public sphere, a dedicated citizen whose rationality distinguishes him from the 'animal' and thus accords him subjectivity, a 'an end unto himself.' For the moment, I will sketch the history of critical responses to Enlightenment reason, in order to properly contextualize a Spivakian and Derridian critique of reason in the postcolonial context.

Marx's appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic in his critique of capitalism provides us with a useful starting point. For Marx, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, the capitalist enterprise, far from replacing feudalism with enlightenment, merely exchanges one form of domination for another, within the framework of an economic system that sublates the awareness of class differences to justify its own existence. Where Hegel focuses on the union of matter and spirit through a dialectical approach to reason, thus achieving elevating the ideas of the Enlightenment to the level of universal 'truths', Marx makes use of the dialectical method to offer a position and its contradiction — capitalism and the oppressive reality it conceals — that destabilizes the hegemony of the rational Enlightenment by locating its germination and currency within historical and sociopolitical structures. Where and when the ruling class wishes, it disseminates ideas

that control the working classes: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of material production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx 253). Consequently, the concept of ideology as false consciousness (in the earliest Marxist sense) displaces the intellectual certainty of the rational citizen of the Enlightenment, revealing his historicity, his operation within prior intellectually circumscribed structures, raising the possibility that rational man can desire an unpleasure as pleasure even when using his own reason without the guidance of others, as Kant suggests. The autonomous rational agent is himself bound by larger ideological structures: his thinking is nowhere uninformed, in classical Marxist theory, by the ideas of the ruling class, making their legitimation assured and perpetually shaping the force, direction, formulation, and aim of his social critiques. Individual rational will is insufficient, indeed, simply a product of false consciousness.

Marx’s strongest critique of Enlightenment rationalism, though, lies in his direct link between the development of capitalism and the onset of brutal colonial violence during the period: the surplus capital generated domestically needs fresh markets overseas, but the underlying basis of the colonial regime is actually repressive and feudal rather than traditionally capitalist. Threading these disparate economic systems together are the logic of the Enlightenment man of reason, who orders the world according to his own (historically and geographically specific) judgment. Arguing that “[m]an is a universal being ... because he looks upon himself as a *universal* and therefore free being” (Marx qtd. in Spivak 78), Marx enables a counter-reading of Kantian and Enlightenment ethics that troubles the “definite predication of being-human to take the singular self as general and universal” (Spivak, *Reason* 78). The given self assumes universality through a

normative philosophical subreption¹; the Western subject is taken as *the* speaking subject; the aims and ends that drive this subject slip behind the screen in the moment of formulation, displacing and indeed taking no account of historical difference — in Marxist terms, articulated as class difference — which capitalism must sublate as part of its daily operations. It then becomes discursively impossible to ask in whose name this (western) subject speaks, and why the predicate for being human seems to reside in the subreptive transformation of the self into a rational citizen whose very autonomy and self-reliance, in the best Kantian model, is merely the socially and politically exigent precondition for him “to take himself [...] as the *correct* general case of being-human” (Spivak 78). As the individual does personally, so the system of capitalism does correspondingly, defining difference or excess in order to dispose of it ‘rationally’ by making its failure to adhere to its own internal logic the overriding criterion of judgment. However, as Spivak notes, “[t]his schematic version of a logic of difference and excess internal to capitalism is framed by a larger difference articulated by the narrative of history” (80). In other words, since many parts of the world have not ‘progressed’ — I use the term to demonstrate the implicit(ly imperial) value-judgment that accrues to any discussion of ‘neutral’ economic models and their possible alternatives — on the same path towards capitalism, how does capitalism negotiate the gap between the supposed universality of its domestic model and the lived experience or difference of the postcolonial nation? In answer, Marx transforms the postcolonial figure of authority, the possessor of land, into a tyrant or ‘despot’ who mediates the landless subaltern’s relationship to property, which Marx then defines as “the relation of the individual to the *natural* conditions of labour” (qtd. in Spivak 80). Spivak tracks the similarity of this victimized landless ‘Asiatic’ to the ‘raw man’ of

¹ Spivak uses the OED definition to characterize subreption as “the suppression of truth to obtain indulgence” (qtd. in 11)

Kant's Third Critique, written out of the cultural matrix through his position outside of the normative structures of capitalism, and extensively, of Enlightenment rationalism. I will discuss the Kantian raw man in depth later; for now, I want to agglomerate the strands of Kantian and Marxist thinking to illustrate how these strategic moves (immaturity to enlightenment, feudalism to capitalism, capitalism to an expanded global form of the same, all seen as teleological inevitabilities) conceal a deeper aporia, an effacement of difference at the moment of inception that must necessarily transpire in order to mask its historical specificity — and consequently exploitation, tyranny, imperialism. Working with the Marxist dialectic, one encounters a closed discursive circuit, of capitalism presaging socialism, that symmetrically mirrors the closed circuit of capitalism and development-into-capitalism itself, effecting a foreclosure of the experience of the native informant, which “can only be confronted by systems of collective responsibility-based ethics [...]; [because] the European Enlightenment, followed by the bourgeois revolution, can only ever gives us ideas of social redress through the notion of rights” (Spivak 85). The Enlightenment man of reason, thus displaced, simultaneously reaches a limit — a situationality, specificity, and grounding in time and place — even as, with the advent of psychoanalysis, he finds the unity of his own inner life displaced through the idea of the unconscious.

With Freud, man as a unified subject is permanently destabilized via the unconscious, which locates the ‘centre’ of man’s being precisely where he is not thinking, outside of his rational and cognitive judgment. Reason, in this case, operates both as mirage and reflexive self-fiction: it shuttles desire into phantasmatic regression and reticulates specific experience into solipsistic increments which communicate with each other intermittently and irrationally, outside the discursive loop of reason, proving that

“what appears to be a reality is in fact only a reflection of a forgotten past” (Freud 171). Lacan, as both interpreter and extender of Freudian theory, fragments and problematizes the hitherto undivided self by making psychic integrity the product of the subject’s entry into the Symbolic Order of language, which can only ever offer an inadequate echo of the plenitude of existence *before* language, before separation of self from other. The Enlightenment man who previously disseminated “among the herd the spirit of rational assessment of individual worth and the vocation of each man to think for himself” (Kant, *Enlightenment* 59) now operates within a world that constructs the telos of rational progress precisely to provide the symbolic and discursive terrain on which he may justify and propound his ‘rationality’, because “it is the world of words that creates the world of things” (Lacan 184-85). Thinking for oneself is no more certain than existing for oneself, because rational thought conceals any number of deeper anxieties rooted in a (futile) desire for the self-unity that inhered before the subject was forced to substitute words for things. The entry into the Symbolic Order is thus based on an animation of one’s own body within a social context that refracts an altered (transposed) image back to the subject, constructing an aggregation of bodily gestures while simultaneously vectoring the sum total of this alteration into the domain of the social; one sees oneself *as oneself* and also *as apart*, released from the affective enclosure of the intrapsychic realm into the mediated gaze of the social. In the mirror stage of identification, the presubject becomes subject by suborning the fragmented body-image to a coherent “orthopedic” (to use Lacan’s term) identity whose totality resides in the “jubilant assumption of [the subject’s] specular image” (179). Essentially, the child ‘learns’ that his mirror image or specular double ‘is’ in fact himself:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates

in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him (179)

Delayed recognition and misknowing (*méconnaissance*) are visible in the descriptive functionality of inverted symmetry between the self, still ontologically in flux, and the image, which transmits coherence without apparent agitation (“turbulent movements”) to the self via an unverifiably unified exteriority: the ‘thing’, the image, the reflection, instantiates a reality between the subject and the external world in the moment when it imperfectly doubles the self, forever reifying that imperfectly doubled image as the *true* self. As this identification with a constituent rather than constituted form or refracted image irrevocably tethers “the I to socially elaborated situations,” it also “tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other” (Lacan 181) by transforming “the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger” (182). We witness the emergence of a self beset by doubt, neurosis and phantasmatic desire, whose apparently rational will merely disguises irrational and unconscious desires that the conscious mind, inculcated in the very Symbolic Order which initiated the original disturbance (separation of self from other through the reflected imperfect mirror image), can neither apprehend nor master in any concrete form. For Lacan, rationality is merely specularly that refers back to an endlessly rehearsed childhood trauma — the self obtains where it is not consciously projecting a false or socially mediated unity. Therefore, recalling Marx, man can desire an unpleasure as pleasure, on apparently rational grounds, because his unconscious impulses, desires, and feelings always escape rational control. Lacan’s mirror stage opens the door for a

profound critique of the Enlightenment project by postulating that the self that one sees is always already imperfectly doubled, a simulacrum relayed back to the self via the mediation of the social gaze: one learns to regulate and control the ‘turbulence’ of the body at the moment when one substitutes the world of words for the world of things. The mirage of this simulacrum mistakenly relies on “the perception-consciousness system” or “reality principle” that evidences “a scientific prejudice most hostile to the dialectic of knowledge” (182). Though Lacan’s critical target is existential philosophy, there is an additional and implicit critique of any system of philosophical thought that takes the ‘perception-consciousness system’ as the foundation for the ego and maintains “the illusion of autonomy” (182) of consciousness, which leads us back to Kant, whose model citizen needs only personal freedom and his own inborn rational intellect achieve a state of enlightenment.

But Lacan’s formulation, on its own terms, does not include the public register, or rather, the larger spectrum of social and political ethics which necessitate an investigation into the primacy of reason in a postcolonial context. Taken on its own, Lacanian theory refracts critical inquiry back into decontextualized individual experience, ahistorical, groundless in its presumed universality, and open, based on substantive historical evidence, to appropriation by imperial powers for the purpose of re-presenting, speciating, and controlling subject populations. Therefore we look to Foucault to situate the rise of rationality in a specifically European historical and cultural moment, rather than reducing it to a chimera of individual consciousness. In his response to Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”, Foucault asks: “How is this rationality born, how is it formed, from something that is wholly other? [...] How is it that rationalization leads to the rage of power?” (*Critique* 390). Kant’s original exhortation relies on the binary opposition

between informed, rational decision-making, made without needing the input of another, and the irrational excesses of the monarchy. It is for Foucault a moment of historical significance that Kant formulated his views on reason and the rational will as a response to the excesses of power (as represented by monarchic government), because it allows Foucault then to unearth a historical genealogy of his own: the twentieth-century emergence of “two forms of power that resembled one another like two brothers” (390), fascism and Stalinism, both of which, in their methodologies, ideological rigour, and coercive structures, replicated “the form and justification proper to a rational, calculated, technically efficient, and so forth, element” (393). In other words, the ‘rages of power’ of the 20th century originate precisely in the rational will that for Kant was a means of *opposing* the excesses of power. Through rationality, power becomes nakedly manifest; through power, rationality acquires an a priori valorization, becomes a terminus of discussion, because its foundation is never open to inquiry.

The concept of power as technique of control, diffuse and capillary, omnipresent and impossible to dissociate from the knowledge that claims to stand apart from it, underpins the bulk of Foucault’s oeuvre, which tracks this curious formation in the hospital (*Madness & Civilization*), the history of rationalism itself (*The Order of Things*), the prison and the university (*Discipline & Punish*), and sexual practice (*The History of Sexuality*). The interpenetration of power and rationality (knowledge) is a necessary theoretical formulation because it is “not composed of two categories of elements foreign to one another”; rather, it postulates a “nexus of knowledge-power” (Foucault, *Critique* 394) that overlays, interweaves, and entwines operations within any given system; that circumscribes and constrains possibilities; that subverts individual meanings within a complex ecology of social and political signifiers; that ablates vigorous sustained critique

from its corpus without acknowledgment of the act; that finally seeks to conceal that the relation between its components, between knowledge and power, is merely a 'game', a set of semidiscrete discourses that proclaim themselves "acceptable by some originary right" (395) when it is precisely the fact that their truths do not proceed from any anterior state that makes critique of their legitimacy so vital. Correspondingly, Deleuze's assertion that all "categories translate flux into stable identities, things that have nothing to do with the world" (Rivkin and Ryan 335) both converges with Foucauldian thought and anticipates the radically deconstructionist projects of Baudrillard, Irigaray, Butler, Derrida, and Spivak.

Although Foucault rightly juxtaposes the hyper-rational excesses of fascism and Stalinism with Kantian reliance on reason, it is further necessary to extend his argument by situating the excesses of western 'democracies' in relation to the total global scale, and comparatively, to the imperialist projects that characterized Europe and America since the Enlightenment, for the latter, in the scale and focus of their operations in colonized territories, were just as brutal, repressive, and excessive in their 'rationality' as were fascism and Stalinism. For this critique, Said is vital in extending the scope of inquiry to include what he ironically terms the Orient, that is, the corpus of knowledge and the materiality of the Eastern world that Western scientific rationalism is bent on reducing to aggregations of writing, the whole of which is actually "a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient" (875). That the Orient is never fundamentally important to the Western scholar "except as the first cause of what he says" (875) recalls Hegel's detailed but ultimate dismissal of the Hindu sacred texts as impermanent relics of a socio-religious system that is incapable of apprehending the divine, providing, in its 'primitive' imperfection, the means of elevating European

rational culture to teleological inevitability. Between materiality and theory, ‘worlding’² resides without interrogation, obscuring the representative quality of ‘truth’ in any “written statement [which] is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as ‘the Orient’” (Said 875-76). The Western scholar interprets and re-presents the Orient, which cannot speak for itself, to the Western public. Moreover, such an act of power requires the assurance of one’s own authority and the material, cultural and sociopolitical leverage to transcend “immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” (879): it demands the ‘eye from nowhere’, the disembodied self, elevated through reason, who can survey, assess, categorize, and control the globe through his own apparently rational understanding and moral superiority. As Said notes, though, it is not a question of Orientalism being invented in order to legitimize colonialism but instead the reality that “colonial rule was justified in advance *by* Orientalism, rather than after the fact” (879, emphasis added). The discourse of rationality precedes and anticipates the brutality of imperial occupation of the East by the inherently limitless extension of its guiding principles: having established reason as a first cause of and foundation for the advancement of civilization in every conceivable instance, without recourse to historical specificity or an examination of why individuated reason should reign supreme, it becomes possible to extend the hegemonic scope of reason indefinitely across all territories, sweeping any attendant colonial violence and repression behind the screen of rationality, which is never open to ethical scrutiny.

² Preferring “the schematic authority of a text to the disorientation of direct encounters with the human” (Said 876): a discursive strategy that replaces the geopolitical and cultural relation of the West to the ‘Orient’ with the mere figuration, or worlding, of what can now only be known *as* the Orient. In the colonial arena, worlding is by nature subreptive because the colonist is always engaged in doing something that he seeks to represent as ‘natural’ or ‘objective.’ The Western fabulation of an Orient, *any* Orient, is itself a coercive act, which later poses as demiurgic.

Spivak and Kant's Critique of Judgment

Between the historical response to the Enlightenment period, sketched out in the previous pages, and the theoretical framework of my thesis, Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* is the fulcrum for unifying the disparate and transverse strands of critical response to capital-r reason as it relates to the ethical domain. For Spivak, the issue cuts at once across different systems of knowing or ontologies and the mediated intrapsychic realm, but the convergent point is ethical responsibility towards the Other in a postcolonial context. By the end of this chapter, I will hopefully have demonstrated that Spivak's ethical concern is equally important to Coetzee, and to any legitimate analysis of his work; to that end, I will engage in what Foucault refers to as "historicophilosophical" inquiry, at once destabilizing "the historical objects that are habitual and familiar to the historians in the direction of the problems of the subject with which historians are not concerned," and placing philosophy "into empirical contents sketched out precisely by it" (*Critique* 391). It is thus useful to indicate, at the start, that Spivak's analysis is Marxist in its observance and acknowledgment of systemic economic and social structures that produce capitalism, which in turn symmetrically presages a globally expanded form of the same, and yet a departure of Marxist thinking in her unwillingness to accept the 'Asiatic' case as merely a useful footnote, an aberration that proves the rightness of the European model, or an evolutionary strand that eventually is subsumed by capitalism on the trunk of 'civilized' development. This same nuanced response to Eurocentric epistemology surfaces in Spivak's analysis of psychoanalytic theory: acknowledging the significance of Freudian ego formation, and surrendering to the theory of systemic control of desire in service to capitalism that Deleuze and Guattari propound in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Spivak nonetheless seeks to reformulate the self in a

way that does not permit the undivided subject to return *sub rosa*. Spivak's literary style, with its extensive footnotes (containing their own paranarratives of critical inquiry) and discursive rigour, evinces her wish to hold all writing or discourse under erasure, which may constitute the underlying framework of her analysis of ethics in the postcolonial context. Attentive to self-reflexivity even at the discursive and semantic levels of analysis, Spivak urges us to look past the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy "in the hope that such a reading might take into account that philosophy has been and continues to be travestied in the service of the narrativization of history" (*Reason* 9). My opening chapter will hopefully aid and abet this recuperative reading of Enlightenment philosophy, detached from its own specularly, pushed into empirical facticity as we attempt to grasp the lingering presence, the sense of ghostly residue or remnant of the unvoiced margin.

In her analysis of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Spivak critiques the conceptual instability that inhabits any philosophical formulation of ethical responsibility founded on the primacy of reason. Crucial to this critique is the Kantian Sublime, which acts as a conceptual foil to reason by virtue of its unrepresentability within language and defiance of imaginative sense. In Spivak's reading of Kant, "[i]n the moment of the Sublime the subject accedes to the rational will" (*Reason* 10), experiencing "a feeling of pain arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical stimulation . . . formed by the imagination and the same formed by reason" (Kant qtd. in 10). However, "since this 'judgment of the inadequacy of our greatest faculty of sense' is reasonable and correct, 'a pleasure [is] excited'" (10). The visceral gap between imagination and actuality produces an experience of the Sublime that Kant associates with nature, grounded in the superiority of reason being able to perceive the limits of imagination, rendering reason

supreme. I will argue for and unpack three implications of a Spivakian reading of Kant's formulation of the sublime relating to my project: the dialectically overdetermined duality of mind and nature; the function of magnitude in establishing sublimity; and the assertion that aesthetic "judgment itself, however, always remains only aesthetic" (Kant, *Judgment* 115).

1. Mind-nature duality

When Kant states that "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object" (113), we are faced with a paradoxical situation that posits the rational mind as the locus of this inspiration (the sublime) but needing to receive its call to sublimity from nature. The 'natural' object is a supplement, a strategically deployed trope, and one that originates from the human brain, which is responsible for the figuration of nature *as* trope, as infinity from which the imagination recoils in futility, to which the rational will remains master in its apprehension of imaginative limits. But we can only know the sublime if we are developed moral subjects, emanating from culture, which contradicts Kant's own notion of aesthetic judgment as formed *naturally* and spontaneously within human beings, needing culture but paradoxically not produced by culture. Culture allows us the moral development to conceptualize the sublime from which we infer the primacy of reason, at which point we then erase all traces of the programmed and culturally determined path to such a position by labelling it as natural and inherent to human beings. Enter Spivak's 'raw man', the de-individuated Other of Kant's text, the "Greenlander, the Lapp, the Samoyed, the inhabitant of Yakutsk, etc." (Kant, *Judgment* 247), whose very accretion into one homogenous, insignificant category announces the fundamental subreption that underpins the forming of aesthetic (only aesthetic, we are led to believe) judgment: Kant

dismissively relegates this man to nonbeing and erasure as he arrives at a ‘universal’ formulation of how the ‘subject’ develops judgment. The raw man “*cannot* be the subject of speech or judgment in the world of the *Critique*” (Spivak, *Reason* 26), but even as this “geopolitically differentiated” (27) categorization stands exposed as the catalytic principle of Kantian subject formation, discussion is foreclosed, and we are left with a universal man sprung full-grown, as it were, from the gestative apparatus of the rational will, unimplicated in any prior suppression of alternatively individuated experience.

2. *Aesthetic judgment as only aesthetic*

Thus formed, the power of judgment, according to Kant, operates only within the domain of the aesthetic, but if we use Spivak to hold under erasure the segmenting of different qualities of judgment into discrete territories, we can argue that while this faculty of judgment does not *consciously* (to itself) extend beyond the aesthetic, it in fact resides everywhere else through acculturation, or interpellation: its claim to particularity is the signal, the giveaway, the clue or trace, of its ideological omnipresence. Fabulating man’s binary opposition to nature, such an aesthetic distinction is unequivocally situational and contextual, Western and European; the conceptual fabric of aesthetic judgment is itself a worlding (to use Said’s term), the erection of an apparatus of civilization, the establishment of dialectically opposed modalities (man, nature). If nowhere explicitly apparent it is also nowhere absent: it fuels the inquiry of the scientist, with his claim to detached objectivity; it inspires the work of the romantic poets who still constitute the ‘canon’ of English literature (I will examine this in more detail in chapter three); it governs the form and effect of a presidential speech (since what else does the state do but attempt to secure its constructed structural integrity against attacks from ‘outside?’); and it justifies the very existence of the constitution (one of the hallmarks of a ‘civilized’, as

opposed to savage, society). Yet this judgment, this separation of human and nature, can never acknowledge the plenitude of its influence, because it purports only to deal with the domain of the aesthetic, which Kant isolates in relation to practical reason, reflective judgment, and so on. However, the sublated worlding of this construction of aesthetic judgment returns, unannounced and unwanted, in the rhetoricism of the following question: “Indeed, who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea?” (Kant, *Judgment* 113). Here, Kant can employ the rhetorical form precisely because he has already contained and deprivileged the dissenting experience of the raw man, who might voice an alternative account of these “shapeless” agglomerations of matter (Kant does not even deign to let the descriptor ‘mountain’ stand, instead appending the word ‘masses’ to what he must ultimately designate as less than noumenal, other than European, the ‘virgin’, unexplored colonial territory), whose alienated relationship to this picture might signal, as Spivak notes, “in what an overt way an unacknowledged differentiation within the subject as such moves Kant’s text” (25). The raw man’s account could conceivably substitute a different order of knowing for the European cultivation that terms such objects “wild disarray.” Phrasing the question rhetorically allows Kant to presume a condition of readership, of understanding, of (finally and tacitly) subject position, establishing a ‘universal’ response to natural phenomena that actually relies on the just-cited cultivated reader ‘type’ to retain intelligibility. The inadmissibility of this universal man in a postcolonial context becomes even more apparent when we examine Kant’s treatment of the importance of magnitude in any adequate formulation of the sublime.

3. *The magnitude of the sublime*

A dictionary definition of the term ‘magnitude’ is useful at the outset: “the great size or extent of something; size; a numerical quantity or value.” Thus a common definition of magnitude, interestingly enough, encompasses at once a determinative value of a certain size, the raw principle of size across which we can postulate estimates in incremental vectors; and the mathematical concept, which unifies both size as concept and size as unit of measure. Now, Kant’s justification for the undecidability, the supra-rational grandeur of the imaginative sublime, resides in its very contrast with the mathematically derived understanding of the sublime, which “is done merely progressively (rather than comprehensively), under an assumed principle of progression” (*Judgment* 110); in other words, we use the same arithmetic scale, regardless of whether the total number is 10, 100, or 5 million. However, Kant argues that “the mind listens to the voice of reason within itself, which demands totality for all given magnitudes, even for those that we can never apprehend in their entirety but do (in presentation of sense) judge as given in their entirety” (111); his problem is that in the case of aesthetic judgment, we are shorn of the reliance on the mathematical progressive concept (the scalar model) which normally obviates the need to confront the infinite in its entirety. Stripped of this numeric shield, the imagination balks at what is ultimately unrepresentable, which allows reason to fill the breach by rationalizing this inadequacy, demonstrating the imaginative limit and tacitly reintroducing itself as ascendant. The intellectual capacity of reason accords to us “a power that enables us to think the infinite of supersensible intuition” and “surpasses any standard of sensibility” (112).

Kant goes to great lengths to secure the difference between mathematical and aesthetic conceptions of the infinite (or sublime) on the way to postulating the

separateness of aesthetic judgment from all other types, noting that a reliance on a numerical scale to make sense of the infinite would hardly be “purposive for, and liked by, the aesthetic power of judgment” (110). And yet the fascination with numerology, the limitless potential of numeric signifiers, the popular apprehension of the divine in the convergence of integers: are these all not the fulcra for an aesthetically predicated conception of the sublime, slipped in subreptively behind the supposedly binary opposition of mathematic and aesthetic? Why this relentless insistence on Kant’s part on a division between the two forms of judgment? In a more general analysis of the *Critique of Judgment*, Spivak contends that Kant excludes what she terms the “raw man” (26), the postcolonial subaltern who stands outside of western culture, historically absent from the site of cultural production because subordinated within imperialist hegemony. To be a raw man is to be written out of access to the cultural matrix which covertly stages the conditions for the possibility of the subject’s cognition of the sublime, and therefore, the subject’s awareness of himself *as subject*, as a rational agent apart from matter. Returning to the concept of magnitude, can we argue that Kant is performing another exclusion? I believe so. Insisting on a radical discontinuity between these two forms of judgment inevitably draws attention to the control both forms seek to exert over the infinite *as a concept*, and correspondingly, over actual matter, since Kant’s formulation relies so heavily on an empirical encounter with ‘raw nature’, those “shapeless mountain masses” which trigger the hegemony of reason. Kant’s contention that appreciation of the sublime is based on the form of the sublime (‘wild’ and ‘shapeless’ nature) not having any purpose, unlike the merely beautiful (110): is this not finally the calculus of a geopolitics of imperial expansion, taken in its anterior stage (sublime, untamed nature, prior to colonization) and ascendant (comfortably and securely dominated, ‘beautiful’ matter with

purpose) stage? Is this sublime feeling not, with respect to the historico-political field of colonial expansion and its attendant devotion to *mathematics*, to the furtherance of scientific knowledge through colonization, simply the prehegemonic subject position of the colonizer, the stimulus that excites and prefigures his will to power? Is this steady Kantian containment of the sublime within these two seemingly discrete categories (mathematic and aesthetic) not, at the end of the chain, a strategic move to efface their commonality, an attempt to isolate the aesthetic judgment of the sublime in a hermetically sealed state of sense-perception, outside the sphere of practical politics and history?

If we are not yet in a position to offer a definitive answer to these questions, we can nonetheless extrude the concept of magnitude from the field of ‘pure’ philosophy by making its deployment a function of an Enlightenment project that constrains and limits what it must ultimately always already attempt to control: the colonial territory and/or (attentive to the conflation yet holding said conflation under erasure) the body of the racialized colonial subject whose undiffused Otherness signals an infinity that the western mind must acknowledge in order to dominate. Frustrated in any spatial, delimited, territorialized, circumscribed attempt to master the infinite or sublime, the imagination gives way to reason, which can acknowledge infinity as a concept and retain control of infinity in its distance from the facticity, or rather, the unpresentability, of infinity. Yet distance-as-control reveals a slippage, which is the distinction between what triggers contemplation of the sublime — shapeless mountain masses “without concern for their form” (Kant, *Judgment* 113), without (civilized) purpose — and what inspires a sense of the merely beautiful — purposive, contained nature, mastered by civilization; the mere existence of such a distinction reveals that the Kantian infinity is conjured by a thing that can, in time, lose its ability to channel the sublime. Human beings can inhabit the

shapeless mountain mass, sail the gloomy raging sea, and circumnavigate any natural land mass to ascertain topography, size, height, and material composition: *we can render the sublime merely beautiful by our own hand*. Furthermore, both mountain mass and raw man are finite increments of matter, not infinite, unmasking the postulation of the infinite as underpinning mathematical and aesthetic conceptions of magnitude as a means of control that allows man to elevate himself above these masses, objects, peoples, and territories. Concealed in this postulation, as Spivak notes, is the just-formed ‘boundlessness’, or, to drive home the point, the *infinity*, of the Kantian moral law, which appears only “when speculative reason has been trained not to be fearful of its own limits” (Spivak, *Reason* 31). If the development of practical reason and judgment, within a Kantian model, assumes “man as its noumenon as such”, “it is clear that the raw man is reduced out of this definitive arena” (32). Consequently, the raw man himself, within the bounds of normative philosophical practice, “cannot conceptualize man as noumenon either” (32), because the entire *Critique of Judgment*, as Spivak and Derrida both note, relies on an a priori conception of the subject (man) as possessing “good will” and “common sense” whose cultural specificity is never investigated and discursively never open to investigation: “This common sense is constantly presupposed by the *Critique*, which nevertheless holds back the analysis of it. It could be shown that this suspension ensures the complicity of a moral discourse and an empirical culturalism. This is a permanent necessity” (Derrida qtd. in Spivak, *Reason* 32).

At this point, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the inversely correlative relationship between the boundlessness of the previously uncontained sublime (manifested in wild nature) and the emergent faculty of practical reason (borne of the specularity of reason as yet still fearful of its own limits): the recession and gradual

containment of the sublime in nature presupposes the expansion of reason into its practical form, a faculty now capable of filling the hollow space left by the immeasurable magnitude of the sublime. To put it another way, we must bring the unrepresentability, divinity, and primacy of the sublime under reason's control so that the only boundlessness that concerns the thinking subject is now within *himself*: his own personal faculty of reason, which allows him (in the best Kantian sense) to employ his own judgment unaided. And if I can argue that Kant's descriptions of vast "pyramids of ice" and "glooming raging sea" (113) constitute nothing less than the specular unrehearsed gaze of the colonizer beholding the territory that has yet to fall under his control (since what else excites the feeling of the sublime in the Kantian subject but the sight³ of things without purpose, things not man-made?), then the methodology that drives the ability to judge the sublime, as it is found in mathematical concepts but even more crucially in 'crude' nature, is merely the enabling requirement for the western mind to subordinate all matter to the infinity that now resides within itself. In short, by sublating infinity, the western subject is ready to dominate the colonial territory, which no longer presents any conceptual threat to the European via its lack of 'purposiveness' or 'wild disarray'. The western mind now projects its own infinity into properly tamed colonial space.

Reason for speech

Yet this discourse on reason functions solely at the level of abstraction; certainly, within the field of literary analysis, one could be justified in questioning the relevance of any analysis that extracts the guiding principle or underlying rationale from the 'script' of a text without coming to grips with that text itself. This is why I turn now to the relationship of the Kantian construction of reason to text / language / writing / speech, and

³ The implications of Kant's deployment of the faculty of *sight* will become clear in chapter three.

if this latter conflation seems suspiciously facile, it is only because I wish to interrogate the rigidity and relevance of such linguistic taxonomies. To be sure, we can devise a schematic of word-usages or word-contexts through the establishment of discrete categories: speaking to another person; speaking to oneself; writing for one or more persons other than oneself; writing for oneself; the act of speech in general; the act of writing in general; and finally, the whole girded ecology of language that encompasses speech act and writing. And yet, for the student of literature, the issue turns on a point that perhaps troubles the stability, the impermeability, of these categories, because she is dedicated to investigating, among other things, the *written* record of fictional *speech* acts: that is, she must examine what an author makes a character say, and judge the author's intentionality in the 'spoken' words of a fictional character, as part of the larger fiction of analysis (is not all literary analysis a worlding?). This burden betrays its weight whenever we frame the analysis of a character based on what has just transpired in the plot, or according to the symbolism of what is to follow, which conspicuously resembles the traffic of 'real' life: we talk freely about people we know, speculate on their futures by rehearsing their pasts, and situate their actions within a larger schematic of intentionality (did he mean to anger his manager? did he deliberately avoid going to the party, and if so, for what reason?). In life we look to the originator of the speech act for the intentionality we ascribe to the author of a novel, but nonetheless, we are still willing to accord some weight to contingency, to the fact that chance and the actions of others will perhaps influence what we say or do, even though that contingency is more appropriately defined as a constant and constitutive chain of contexts, a sort of contextual enclosure, as it were, ever shifting in local magnitude and individuating presence, but inescapable as an area of effect.

Austin's classical formulation of the conditions in which a performative (illocutionary speech act) may be successfully uttered is crucial here. Austin distinguishes between illocutionary speech acts,⁴ which through saying imply that "we are *doing* something [...] rather than *reporting* something" (13), and perlocutionary speech acts, which merely provide a summary or report of what has transpired and which does not need the speech act in order to be considered a success. Examples of perlocutionary speech acts appear to be so readily available to the imagination as to obviate their invocation, but I will do so nonetheless: noting the departure of a friend from a party for another friend's benefit, asking about someone's health, explaining the basic principles of music theory, etc. In none of these latter cases is anything enacted by the utterance: the friend will have left the party regardless of whether I choose to tell another person; my friend's health is not dependent on my inquiring about it; and an explanation of basic music theory is hardly useful if I do not absorb the lesson and apply it to my chosen instrument.

However, can we not argue for a reexamination of the perlocutionary speech act, the everyday occurrence that Austin is not inclined to ritualize? Ritual is the locus for a slippage that Derrida, in his critical deconstruction of classical speech act theory, tracks and isolates in relation to the mutability of *all* speech acts, a slippage that allows Austin to assign intentionality to the perlocutionary act in the assumption that the speaker is master of the situation, or, at the very least, that any variability of the social context in such an act is negligible for the purposes of Austin's inquiry. Austin asserts that in a performative nothing "is either true or false: I assert this [the performative] as obvious and do not argue it. [...] When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., 'I do', I am not

⁴ Austin uses the marriage ceremony as an example of an illocutionary speech act that needs the words "I now pronounce you husband and wife" spoken in order to achieve legitimacy.

reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (6). Yet here we have again the conflation of ritual and intentionality, because all of Austin’s performative examples (5) take place on the altar of public record, requiring external verification, consent between the parties, and acknowledgment of intelligibility through acknowledgment of the ritual’s binding force: the marriage ceremony implicitly accords authority to the performer of the ceremony; naming a ship is meaningless if it is not done at the right time and place and by the appointed person⁵; any bequeathal in a will relies on the authority of the document and the intercession of the will’s executor; and a bet on whether it will rain tomorrow is not ‘official’ without both parties consenting to the bet, and usually shaking hands or performing some other mutually intelligible ritual (often with a third party as witness) to authenticate the wager.

Derrida compels us to reevaluate the meaning, purpose, and validity of Austin’s theory by destabilizing the foundational concept of locution on which the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts is always already made. Arguing that all locution is “graphematic” — dependent on a “system of predicates” that “blurs all the oppositions [...] whose pertinence, purity, and rigor Austin has unsuccessfully attempted to establish” (*Limited* 14) — Derrida challenges both the absolute intentionality that Austin accords to the “speaking subject in the totality of his speech act” and the “conscious presence of speakers or receivers participating in the accomplishment of a performative” which “implies teleologically that no *residue* escapes the present totalization” (14). In other words, Derrida questions the assumption that a speaker can be absolute master of the total context, and that the participation of those

⁵ Austin famously tracks the possible ways in which this particular event can go wrong. In his example, an interloper walks up to the ship, cuts the ribbons, and christens it the *Mr. Stalin*, the day before the official ceremony. Not only is the interloper not the ‘correct’ person to christen the ship, but the day, time, and ship name are wrong. Austin, somewhat wryly, also notes that “perhaps in a way it is even more of a shame” (23) if the ship *was* to be named the *Mr. Stalin*.

who receive her speech act is conscious, willing, self-willed, transparent, and complete. And yet, as Derrida notes, Austin brings up the possibility of failure (infelicity, unhappiness of the speech act, when things go wrong) as a spectre that haunts *every* speech act, “an ill to which *all* acts are heir” (Austin 18-19), only to foreclose an examination of this abyss of failure because it apparently “teaches us nothing about the linguistic phenomenon being considered” (Derrida 15). Moreover, at this stage, such a gloss prevents a full-fledged examination of ritual not as “possible occurrence, but rather, *as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark” (15).

If all speech acts are vulnerable to ‘unhappy’ results that escape the control of the speaker, if every speech act by definition implies its infelicitous opposite, as Derrida suggests, why does Austin take no notice of this continuous instability? Is his entire schematic opposition of perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts contingent on “a general and systematic elaboration of the structure of locution that would avoid an endless alternation of essence and accident” (Derrida 15-16)? To put it another way, Austin’s conceptual framework presupposes a system of locution that devalues the fact that infelicity is as vital a component of the structure of any speech act as felicity, that risk of infelicity or failure by definition inheres in any speech act, and thus to speak of success and failure in a perlocutionary / illocutionary model is to limit ourselves to categories that are “quite insufficient and secondary” (15) to a rigorous analysis of the ‘linguistic phenomenon’. A little later, Derrida, tracking Austin’s exclusion of the infelicitous result on the grounds of supposed ‘parasitism’ and ‘abnormality’, agglomerates the strands of his argument into a central assault on Austin’s divisions of language:

In other words, does the quality of risk admitted by Austin *surround* language like a kind of *ditch* or external place of perdition which speech could never hope to leave, but which it can escape by remaining ‘at home,’

by and in itself, in the shelter of its essence or *telos*? Or, on the contrary, is this risk rather its internal and positive condition of possibility? [...] In excluding the general theory of this structural parasitism, does not Austin, who nevertheless claims to describe the facts and events of ordinary language, pass off as ordinary an ethical and teleological determination (the univocity of the utterance— that he acknowledges elsewhere remains a philosophical ‘ideal’—the presence to self of a total context, the transparency of intentions, the presence of meaning to the absolutely singular uniqueness of a speech act, etc.)? For, ultimately, isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious,’ *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative? (17)

I would like to extract two key concepts from what I have just cited: first, the philosophical idealism of the phrase “transparency of intention” (that is, the projected and utterly harmonious convergence of meaning or intent and a given speech act); and second, the relationship between general iterability and localized iterability, the inescapable tether between the unhappy, ‘anomalous’ citation (a marriage proposal spoken on stage, to use Austin’s example) and the ‘successful and real’ citation which dialectically generates, shapes, transforms, and inhabits the context of every speech act. I will now, finally, shift the focus of the analysis back to the Kantian subject, to the rational western will, finally, to the Enlightenment man of reason who uses his judgment without the input of another.

Tracing the connection between Austin and Kant, one can isolate the common use of ritual to cover a subreption that occurs at a precise moment: when both confuse methodology for noumenal primacy; when both reduce the heteronormativity of social contexts to a choice between public, performative, ritualized speech on the one hand and private, reportive, non-ritualized speech on the other; when both seek, as part of a strategy of containment, permanently to suspend inquiry into the consequences that so-

called ‘private’, inconsequential speech may have for their epistemes, discursive frameworks, and lines of argument. Nowhere is this suspension more apparent in Kant’s work than when he asserts that “the *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the *private* use of reason, however, may often be narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered” (*Enlightenment* 59-60). Is this not, discursively, the attempt to situate the “non-serious” situation outside the systemic affect, exiled to the private domain which Kant stealthily excludes from what Derrida will later refer to as “general citationality”? Surely, to admit that the private use of reason is embedded in the general citationality of all speech is to *at once and forever after* accept the general undecidability of all speech acts, public or private, and furthermore, to renounce the ontological certainty of the rational, socially transformative public speech act — which would be disastrous for the teleologically inflected use of reason that Kant propounds as the only means of producing an enlightened society. In his valorization of the public use of reason, in his exhortation to all men to make their voices heard in the public domain as scholars or clergymen (60), Kant reestablishes the primacy of ritual as occurrence, as transparent means of access to ideas that remain uninflected by the medium of the public register, which is neutral and carries no ethical, historical, political, or sociocultural charge. Expunged is the possibility of any examination of why the nonpublic opinion, the nonrational, and the affective remain “forms of sentiment rather than insight, ways of feeling rather than knowing” (Sandel 164); erased too is the possibility that “we are neither as transparent to ourselves nor as opaque to others” (166) as the Kantian ethic presupposes; banished finally is the possibility that in order to be enlightened, ethical subjects, “we cannot be wholly unencumbered subjects of possession, individuated in advance and given prior to our

ends, but must be subjects constituted in part by our central aspirations and attachments, always open, indeed vulnerable to growth and transformation in the light of revised self-understandings” (166)⁶. All three possibilities vanish through the same strategy of foreclosure that excludes the raw man from consideration as the thinking subject, a presencing and then deferral without explicit deferment, seemingly innocuous, but actually crucial to Kant’s argument: a series of uninterrogated assertions that comprises his theory of enlightenment through rational use of one’s own judgment in the public domain. It falls to us, unavoidably and particularly in the field of postcolonial studies, to examine the corpus, the constitutive bedrock, as it were, of Kant’s arguments, holding such suppositions under erasure.

Can we discern, perhaps, too much of an insistence on the transparency of the domain of the public speech act on the one hand and the versatility and universal applicability of reason on the other? I believe that this insistence signals the unresolved tension or anxiety of the colonist, who reestablishes control at the moment when he banishes the possibility of imaginative connection to land, to nature, and finally, to the raw man. What remains to adjudicate the encounter is faculty of reason, which requires the subordination of disorderly natural solitude to the taxonomic, ‘purposive’ western sociopolitical context that must always already be in the process of justifying its imperial expansion. If savage disorder ‘naturally’ inspires the sublime in our (western) subject, it signals the “limit case of our understanding” (Fudge 8), the demarcation of a boundary beyond which exists the absolute Other, to whom we owe no ethical responsibility, and which binds us (selfishly, provisionally and arbitrarily) only to the obligation of colonial

⁶ Sandel is, of course, critiquing John Rawls’s conception of justice as fairness, and is not directly engaged with Kant. However, given Rawls’s philosophical indebtedness to Kant, and given the similar distinction that Kant draws between private desires and opinions (the Rawlsian ‘good’) and public speech (the Rawlsian ‘right’, or justice), I believe Sandel’s analysis is relevant to my argument.

stewardship. As the imagination is resolutely suppressed, even suffocated, a cone of silence emerges, the Derridian trace that hovers on the margin of the text, a silence that remains unetiolated for all that its presence and presencing are vigourously denied by Enlightenment logic, gesturing towards the experience, the subjectivity, the facticity, of the absolute Other: “[T]he ground-level value-codings that write these women's lives elude us.”⁷ These codes are measurable only in the (ebb and flow) mode of the total or expanded form, which is 'defective' from a rationalist point of view” (Spivak, *Reason* 245).

Yet this rationalist point of view returns, via the circuit of Enlightenment logic, in the form of abstract public debate, a ritual elevated to uninflected occurrence, never constructed “*as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark” (Derrida, *Limited* 15). We are faced with the problem of a discursive system that sees its own transparency of intention as an a priori we are not allowed to challenge: as a scholar, using the trained faculties of practical reason and reflective judgment in a public forum without the guidance of another, I can convey my idea, argument, or theory to the community as completely and transparently as any forum of discussion can hope to be. If there is any residue, anything left unsaid, it has no place in this forum, which Kant has already exalted as the only way of achieving enlightenment: “that use which anyone makes of [his own reason] *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *reading world*” (60). As the public register is emptied of that which would trouble its structural integrity — insubordinate affect, not yet fallen under the yoke of practical reason, the imaginative tether to the

⁷ Spivak is discussing the exclusion of tribal women in India within the circuit of capitalist production. To return briefly to an earlier theme in this chapter, the subaltern's epistemic occlusion serves as a paranarrative to her material and economic occlusion, the two erasures revealing rationality and capitalism as allies and brothers, working each in his own way to better the fortunes of their house. Spivak takes up Marx again to argue that “the mode of production is so efficient because it is constructed in terms of the most efficient and abstract coding of value, the economic” (244-45). Using a rational, economic calculus, the Other remains invisible.

Other whom we share kinship based on shared being-in-suffering, not rational obligation — ethical responsibility devolves into performative civic vocality. Any alternative ethical expression is now unintelligible, because the public register has no conceptual space to accommodate an ethical issue that does not acquiesce to its own heteronormative parameters; itself the defining forum for ethical expression in Enlightenment logic, it cannot admit that ethics can find plenitude in private, casually, in jest, in everyday inquiries, in short, outside the public register altogether. Furthermore, such an alternative would be considered irrational, because the trained use of reason, without the guidance of another, is inseparable from its public use, according to Kantian thought, and because the ritualized nature of the public declaration or utterance (an article in a scholarly journal, a speech in parliament, a newspaper feature, a municipal debate, etc.) obfuscates the iterability of *all* speech acts, which carry and endlessly regenerate their contexts, establishing ritual through and with their very utterance. However, given the fetishization of ritual that permits the public speech act to achieve primacy, Enlightenment thinking renders nonpublic speech irrational in its isolation, triviality, and apparent lack of ritual.

Of course, when I repeatedly invoke the term ‘ethics,’ the reader may feel justified in asking for a clarification. Am I speaking of the ethics of public debate, of civic charity, of state intervention in global affairs, everyday interpersonal ethics, a citizen’s viewpoint on political affairs, or an aggregate of these definitions? The critical issue for my discussion is that ethics as a ‘pure’ experience of civic justice and/or scholarly debate is categorically insufficient in the postcolonial arena; in fact, one could argue that the nonrecognition inherent in the colonial encounter between rational, educated, western citizen and unknowable, irrational, colonized Other indicates the incommensurability of said encounter with the terms of rational public debate, which is ‘supposed’ to be the

final, indeed, the only word, on the issue of justice. But here we have another sort of person, the raw man, to reinvoké Spivak's term, who maintains his presence, being, and claim to the status of noumenon even as western philosophy is so bent on excluding him by definition, in default, before we have spoken a single word. His relationship to the vast wilderness of land mass that forms the basis for a Kantian approximation of the sublime differs from that of the European subject, but that difference plummets into nonpresence; his participation in the apparatus of rational, civic debate is foreclosed because he does not know the rules, speak the language, or privilege reason over all other faculties. In Enlightenment discourse, we consign him to nonbeing, which allows us to erect the edifice of progress, reason, and civic democracy, structural components whose foundation of blood vanishes into dust. If we wish to seek for this raw man in order to account for him in an ethical framework, where would we begin? And would we not be obliged to reformulate our tacitly held notion of ethics if he is to emerge from the rubble? What are we to do with a narrative whose specificity, materiality, and epistemic morphology renders it 'defective' for the public register, for easy insertion into the 'rational' public debate? If we can call these narratives works of fiction in general, we must inevitably assign the description, perhaps even more intensively and specifically, to the exploration of the encounter with absolute Other that characterizes so much of Coetzee's fiction. And if I can argue that Coetzee's fiction is an ongoing attempt to explore the possibilities when we come face to face with the limits of our own ontological certainty, when we see the Other at the same moment that we become aware of a hitherto ignored absolute limit of our understanding *within an Enlightenment discursive framework*, then my argument also assigns a sophistication and complexity to Coetzee's literary approach: not merely in the sense that Coetzee, the writer and purveyor of fiction or semifiction, interrogates

these issues by the act of putting ‘pen’ to ‘paper’, by announcing himself as author, as creator or inventor of alternative, counterfactual, and nonrational narratives, but also in the sense that Coetzee’s characters, his literary creations, enact that struggle within their own (constructed) lives, in the arc of their internal developments, by the choices they make, the decisions they take to speak or remain silent in this setting or that, and by the effect of these speech acts compared to the their ‘intended’ effect. Given the theoretical framework of this chapter, when Coetzee’s characters fail to communicate through speech ‘rationally,’ without the guidance of another, what are the ethical implications in the postcolonial arena? In the next chapter, I will attempt to provide an answer to this question as I examine two of Coetzee’s early novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*.

Chapter 2

The publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1983) anticipates a moment of historical tension in apartheid-era South Africa: two years before the State of Emergency, which would last with only a brief interruption until 1990. Though we can see without difficulty the parallel between the apartheid regime's response to growing unrest among black South Africans and the imperial mobilization against the 'barbarian threat', Coetzee's novel, as many critics have noted, studiously maintains the anonymity of its fictional setting, offering a "strategic refusal of specificity, a refusal that is the result of being painfully conscious of one's immediate historical location" (Attwell 73). For Attwell, though, nonspecificity is not permission to empty out the discursive register of any alternative to an ethical model that conceals its own postulates under the guise of universality, but a way of signalling the trace of the inadequacy of the literary *as* register: the silenced specificity inhabits the margin of the text. Attwell deftly sums up the social and political events that inform the novel:

Internally, a large, unregulated and unruly labor movement had been growing since the early years of the decade; a continuing recession exacerbated unemployment; above all, there was the Soweto Revolt of 1976. Externally, the demise of the Portuguese government in Lisbon in 1974 led to the collapse of its colonies, Mozambique and Angola, where protracted guerilla wars had been fought for some time near South Africa's borders. The period also saw the intensification of civil war in Zimbabwe, leading to independence by 1980. In response to what it saw as a series of unprecedented threats, the government created commissions of inquiry, charged with investigating the regulation of trade unions, and Party think tanks, designed to devise a racially co-optive constitution; [...] it refined its elaborate and already totalitarian security apparatus. The central emphases of policy at this time were therefore managerial, technocratic, anticommunist, and military. The umbrella concept linking all of these policies—defined as a response to what was called the 'total onslaught'—was 'total strategy'." (73-74)

Thus confronted, the apartheid regime reconstitutes the historicity of the period to attenuate the potential for revolt in South Africa. But the attempt to exert control over the revolting state is itself an indication that prior hegemony has failed to produce the expected result. The emerging tension signals the abject defeat of the colonist, whose reach will always already exceed his grasp. The commission of inquiry is charged with circumscribing black power in trade unions, but must also ‘devise a racially co-optive constitution,’ i.e. recode and retransmit the oppressive language of apartheid into an ethical register that tropes civic and political difference based on race (apartheid) as enlightened, practical, natural, unavoidable. My point is not to ‘prove’, fallaciously, with the benefit of hindsight, that the apartheid regime’s efforts were doomed to fail, but to show instead how the state’s very attempt to exert control produces a call to resistance that becomes the dialectical impetus to extend its ‘total strategy,’ to silence the call it must always create. In deploying the adjective ‘total’ to describe both threat and response, the South African regime extends its conceptual framework to include and presume infinity as a key component: the enemy’s victory can never be contemplated, but must be eternally opposed. This opposition becomes the empire’s endless preoccupation with “how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era” (*Barbarians* 131).

Gripped by riots, civil disorder, and political uncertainty, the South Africa that informs *Barbarians* resists teleological interpellation because its future remains uncertain. Neither defeat nor victory is conceivable. The political uncertainty finds its mirror and specular double in the language of imperialism, which “always presupposes a horizon of competing, contrary utterances against which it asserts its own energies” (Terdiman qtd. in Parry 40). Lurking in the studious omission of historical context from the novel is

Coetzee's own professed and admitted discomfort with situating himself specifically as a writer in the South African tradition. Benita Parry has accurately tracked Coetzee's "failed effort, when a graduate student in the US, to 'find an imaginative (and imaginary) place for [himself] in the Third World and its narratives of itself' by reading Césaire, Senghor and Fanon'" (37-38). We gain an indication of Coetzee's ambivalent relationship to the explicit polemical stance of anti-colonial activism and his awareness that "'time in South Africa has been extraordinarily static for most of [his] life' — a reference to the political order dominated by the Afrikaner-Christian nationalism in which he grew up" (38). Too, we discover a convergence in the Coetzee's uneasiness with and alienation from the static rigidity of colonial culture, and the gaping silence surrounding the political events of the period. This silence on the one hand and discomfort on the other are not means of escape, though, not ways of retreating from the ethical dilemma of the period; instead, they gesture to the chronohierarchical constraint of writing that consciously and openly declares itself as white South African, Christian in origin, privileged, nostalgic for a 'simpler' time, unwilling to confront the ethical problems of the era, defining itself as "a culture looking, when it looked anywhere, nostalgically back to Little England" (Coetzee qtd. in Parry 38).

As both Parry and Derek Attridge note, the silence of the untext, the omission or Spivakian *découpage*, provokes the reader into envisaging the larger political and social context as textual unpleasure, as the 'dark thought' that counterfocalizes the narrative trajectory of the novel. We run up against a wall in the studied nonspecificity and abstraction of the novel's setting, which positions a fictional Empire hunting undifferentiated barbarians along an unnamed frontier in a doomed attempt to secure its own territorial and imperial integrity: "In effecting an estrangement of the consciousness

she or he articulates, this speaking subject manifests the solipsism of disquisition deprived of dialogue, while intimating another world whose agency is denied” (Parry 40). Shorn of countervailing dialogue, imperial discourse paradoxically and helplessly gestures towards ‘another world’ of the Other, or colonial subject. It is this refusal to ventriloquize that I wish to examine: Coetzee’s insistence on fabulating the imperial and colonial subject as one for whom the Other must always remain traced in shadow, outlined by absence, woven from the constitutive fabric of colonial hegemony but visible only as outlined lack. Though a certain postcolonial reading would insist on a ‘recovery,’ with all its difficulties, of this colonial Other, Coetzee chooses to let the unknowable remain unknowable, focusing instead on the discursive and epistemological failures of the magistrate, and this focus, both under and outside authorial control, permits the emergence of a post-Enlightenment ethical register in the text. I turn now to the text itself.

Unhappy truth: the discourse of colonial interrogation

Waiting for the Barbarians presents a fictional imperium whose paranoid need to control and subdue dissident ‘barbarian’ (actually indigenous) populations prompts them to send a representative, Colonel Joll, to the border settlement governed by the Magistrate. Joll arrives under “emergency powers” (1), swiftly and brutally tortures an old man to death, and ventures out into the desert to capture more barbarians to fuel his investigations. Concurrently, the Magistrate enters into a coercive sexual relationship with a barbarian girl, herself the survivor of earlier torture and abuse, and whom he later attempts to return to her people in a belated, insufficient, and severely problematic attempt to make restitution for what Joll and others have done to her. Returning from this excursion, the Magistrate is charged with treason, at which point he himself becomes the

victim of torture. Joll decides that the ‘barbarians’ are planning an attack on the empire, and rides out into the desert to hunt them down, only to return, beaten and defeated with a handful of men, at which point the majority of the town’s inhabitants (including Joll) flee back to ‘civilization’ and the Magistrate regains his freedom. Teresa Dovey has characterized the novel as an autocritique of discursive failure in “liberal humanist discourse: first of all its failure to interpret and offer resistance to the militarized totalitarian phase of colonisation and, secondly, its failure to interpret and articulate the history of the colonised” (141). Similarly, Patricia Merivale asserts that the “ambiguously intermediate authority figure, Coetzee’s Magistrate, tries to oppose these wall-like forces of Empire with his feeble weapons of reason, learning, and good (for South Africa read: ‘liberal’) intentions” (159). For Richard Barney, the Magistrate personifies “the imperial ‘mind’ at work, as the exemplar of instrumental reason that will organize and subordinate the colonized, bestial ‘body’ of the native populations” (20), while Brian May, arguing against a purely postcolonial reading of the novel, suggests that the body, in Coetzee’s work, is “potentially, a friend to the mind—a force in its own right, and one that may impose its own auspicious and peculiar meaning on the same imperial mind and self” (393).⁸

The Magistrate’s attempt to imagine what takes place within the torture chamber allows Coetzee to concatenate the act of physical harm and the discursive repetition of harm. Yet the repetition is never merely or exactly a mirror or copy: unavoidably, as part of its morphology, the discursive imprint of torture reveals at once the trace of its own

⁸ Interestingly, May also contends that “characters whose body images have been shaped by their colonial heritage [...] and whose bodies are, consequently, not even critical, let alone creative, suffer a dissolution of self” (394). May’s articulation of the body as the transmitter of “its own ineluctable presence, persistence, [and] superabundance” (408) presages the facticity of Friday’s body in *Foe*, underscoring Coetzee’s critique of a logocentric epistemology that, that constantly seeks to “transcend the body and its world of material and temporal things” (405). May’s argument speaks eloquently to the Kantian elevation of self through reason that I discussed in chapter one.

singularity and the disruptive excess of torture *as narrative* that both demands and destabilizes a closer reading. Within a larger framework of speech acts, the subject of torture possesses his “own ‘existence’ implicated in a language that precedes and exceeds the subject, a language whose historicity includes a past and future that exceeds that of the subject who speaks” (Butler, *Excitable* 28). The speaking subject is, for Butler’s purposes, the perpetrator of hate speech, whose refuge in the apparent non-injury of words provokes, in his turn, the act of censorship, crystallizing Butler’s project as a critical inquiry into the issue of language as both a field of power and an opportunity for agency. If language injures and traumatizes, Butler argues, it also provides a regenerative context for resistance, producing a definition of speech as “excitable” — in flux, variable, situationally contingent — and speech acts that are “at once the deliberate and undeliberate effect of a speaker” (39).

The basis for Butler’s argument is a critical interrogation of Austin’s speech act theory, which complements my deployment of Derrida in the previous chapter: in questioning the locus of where power inheres at the moment of an injurious speech act, Butler confronts Austin over the issues of control, intentionality, and power in language. Furthermore, hate speech in the public domain reveals, to Butler, the limits of what justice can do to mitigate the original trauma of the hate speech itself: in speaking of the original act, the judicial register actually recirculates the trauma.⁹ Butler sets her investigation of “the specific kind of violence that language itself performs” (6) against an epistemology in which “language assists violence, but appears not to *wield its own violence*” (6), making specific mention of the torture chamber. For Butler, the two forms of violence — discursive and material — are complicit in reifying existing structures of power that reciprocally work to sublate the discursive *into* the material, concealing the

⁹ The *public* nature of justice’s failure will become more important to my discussion in chapter three.

way in which these two forms touch each other to subtend a social and ethicopolitical hegemony. The torturer's physical reduction of the tortured to nil (through violence that may well end in death) necessarily involves a similar discursive reduction. In order to torture, one must conceptualize the victim out of selfhood, yet the excessive historicity of the target is also "what makes possible the speech of the subject" (28), providing the possibility of a speaking voice beyond the control of colonial authority:

Foucault refers to this loss of control over language when he writes, "discourse is not life; its time is not yours." By this statement, Foucault appears to mean that one's life is not reducible to the discourse that one speaks or to the sphere of discourse that animates one's life. What he fails to emphasize, however, is that the time of discourse, even in its radical incommensurability with the time of the subject, makes possible the speaking time of the subject. That linguistic domain over which the subject has no control becomes the condition of possibility for whatever domain of control is exercised by the speaking subject. [...] And this excessive historicity and structure makes possible that subject's linguistic survival as well as, potentially, that subject's linguistic death. (Butler, *Excitable* 28)

Let us tease out Butler's interpretation of Foucault's argument: discourse, though dialogically involved in the shaping of one's concrete existence, is not itself existence, nor is it exhaustively and conclusively constitutive of one's materiality. However, as Butler points out, Foucault runs the risk of eclipsing the actual lived time of a given person through a totalizing concept of an undivided subject whose relationship to discourse is free: in actuality, discourse is potentially and simultaneously the site of one's life or death in linguistic terms. Furthermore, the ethical conundrum is that the "condition of possibility" for one's survival is convulsively dependent on "speaking time," which, as Butler later notes, finds its expression in different ways, and is not merely a function of the amount of real time one has to speak (though it is that as well). Returning to the literary arena, I would argue that it is incumbent upon us to track how Coetzee accords

speaking time to his characters, to determine the ways in which physical violence and spoken violence intersect, touch, and reify each other, as part of a larger ethical critique of the imperial discursive model.

The joint interrogation in the opening pages of *Barbarians* alerts the reader to the control that Empire has over the speaking time of the colonial Other, while simultaneously gesturing towards the failure of the discursive register of interrogation as a means of re-presenting the Other as voiced speaking subject. The old man's speaking time is not only circumscribed by power (he is a prisoner under the complete and total jurisdiction of his captors, the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, and his only avenue for speech resides in a disingenuous imperial request to speak 'the truth'). More importantly, we witness the power of the interrogator, as colonial authority, to name himself as hierarch before the scene is even staged, evidence that "the very possibility of naming another requires that one first be named" (Butler, *Excitable* 29). If the Magistrate and Colonel Joll can call him 'prisoner' and 'old man' without providing a proper name, linguistic death is already visible on the horizon before any of the parties utter a word; the descriptors "confer a spatial and temporal specificity, inaugurating a time of the subject that is not the same as the time of language, enforcing the sense of the subject's finitude that follows from that incommensurability" (Butler 29). Subjectivity for the 'old man' vanishes into oblivion in the discursive register of torture, which consigns him to small-s selfhood by restricting his speaking time to almost nothing:

"Excellency," he says. His voice croaks; he clears his throat. "Excellency, we know nothing about thieving. The soldiers stopped us and tied us up. For nothing. We were on the road, coming here to see the doctor. This is my sister's boy. He has a sore that does not get better. We are not thieves. Show the Excellencies your sore." (3)

After an examination of the boy's sore, both are taken away for interrogation and torture.

What can we say about the infelicity of this occurrence? Lacking proper command of the language, did the old man merely misspeak? In the Austinian tradition, we might feel justified in taking this scene as an example of perlocutionary (consequential) utterance. The colonists question a prisoner to obtain information; he provides answers that carry consequences for his well-being if the interrogators are not satisfied with their veracity; the speech act and its consequences appear to be “temporally distinct” (Butler, *Excitable* 17); and this is only the non-ritualized prelude to the real and formal interrogation that takes place off-stage immediately after this scene.

Yet we can make an equally persuasive case for the interrogation scene as illocutionary utterance. The colonists depend on the pervasiveness of ritual to surmount the problem of the Other as citizen and subject with rights and privileges, which would disrupt the situational and hierarchical logic of the entire proceeding. By what right could Colonel Joll question the ‘prisoner’ if he acknowledged that the terms by which empire assesses truth are based on the prisoner’s negation as rational subject?¹⁰ The ritual of interrogation neatly obfuscates this dilemma by presenting the old man’s defense as a speech act that performs the expected, reciprocal, and endlessly relayed revolt of the colonized subject. Essentially, the old man’s speech empties of specificity and indicates only a *posture* of defiance: he is an inferior, lying barbarian whose speech in this particular situation will imply the need for formalized, violent interrogation regardless of what he actually says. It is his position as colonized body that predetermines the outcome of his speech act.

Just as “those who make history are the only ones in a position to write it”

(Moses 120), those who speak, record, and write establish the total signifying context

¹⁰ This ‘rational’ exertion of violence should recall Foucault’s observation, which I cited in chapter one, that repressive, tyrannical regimes can, all too easily and perhaps unavoidably, mobilize the discourse of rationality to justify excesses of power.

that governs the felicity or infelicity of those who speak. The Magistrate and Colonel Joll, named as imperial agents, are those “who might well name another in time” (Butler, *Excitable* 29): naming confers the imperial singularity that allows the homogeneity and abject Otherness of the colonized. When the Magistrate’s joke that the boy is probably confused because he has likely never seen anything like Joll’s sunglasses meets only stony silence from the colonel, we are alerted to the discursive superstructure of the interrogation, which devoutly seeks to assign unspecified, nonsingular temporality to the prisoner. To offer an opportunity for the boy to affirm his own individuated experience during the interrogation is to allow a micro-interruption of the discursive field, an interruption that would raise the possibility of the prisoner’s speaking time expanding further. Anathema to the torturer, clearly, who cannot permit this expansion if he is to retain control of the situation. Ritual, inflected by imperial hegemony, tacitly governs the scene, and Austin’s ‘convention’ is now clearly insufficient as a category to which ritual might refer. Rather, we can only conclude from the permanently blurred distinction between perlocutionary and illocutionary utterance that all speech acts carry the potential for infelicity in their very morphology; that all are dependent on a structured conception of ritual as occurrence, invisible as mark, a priori; and that what governs ritual itself is the presumed success, validity and inherent rightness of imperialism as discourse, as endlessly regenerated empire.¹¹

The example I have just dealt with indicates the difficulty of maintaining binary

¹¹ Characteristically, Coetzee does not explicitly state that it is Joll’s very position as imperial agent which allows him to take the ritual of torture as the a priori convention by which the imperium transparently articulates ‘truth.’ The closest we get is Joll’s complacent assertion that a “certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth” (5), to which the Magistrate replies with some irony: “The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?” (5). Faced with Joll’s dismissive response that he is speaking not of ‘everyday speech’ but of a “special situation” (5), we behold the power of the imperium to contain acts of physical violence in specific, hidden contexts through discursive subreption. The Magistrate later becomes the subject of this power when he himself falls into the aforementioned “special situation” — when he enters the torture chamber.

opposition between public and private registers, between rational public speech on the one hand and private irrational speech on the other. If the prelude to the old man's torture evinces a harrowing uncertainty about the discursive imprint of the encounter, the Magistrate's brief questioning of the guards after the fact further destabilizes the terrain on which we would attempt to uphold Austin's linguistic conventions. Consider the Magistrate's narrative reticence for these precious few paragraphs, compared to what precedes and follows. Normally possessed of an astonishing eloquence, here he confines himself to recording detail and nothing more. He cites the official report, which asserts that the old man became "enraged and attacked the investigating officer" after "contradictions became apparent in the prisoner's testimony" (6). Far short of describing the details of the beating that the torturers must have inflicted on the old man, the report primly announces that "a scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall," and that "[e]fforts to revive him were unsuccessful" (6). Coetzee's known interest in the constraints and discursive omissions of the passive-voice construction¹² mediates the carefully circumspect phrasing of the official report, which legitimates, verifies, and performs the ritual of the torture interrogation. However, there is a gross discrepancy between the oppressive violence of the torture session and the public record which effects a substitution at the moment of inquiry: interrogation replaces torture, 'scuffle' supplants police brutality.¹³ No one is apparently responsible for the prisoner's fall, nor is it ever made clear how a single fall against a wall produced immediate death. As for the 'efforts' undertaken to revive the prisoner, we gain no insight into their specificity, intensity or

¹² Attwell cites three Coetzee essays "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device" (1980), "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" (1980), and "Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language" (1982) to demonstrate the author's interest in "[c]ertain elements of the passive style —such as its air of circumspection and the idea of agentlessness" (74).

¹³ Jean-Philippe Wade comments on the chilling similarity between the official report of the old man's death and the real-life police account of the death of South African activist and intellectual Stephen Biko (qtd. in Attwell 74).

duration, even if we cling to the extremely shaky conviction that the guards ever bothered trying to 'revive' their victim in the first place.

The tension here is at once individuated, shuttling the relay of power between colonizer and colonized with a single murder; reifying, a larger consolidation of the imperial subject position, allowing it to "congeal" over time, to use Butler's term; and operationally convulsive, never absolutely successful, always leaving traces. The old man's body, chained by the colonial speech act to constitutive nonbeing, individuates at precisely the moment when it ceases to embody itself directly in speech. In speaking, it recedes endlessly into victimhood and nonbeing; in being spoken *of*, it emerges in the public register, but alien to itself, nameless, stripped of vocality. It comes into being only when it dies, but that being is nameless and voiceless, spoken for, interpellated into annihilation. From interrogation to torture to report, we unearth the imperial relay, the circuit of interpellation "whose 'content' is neither true nor false: it does not have description as its primary task. Its purpose is to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time. Its reiterative operation has the effect of sedimenting its 'positionality' over time" (Butler, *Excitable* 33-34). The old man's death convulsively establishes the 'positionality' of imperialism, permitting the re-formation of imperial discourse and functioning as the staging-ground for the possibility of this discourse's life and continued circulation. His death is one of a multitude of deaths which consolidate the usage of the term 'barbarians,' "a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force" (36).

Butler links the potency of this repetition to "encoded memory or a trauma" that "defies and propagates representation at once" (36), but refuses to accept the blank, mechanically perfect replication of social trauma that must always be the aim of the one

in power, the imperial agent, the colonialist. Rather, she positions hate speech as the site of a burgeoning resistant potential even as it also indicates the staging and continuance of the original trauma:

Social trauma takes the form, not of a structure that repeats mechanically, but rather of an ongoing subjugation, the restaging of injury through signs that both occlude and reenact the scene. Can repetition be both the way that trauma is repeated but also the way in which it breaks with the historicity to which it is in thrall? What makes for a reverse citation in the scene of trauma, how can hate speech be cited against itself? (36-37)

To answer the latter question, enter the author, willed or not, intentional or not. This is not the re-citing of hate speech, which reproduces trauma (37), but a staging of silence that does not permit the speaker of hate speech to wield absolute discursive power over his target: the trap door is not neatly covered, obfuscated by further speech, by attempts to speak for the old man. Coetzee cites imperial hate speech against itself by indicating the absolute limit of the official, imperial, rational public register, and also by refusing the official report as hate speech: he rejects the smooth ritual that accompanies the report by gesturing to its hollowness, its discursive strategies, its silences, its omissions, its moments of slippage. And as I will argue in my next textual example, this rejection is also a rejection of the Austinian and Kantian distinction between public and private, between formal, illocutionary (performative) speech on the one hand and informal, perlocutionary (consequential) speech on the other. For if the torture of the old man is unmistakably a sign of imperial hegemony, the Magistrate's private, personal encounters with the barbarian girl are no less revelatory, no less indicative of the extent to which the imperial ability to construct the Other is shackled by its own logic, by the contours of its ontology, by a necessary blindness, if the imperium is to continue to be recognizable to itself *as* empire.

(The barbarian girl)

The Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl begins before the two enter into speech: when he sees her kneeling "in the shade of the barracks wall a few yards from the gate, muffled in a coat too large for her, a fur cap open before her on the ground" (25). She is made abject in relation to the imperial military apparatus (the barracks); her physical and social uncertainty (close to the gate, or exit¹⁴); the discomfort of her clothes, which do not fit her; and the open cap which implies that she is a beggar and a vagrant. Two corollaries emerge: the material, economic, and social realities that trace and shape the barbarian girl's starting-point for agency, and the hierarchical subject position the Magistrate occupies before he even speaks to her. The Magistrate sees the girl in relation to the apparatus of imperial power, stripped of individuated identity, enmeshed in "a situation in which one is named without knowing that one is named" (Butler, *Excitable* 31). Small wonder he has so much difficulty remembering what she looks like. The gatekeeper's characterization of her is essentially 'blind,' 'barbarian', and 'left behind.' Here we see the context that defines, reports on, and exceeds the speech act to follow, a context that etiolates the certainty that the participants will consequently have absolute and self-willed control over their speech acts: the terrain is already shaky.

I cite this uncertainty not to 'prove' or 'disprove' what the Magistrate says, but rather to question whether his words can constitutively fulfill the promise they seem to offer, to raise the possibility that the weight of imperial discourse intercepts his speech acts at the moment of their utterance, rendering them infelicitous to their intended or stated effect. They appear as stilted, rehearsed words on stage or in a play, to use the example that Austin cites, but they transact within an *unstaged* situation. Thus when the

¹⁴ Also a reference to Cavafy's poem that is also the title of the novel.

Magistrate says, “They tell me you are blind,” (25) the speech act is, intentionally or not, injurious, a exhortative call “that makes what it names,” but which “also subordinates what it makes” (Butler, *Excitable* 31). Instead of using unspecified and falsely multiplied testimony (who are ‘they’? only one gatekeeper, as far as we know) to confirm her blindness, the Magistrate might as well say, “They tell me that I may exert control over you as I wish,” or “They tell me that you are blind, possessed of a weakness that renders you Other, to whom I owe nothing but the gratification of my own desires.” The scene is worth citing at some length:

“I can see,” she says. Her eyes move from my face and settle somewhere behind me to my right.

“Where do you come from?” Without thinking I cast a glance over my shoulder: she is staring at nothing but empty wall. Her gaze has grown rigid. Already knowing the answer, I repeat my question.¹⁵ She meets it with silence.

I dismiss the soldier. We are alone.

“I know who you are,” I say.

The barbarian girl refutes the Magistrate’s interpellation (though not with unequivocal success, given her position in relation to the colonists) by claiming the faculty of sight, albeit a sight that apprehends phenomena without directly engaging and thus controlling the object of her gaze. The Other stares back, inscrutable and unsettling. The Magistrate’s question (“Where do you come from?”) presents itself as simple inquiry, yet both he and the barbarian girl know that the question is merely the ritual that must necessarily inaugurate “a reality rather than report on an existing one” (Butler, *Excitable* 33). He has no need of an answer because the question consolidates the imperial position in its very utterance, regardless of the answer — only the man of Empire, the wielder of power, can ever ask such a question — and because the question is also, paradoxically, the site at

¹⁵ A classic example of Spivak’s construction of the patronizing western subject, secure in the knowledge that the Other has nothing to offer, positioning charity as the limit of ethical responsibility, and *utterly unprepared to listen to the subaltern*.

which the imperial position must reproduce itself.

However, the girl's silence refuses the *implicit* mastery that the imperial subject has over the context, forcing the Magistrate to confess, in *explicit* terms, that he knows the answer to the question he has just asked. His next statement renders the naked operation of power manifest: "Do you make a living by begging? [...] You know you are not supposed to be in town. We could expel you at any time and send you back to your people" (26). Can we really expect the barbarian girl to own or master the content of her speech acts, to negotiate absolutely and securely from an indestructible base of privilege, irrespective of the social, political, and cultural factors that constrain and circumscribe agency? This empty stage performance, caught and exposed in a fictional work, problematizes the Magistrate's circumspection: concern for a 'vagrant' when he is perfectly aware of who she is; threats of expulsion based on 'citizenship' that assign a bland legality to what is ultimately a brutal exercise of power; innocuous inquiries about her profession; and sexual demands masquerading as offers of employment. And yet, if we uphold Austinian and Kantian logic, this is a private scene, without witnesses in its crucial stage (the guard has been dismissed), a scene from which we can apparently learn nothing because it transacts *outside* the rational public register.

The Magistrate believes in the infinite possibility of the transformative speech act across varying times, places, subject positions, and colonial epistemologies, and this belief forms the literary basis for the invitation to counterfocalize that is a hallmark of Coetzee's oeuvre. Constantly engaged in constructing a free speaking subject whose mastery of the speech act isolates with regard to the specific context, the Magistrate seeks to conceal the operation of the discursive field that severely limits the speaking time

of the colonized (which I have already discussed in chapter one¹⁶). If he can reduce the sociopolitical imperialist power to a single encounter between Othered torturer and Othered barbarian girl, he can absolve himself of any complicity. This absolution enables an appropriation of the same judicial language that assigns singularity to the perpetrator of hate speech, in which, Butler argues, “the subject is not only fabricated as the prior and causal origin of a painful effect that is recast as an injury, but the action whose effects are injurious is no longer an action, the continuous present of ‘a doing,’ but is reduced to a ‘singular act’” (*Excitable* 45). Just as the state positions the individual user of hate speech as the originator of ‘hateful’ discourse, eliding itself from culpability, so does the Magistrate eliminate “a critical understanding of state power” in order to render himself “a neutral instrument of legal enforcement” (Butler 48). In chambers with the barbarian girl, he asks her if she does whatever she wants, if she feels free to act or say anything in his presence, though he knows he is “being carried dangerously by the words” (Coetzee, *Barbarians* 40). Hovering in the background is the presumed history that accompanies Coetzee’s unnamed empire, the history of imperial hegemony and reality of Joll and the Magistrate as occupiers of colonial territory, but all this can vanish if the Magistrate is able to install “the subject as fictive origin” of context, both with regard to the imperium and the barbarian girl. If she acknowledges, of her own ‘free will,’ that she can do whatever she wants, she “assumes the burden of responsibility for the very history that subject dissimulates” (Butler 50), leaving his hands clean and disassociating him from ruthless colonial rulers and torturers. Ultimately, though, the Magistrate is unable to sustain this delusion:

¹⁶ The Greenlander, with perhaps a differing view on those wild mountain masses that so intrigue Kant, the Hoy, who, oddly enough, might not share the European colonialist’s fascination with the shapeless disarray of nature that allows him to construct a Sublime of which he always remains master through the boundless play of trained reason.

I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. No! No! No! I cry to myself. [...] There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (43-44)

The Magistrate's fears and anxieties surface through a series of apparently 'non-serious' (Austin's term) or private encounters that, in the Enlightenment tradition, should theoretically add nothing to our understanding of how language shapes and mediates our intentions. Why then, does the barbarian girl's torture affect a representative of public judicial law in such a fashion? Could it be that Coetzee is forcing us to consider the 'non-serious', the private, the ordinary, as crucial components of any meaningful construction of postcolonial ethics? As much as the logic of the Enlightenment seeks to hold the private, the joke, and the non-serious outside the realm of ethical selfhood, the dilemma of the Magistrate invokes ethics on a different terrain altogether, a terrain on which intentionality remains under permanent erasure, acknowledging that though "the category of intention will not disappear" and will retain its place, "it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance" (Derrida, *Limited* 18). Furthermore, oppositions between public and private lose their structural viability and rigour, giving way to "different kinds of marks or chains of iterable marks and not with an opposition between citational utterances, on the one hand, and singular and original event-utterances, on the other" (18).

Once driven to the possibility that no utterance is singular and original, we must renounce the ontological security of the public register, in which speakers originate and control their utterances, using rational speech to generate a series of intentional, logical effects. Who or what constitutes the magistrate's right to govern the scene of utterance? As the colonized subject, from where does the barbarian girl lose her access to the cultural

matrix which would presumably allow her to speak, to be understood, to name herself and consequently others? And isn't the prior constitutive descriptor 'barbarian', combined with a host of similarly reductive and degrading terms the magistrate employs ('incomplete,' 'flawed,' 'lazy,' etc.), the signal of the imperium's power to construct and to injure through speech *outside* of the scene of utterance?

As the magistrate, struggling to picture the girl's face before her torture, has a "vision of her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin" (41), he hails her out of earshot, outside of the scene of utterance, denying her the chance to speak back. When he decides to return the barbarian girl to her people, the absurdity of free choice is glaringly evident in their final exchange: "When you have spoken you can decide what you want to do. If you want to go with them, if they will see you back to your family, go with them. If you decide to come back with us, you can come back with us. Do you understand? I am not forcing you" (69). After exhorting her to speak the "truth", which she immediately exposes as no more than a self-serving fiction, given the imbalance of power between the two of them, the Magistrate stages his final confession:

"Tell them what you like. Only, now that I have brought you back [to her people], as far as I can, I wish to ask you very clearly to return to the town with me. Of your own choice." I grip her arm. "Do you understand me? That is what I want."

"Why?" The word falls with deathly softness from her lips. She knows that it confounds me, has confounded me from the beginning. The man with the gun advances slowly until he is almost upon us. She shakes her head. "No, I do not want to go back to that place." (70)

What the magistrate wishes is the occlusion of any answer that would reveal the unequal distribution of power between colonizer and colonized. Instead, he clings to the illusion that there is a free, informed, rational choice available to the barbarian girl; that she is willing to choose in favour of her captor, who bears no similarity to her torturers; and that

she can be absolute master of the total context governing her speech act, initiating a “metalepsis by which the subject who ‘cites’ the performative is temporarily produced as the belated and fictive origin of the performative itself” (Butler, *Excitable* 49). However, no longer in a colonial stronghold (the Magistrate’s bedroom), surrounded by barbarians in a remote setting, the Magistrate has lost access to the material and cultural hegemony that would subtend the ritual behind his utterance, which now reveals his dependence on coercive power to maintain the illusion of intentionality and transparency in speech. The barbarian girl explicitly refuses him now, as she could not in his chambers, and returns to her people.

Benita Parry has cautioned against viewing the Other as “encoding a protowriting” (48) that produces “the euphoria of desire unmediated by words” (46), assigning a fixed and romanticized agency to the colonized subject. Parry locates such an impulse in Coetzee’s writing, from which she infers a reflexive valorization of the valence of Othered silence, a valorization that attenuates any “critique of how deprivation inflicts silence on those who are homeless in a hierarchical social world” (46). However, Parry overlooks the way in which the imperial or colonialist viewpoint, present in all of Coetzee’s novels, mediates the re-presentation of silence as euphoric desire. Elizabeth Curren, the cancer-stricken protagonist of *Age of Iron* whose final letter to her estranged daughter constitutes the novel’s entire narrative, stages this re-presentation in terms that clearly reveal her own epistemological imprint: “I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine” (103). Curren’s loquacity forms a thunderous contrast both to Vercueil, the homeless man who becomes Curren’s caretaker in her last days, and to Bheki and ‘John,’ the taciturn black teenagers who become fugitives from the law, and

whom the apartheid police eventually locate and kill. Their silence speaks to an experience of oppression beyond what Curren herself is capable of envisioning. We can now put silence ‘in its right place,’ attentive to what constrains the Other’s speaking time and signifying power within a colonial discursive framework.

Nor is it clear how a representation of “non-linguistic intuitive consciousness” (Parry 46) — undermining the rule of rationalism — attenuates Coetzee’s sociopolitical critique, given his insistence on situating the imperium at the limit of its own understanding, helpless, unsuccessfully attempting to bridge a chasm. The Magistrate’s words betray a need to make his intention transparent; they destroy that possibility at the moment of utterance; they are sabotaged by the “structure of iteration” which ensures that “the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content” (Derrida, *Limited* 18). Out of this discursive instability emerges the Derridian *différance*, the sign that can never know itself or others to the full desired extent it wishes; intentionality is not lost, to be sure, merely refracted through a heightened and polyvalent register of possibilities in which speech effects “do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility” (19).

This presupposition of failure in Austinian speech act theory is an inevitable and inexorably traced consequence of Enlightenment rationalism, the two traditions linked by the alienated, alienating, and self-defeating heuristic of control that both seek to render unchallenged. The imperium speaks, reaches out, and in so doing obtains what it has desired all along, what it fears, what it must forever uncover in order to reify its own discursive logic: it needs, desires, dreads, and must always produce barbarians, enemies, terrorists, threats to its sovereign integrity. The paper slips whose significance the

magistrate constantly attempts to decipher may be personal letters, communications, war plans, poems, or gibberish; the barbarian word for 'war' may signify 'vengeance' or even 'justice' (*Barbarians* 109). "There is no knowing what sense is intended," says the magistrate, who ascribes this uncertainty to "barbarian cunning" (109), but would it not be more accurate to say that Empire can never know the governed and intentional total sense that originated from the person who wrote the words, that it is part of the morphology of Empire that it can never know? If it were to know, would it be Empire?

There is a dangerous sublation at work when the Magistrate "undermines the moral and political distinctions among war, vengeance, and justice" (Moses 122) by offering contradictory interpretations of the slips.¹⁷ Can the Magistrate, a citizen of Empire, merely stand up and out of its discursive logic, and stick his head out the window, as it were, to see what lies 'outside'? Would he know what outside means, if his aim is to extend his 'inside' out to foreseeable limits, to make that limit always already the threshold beyond which citizenship, ethical responsibility, humanity, and presencing vanish? What does the Magistrate owe barbarian Others in any system of thought in which they are the acquiescent and unquestioned victims of such a term, in which his Empire arrogates to itself the right to kill large numbers of 'barbarians' in their own land, for purposes not clearly seen, purposes which would be in any case insufficient to justify colonial occupation, domination, and hegemony? How can they speak if they are constitutively outside the rational discursive public register which is the only legitimate means of dealing with ethical questions? The imperium, by definition, can only ever direct

¹⁷ Anne Chantot sees the multiplicity of interpretations here as evidence of the novel's larger concern with portraying "the failure of traditional allegory and its 'naturalization' of a system of univocal correspondences" and undermining "colonial allegory by disclosing its Manichean code" (34). Furthermore, she positions the Magistrate's failure to decipher the slips as an authorial counter to the reader's 'colonization' of the text through ontologically secure allegory. We must resist the urge to prefigure and 'discover' stable truths "if we are to dissociate ourselves from the colonial reader embodied by Colonel Joll, and to a certain extent, by the Magistrate" (35).

“its efforts first and foremost toward writing and reading its *own script*,” which transpires in large part because the Empire “gives itself form by writing on its subjects” (Moses 120). Thus, the Magistrate inherits the onerous burden of reformulating his sense of ethical responsibility from the rubble of the previous episteme, “wrought to a pitch of desperation in [his] efforts to escape the intolerable burden of the master-slave relationship” (Watson 22):

I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame? (*Barbarians* 151).

As Teresa Dovey notes, *Barbarians* presents “an attempt to assimilate the other and the history of the colonised other into what the Magistrate assumes is the universal perspective of liberal humanism” (143), an attempt that is resoundingly unsuccessful, and compounded by the Magistrate’s own realization that “[t]here has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it” (152). Tracing liberal discourse back to its roots in the Enlightenment, we can discern here the Kantian strategy of situating itself outside discursive systems, leaving the specificity of an European subject position as a priori, unexamined, unavailable for critique as system, telos, and tautology. We find an altogether more direct challenge to the presumptions of the Enlightenment in the subject of the next section, Coetzee’s *Foe*.

Through a Foe’s eyes

As a preamble to her exegesis of *Foe*, Gayatri Spivak uncovers an important problematic of deconstructive theory, a “fixation with the stalled origin and the stalled end; many names for *différance* and *aporia*” (*Reason* 175), but also notes that this fixation

is the unavoidable necessity of any investigation that seeks to preserve its ethical and philosophical rigour instead of lapsing into “the liberal pluralism of repressive tolerance and sanctioned ignorance” (176). I argue for *Foe* as a dramatization of limits and origins, a scrupulous concern for the otherness of the margin in a novel that “figures the singular and unverifiable margin, the refracting barrier over against the wholly other that one assumes in the dark” (175). *Foe* solidifies and extends my argument for Coetzee’s oeuvre as a counter-reading to the rational Enlightenment tradition and to the self-contained hegemony of Austinian speech act theory, but this counter-reading assumes visible form as a limit case that indicates the progression¹⁸ of Coetzee’s concern with the ethics of literary representation in the postcolonial arena. This progression manifests in a remorseless literary interrogation of the philosophical concepts of ideality and auto-affection through speech, concepts that I will briefly summarize, using Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s theory of signs.

Derrida argues that in the tradition of metaphysical inquiry that he associates with Husserl, and, implicitly, with Kant, speech allows us to maintain the fiction that we do not move through the world when we speak (*Phenomena* 75). The object before us, the actual embodied physical thing, is determined by the ideal object (the object *in thought*) “whose showing may be repeated indefinitely, whose presence [...] is indefinitely reiterable precisely because, freed from all mundane spatiality, it is a pure noema¹⁹ that I can express without having, at least apparently, to pass through the world” (75). The body detaches from the objects it ‘touches’ in language through the ideality of the object in thought, then effaces its tracks by situating the ideal object prior to the corporeal

¹⁸ I initially wrote ‘logical progression’ and consequently suffered the humiliation of realizing my reliance, unwittingly and in discursive terms, on this same Enlightenment tradition.

¹⁹ The Greek word ‘meaning,’ which, in phenomenological terms, is analogous to a mental schema in that the noema is an outline or representation of a thing, but expressed purely in the subject’s own consciousness.

sense-apprehension of the actual object. According to Enlightenment logic (and this is a profoundly significant subreption), ideality comes first, through the back door, and by its preeminence is now capable of ‘impartially’ governing the terms of the scene it has tacitly helped to construct:

The ideality of the object, which is only its being-for a nonempirical consciousness, can only be expressed in an element whose phenomenality does not have worldly form. *The name of this element is the voice. The voice is heard.* [...] My words are “alive” because they seem not to leave me: not to fall outside me, outside my breath, at a visible distance; not to cease to belong to me, to be at my disposition “without further props.” (76)

Because intangible, because apparently auto-affective, the voice is allowed to forego “worldly form” and establish a noumenal connection to the ideal object of my thoughts. In order for speech to function thus, as an uninflected conveyor of meaning, words must achieve “presence and self-presence” (76) without allowing temporal distance to creep out from between speaker and speech. These words must seem inseparable from me, from my self-willed actualization of them; they must seem to proceed from me unimpeded, without my having to register the bodily functions that permit speech to occur: drawing in my breath, forming sounds with my lips and tongue, assigning tonality (or perhaps no tonal variation at all) to the words that magically, reflexively spring forth from me. Once given over into speech, the “phenomenological ‘body’ of the signifier [words] seems to fade away at the very moment it is produced”, seeming “already to belong to the element of ideality” (77). Yet if we hold Derrida’s analysis to be valid, valourizing ‘ideality’ as a concept signals the ethico-philosophical slippage by which ideality itself is produced: a “complicity between [...] voice and ideality” (77) that prevents any examination of what might lie between speech and its actualization, of the role of the speaker in shaping the

very 'ideality' of an object *through* speech, which transfigures the object within the total hegemonic field. Ideality operates through the power of the one who prefabricates the ideality to which the object must gravitate; the one who then effaces the constructedness of the ideal.

What is the ideality of Friday, the mute and mutilated colonized Other, in the perception of Susan Barton, the white European castaway whose narrative inaugurates our encounter with Friday, Crusoe, and the island? Is it posture, gesture, bodily contortion, implied defiance? Is Friday intentionality stripped of its positive charge, the face that stands murderously mute? Consider this description:

The man squatted beside me. He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust. "*Agua*," I said, trying Portuguese, and made a sign of drinking. He gave no reply, but regarded me as he would a seal or a porpoise thrown up by the waves, that would shortly expire and then be cut up for food. At his side he had a spear. I have come to the wrong island, I thought, and let my head sink: I have come to an island of cannibals. (Foe 5-6)

Barton unconsciously determines the reality she fears through a prefabricated ideality, which is so intensely focused and affectively charged that it no longer registers as such: Friday is the murderous cannibal who gazes upon the putative feast of human flesh, no different to him from animal flesh. Barton herself vanishes from the descriptive framework through the apparent phenomenological coextension of speech and speaker: the paucity of temporal distance produces words that "seem not to fall" from Barton, that do not appear to shape or be shaped by any discursive field in which dark skin is the marker of 'savage' custom. Barton's words immediately recoil back down the affective conduit that links intentionality in thought with expression in speech: troping Friday as

savage cannibal, material reality assumes the discursive form that the narrator has always feared, erasing the traces that might expose the discursive trajectory of the beholder. This interpenetrating effacement has as much to do with the structure of the linguistic conduit as it does with the gap between intentionality and utterance: it is speech, in its presumed dis-figuration and disembodiment, its traffic in unimpeded ideality, that produces the cannibal-ideal-Friday. He is a cannibal without Susan having to “pass through the world”; the apparently decontextualized purity of this figuration detaches her from embodied specificity. Of course Susan eventually learns that Friday is not a cannibal, but how does Coetzee negotiate this learning? Still convinced that Friday wants to taste her flesh, Barton begins to calm down when she notices that “he smelled of fish, and of sheepswool on a hot day” (6). Yet her fear only seriously lessens when she is forced to ride on Friday’s back, “with my petticoat and my chin brushing his springy hair, [...] my fear of him abating in this strange backwards embrace” (6). Susan is forced to jettison the hegemony of speech and embrace an unknown destiny, not knowing what lies ahead, clinging in hope and fear to the Other, whose nature she has not, after all, been able to survey, classify, and control.

Spivak has talked of the catachresis at work in the scene where Susan tries to teach Friday to spell the word ‘Africa’, where Coetzee casts the name as a “metonym that points to a great indeterminacy: the mysteriousness of the space upon which we are born” (*Reason* 188). I want to argue that these attempts to produce and instantiate “foundational” signifiers instead of “timebound naming[s]” (188) point to a greater indeterminacy: the problem of controlling infinity within Enlightenment discourse. In a situation where, as Spivak argues, “words are losing their modes of existence as *semes*” (188), Friday stands in for a wholly dis-figured Other: territory, epistemology, subaltern.

If, as Spivak claims, Friday is the silence of the margin writ large, then the margin possesses an infinite capacity to hold its silence, “a reminder of the alterity of history, a line we cannot cross” (189). As I demonstrated in chapter one, this is living death according to Kantian rationalism.²⁰ Coetzee ruthlessly seals infinity in the unrepresentable shadow of the Other, Friday’s body, rejecting the security of “absolute proximity of self-identity, the being-in-front of the object available for repetition” (Derrida, *Phenomena* 99). Friday the object is not available for repetition, and this withholding suspends the possibility of deferring what Derrida refers to as the “living present” (99) through ideality. Pure, self-actualized, transparent thought never completes its trajectory through the formative imperial circuit of self-knowledge. Friday-as-object is a constantly unstable figure for Susan, shadowy, unknown, mysterious, alien, possessed of multiple vertiginous histories, always escaping the narrative parameters of European rational self-knowledge, intercepting the “‘apparent transcendence’ of the voice” (77) with his marginal trace, below and between the locutionary registers of the text.

Derek Attridge contends that the form of Susan’s narrative is not “the mysterious immaterial language most fiction uses as its medium, nor even a representation of speech, but a representation *in writing of writing*” (172); the quotation marks that begin each of her paragraphs signal the germination of a specific narrative, at once individuated and part of the larger cultural “reworking” that attains “vividness by exploiting culturally-specific conventions and contexts” (173). However, this narrative positions Friday as the impossibly figured Other within the limits of imperial discourse, the Other whose silence is “*produced by* — at the same time as it makes possible — the dominant discourse”

²⁰ The willful preservation of infinity within the colonial subject (racialized Other, mountain mass in disarray) in a text that signals the Other as persistently unverifiable, tenacious in guarding its silence, refusing to let imaginative failure properly subordinate to reason so that infinity, ideality, and absolute self-presence may reside only in the European colonial subject

(181). The dialectical imperial formation creates and thrusts colonized silence into the periphery as the paradoxical precondition of its own existence, premising itself “on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion, it is a silencing by inclusion as well: any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity”

(181). When Foe insists that they “must make Friday’s silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday” (142), Susan asks:

But who will do it? [...] It is easy enough to lie in bed and say what must be done, but who will dive into the wreck? On the island I told Cruso it should be Friday, with a rope about his middle for safety. But if Friday cannot tell us what he sees, is Friday in my story any more than a figuring (or prefiguring) of another diver? (142)

Diver and wreck only encounter one another through the rope, which ostensibly secures and stabilizes without altering the diver’s perception in this transformed state (underwater). Later, though, we discover the shakiness of this representation: “About his neck — I had not observed this before — is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain” (155). The innocent rope, initially visualized as attached to Friday’s waist, has now gravitated to the neck, becoming both mark and means of enslavement.²¹ But what, in this case, is the figurative wreck that prompts Susan to recall the actual experience of the island? Despite the eloquence of her articulation of the representative difficulty, Susan nonetheless effects another aporia, a crossing cunningly submerged, in which the heart of Friday’s narrative now resides *outside* his body, at a remove from Friday himself, who must dive through another substance to discover and ‘report back’ on the wreck. Yet it is clearly *Friday himself* who is the wreck, both hunter and quarry, attached to a rope that is

²¹ Tellingly, it is not Susan who narrates this passage but another, nameless narrator, who, in an attempt to communicate with Friday, is forced to leave the house where Foe (now styled Defoe by his own hand) is trying to rework Susan’s story into a publishable narrative: the narrator dives below the water to penetrate the wreck, where the dead colonists “float like stars against the low roof” (157).

really shackle, fetter, yoke and harness. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Susan actually believes in the existence of a narrative ‘wreck’ that is tangibly distinct from Friday; however, the slipperiness of the analogy, the anxious and unwitting revelation of the metaphor, is our clue to the enfolding omnipresence of the colonial episteme. Investing Friday with the metaphoric ideality of a wreck available to the senses in indefinite repetition, for limitless analysis, a wreck figured effortlessly through the auto-affective speech act which has already disappeared from the scene, “transforming the worldly opacity of its body into pure diapheneity” (Derrida, *Phenomena* 77), Susan presumes not merely another diver, *but an altogether different wreck* that has always already had nothing to do with Friday. At this sclerotic literary gesture, Friday once again vanishes.

Spivak’s assertion that “Friday’s body is not its own sign” (*Reason* 193), which directly contradicts the nameless narrator who replaces Susan at the end of the novel, positions Coetzee’s literary endeavour in *Foe* as an unquenchable desire to suspend the conflation of self with speech, to isolate, establish, and then push out ideality from the speaker into temporality, into the world, so we can identify it as such. For bodies are only their own signs in our thought, constructed as ideality, whatever our fantasies about their embodied presence in the world. Doesn’t the novel’s closing stream of prose (like the stream that issues from Friday’s mouth), detached from the epistolary conventions established thus far, mysteriously ungrounded, appearing more as a wild dream or speculative fantasy, dramatize a literary aporia? To frame the issue another way, is this entire section not the dialectical site of its own destruction as literary text? Coetzee does not allow the reader to put fantasy in its right place through reason; forced to abdicate from the apex of the sense hierarchy, reason never returns from exile to reclaim its throne.

Susan does not reappear to trap the story within the narrative convention of the letter, nor does Coetzee allow Daniel Defoe, the creation of Daniel Foe, to 'authenticate' (dominate) all that has transpired. The dethronement of reason permits a sustained subversion of the colonial episteme, inviting the reader's failure to counterfocalize at the same time as it resolutely posits infinity as the domain of the colonized Other, the territory, the land mass in disarray, and not within the colonizer. The imaginative failure to conceptualize Friday's subjectivity is a *culturated* failure.²² Coetzee offers no recourse to mathematical or aesthetic tropes of containment in the Kantian tradition: Friday adamantly holds his silence. We are confounded; we are stymied; we dissolve into tears of frustration.

'There shall be no mourning'²³

Based on the analysis thus far, it is neither outrageous nor far-fetched to suggest the presence of a profound and continuous sense of melancholy and grief in the novel *Foe*: a lack that speaks to a loss, to standing before the body of a loved one, prostrate for the one who is no longer with us, no longer available to supplement some part deep within myself that I now feel, perhaps have always felt, is incomplete without this person: "I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (Butler, *Precarious* 22). I want to plead for a conception of Kantian ideality in rational public speech that convulsively and involuntarily vocalizes this issue of loss which is loss to oneself, as much as we may pretend that our grief is entirely for the one who is absent,

²² A failure directly related to cultural specificity, to the very foundation of European 'civilization.' The endeavour fails not because of chance or the vagaries of the novel's protagonists, but because any attempt to imagine the Other according to the Enlightenment principles of rational humanism and control over the infinite must necessarily fail, returning us to safer terrain where we can use reason to supplement the imaginative lack (as I have argued in chapter one). This concept of culturated failure will become more important in my analysis of *Disgrace*.

²³ Lyotard qtd. in Derrida, *Mourning* 217.

gone, dead, reduced to nil, and which is also the subject of critique in Coetzee's novel.

The absolute ideality of thought which we can impose on an object without temporal disjunction, without having to acknowledge that anything, perhaps everything, is lost in the imposing; the one-to-one correlation between rational speech in the public domain and the expected result; the apparent auto-affection at work when we speak, the sense that these words are from us and yet not visibly produced by our bodies: are these not our wildest fantasies, without which we are forced to confront the possibility of death over time?

In *Foe*, Coetzee exposes the futility of knowing the Other in the language of colonialism, constructing the speech act as auto-entropic dysphoria, yet unwilling to deny the illuminative power of the literary project even in 'failure.' Rejecting the unproductively self-destructive 'logic' of certain postmodernisms, which end in a narcissistic abdication from ethical responsibility altogether, the convulsive self-interrogation of *Foe* expresses and critiques the terror of non-response, the supreme sublimation that drives us to kill the absolute Other before us, in order to efface the thunderous reminder of 'non-response,' Levinas's term which Derrida invokes in a eulogy for Levinas himself.²⁴ Derrida uses the occasion of his own mourning of a close friend, Levinas, to unearth and examine a cornerstone of the Levinasian oeuvre: the face, whose vulnerability is the first injunction against murder. According to Derrida, the moment when we are sundered from the dead is not a release from ethical responsibility. It is, rather, a moment when "infinite sadness must shy away from everything in mourning that

²⁴ Butler also circles the face, to articulate a certain pathology in the collective response of the U.S. following the World Trade Center attacks of September 11 2001: guilt, rage, and anxiety, a retreat into fantasies of imperial omnipotence, a refusal to use the moment of loss to understand oneself better, to use Butler's paraphrasing of George W. Bush's address following the event, "because we have finished grieving and now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief" (*Precarious* 29). Terrified of non-response, the U.S. cannot relinquish "the notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States," a notion which, Butler argues, "must be given up, lost and mourned, as narcissistic and grandiose fantasies must be lost and mourned" (40).

would turn toward nothingness, that is, toward what still, even potentially, would link guilt to murder” (*Mourning* 204). What is our response to death unadorned with the glossia of mourning, in an encounter that strips away all our defenses? Will we embrace or murder?

Aware of Derrida’s postulation that death is not “annihilation, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the ‘without-response’” (203), we can perceive the shadow of Friday suffusing the text: the Other before Susan without language, without speech, defying her cultural and philosophical preoccupations, stubbornly refusing the colonial exhortation to response, withholding the certainty and the intimacy that she desires:

Oh Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered! It is like our desire, when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us. [...] I am trying to bring it home to you, who have never, for all I know, spoken a word in your life, and certainly never will, what it is to speak into a void, day after day, without answer. And I use a similitude: I say that the desire for answering speech is like the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another human being. (Foe 79-80)

When the lips we kiss respond, are we enacting something analogous to speech? Or is it perhaps the presence of the word ‘respond’ in Susan’s exhortation that might draw our attention to the terror of death as the ultimate non-response? But this is not death, the absence of the person Susan loves, but the unrelieved, factitive presence of the person she fears, or rather, the person she never expected to see, in this instant, which transports her beyond a hitherto-final limit, in this instant, when the world of speech gives way to the abyss between and below worlds. Susan links speech to tactility in a slippery metalepsis, attempting to secure the auto-affection of ideality expressed in speech, which must be coextensive with touch and communicate the presence of the Other without any affective

loss, because any admission of loss generated by non-response is intolerable to rational thought.

To situate oneself ideally with relation to objects, to encapsulate and to contain, as rational speech would insist on doing: this is what Susan and Foe search for in Friday and what Friday will never give them. Instead, they encounter the non-response, Friday's absolute refusal to transact in a colonially constructed system of linguistic intelligibility. When Friday erases the words Susan writes on a slate and repeatedly draws a series of eyes which he in turn erases when she asks him to hand her the slate, he rebounds ethical responsibility toward Susan in a way for which she is unprepared.²⁵ And yet this obligation clearly, in Friday's case, transcends speech, because Friday cannot speak and does not even seem to understand language, residing outside the symbolic order of which language is the chief representative. Friday is the ultimate affront to Enlightenment logic: an ethical claim anterior to language, giving Susan over to an end she cannot fathom, forcing her to confront a non-response to which her first reaction may well be to silence, injure, dominate, and even murder. A body before Susan, available in its totality to subjugate, to order here and there: this constitutes the supreme moment of ethical choice for the colonizer, revealing "an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing" (Butler, *Precarious* 135). Could this not announce, perhaps, staggering beneath the weight of a terrifying uncertainty, the coalescence within the ethical register of what Levinas calls the face?

For Butler, the Levinasian face stages "a scene of agonized vocalization" (133), in which suffering constitutes a kind of 'speech' that disdains the origin of the mouth, and

²⁵ The unexpectedness and provisionality of an ethical call is of primary importance to Butler, who asserts that the legitimate ethical address arrives "from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are ruined, that may well be the sign that something is morally binding upon me" (*Precarious* 130).

the face itself functions as a catachresis for other body parts that “are said to cry and sob and to scream, as if they were a face or, rather, a face with a mouth, a throat, or indeed, just a mouth and throat from which vocalizations emerge that do not settle into sounds” (133). Ethically, the face is always already displaced, evacuated from where we logically expect its presence, “a figure for what cannot be named, an utterance that is not, strictly speaking, linguistic” (133). And if Susan finds herself groping for this spectral presence, unable to make sense of what it demands of her, “speak[ing] into a void, day after day, without answer” (*Foe* 80), is it not because there is a call, or sound, or gesture, that must always elude the grasp of her speech? The face of Friday demonstrates that “for representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure” (144). Friday is not only a limit, but also a living reminder of the fallacy of the concept of auto-affective speech, secure in its relation to objects through an imagined ideality.

In Susan’s search for Friday’s voice, she is instead compelled to look upon his face, at which realization the chasm opens: “From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island” (*Foe* 154). We return to beginnings, to alpha, not omega, using Daniel Foe’s words, to the source of auto-affection: the mouth, the lack from which sounds emerge, fully formed, already seeming to belong irrevocably to the world as they pass out of one’s throat, not even needing breath to take shape. But let us examine this apparently innocuous phrase “without a breath.” To begin with, lack of breath connotes a unity of intent and act, an occlusion of the bodily function necessary to produce sounds: the trace of the previous epistemology, clutching at the remnants of ideality in thought. Then, too, ‘without breath’ is death, the suspension of breath, but presumed to be a permanent state of being in which Friday can vocalize, though not verbalize, “the sounds

of the island.” However, if breathlessness is indeed death, what is the nature of this breathless zone where Friday dwells, coming to us like a wraith outside the discursive parameters of the story? Is Coetzee really situating Friday outside the living boundary? Or has Friday ceased to be an embodied character, taking his place inside the folds of *another* story, one whose author is, in the end, the author of Foe and Defoe, of Crusoe and Crusoe, of Friday and Susan? If this is indeed the case, there is undoubtedly something quite suggestive about Coetzee’s use of the present conditional tense when the unnamed interloper-narrator waits to hear what Friday has to say: “Then, *if* I can ignore the beating of my own heart, I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar” (154, emphasis mine). Here the conditional denotes a concern for preserving intact the reader’s sense of the attempt as putative, suspended, not actualized; the narrator has not (yet) managed to ignore the beating of his own heart. Instead, he merely indicates the possibility of doing so while leaving the success or failure of the endeavour unresolved. Coetzee then immediately strips objectivity and authority from what the narrator hears, which is “*as she said*, the roar of waves in a seashell” (154, emphasis added). We are thrown back upon the doubt that what this person hears may be merely an echo of an earlier discourse, no more than the ear constructing sounds according to a prior episteme, an anterior “roar,” eclipsing any specific rendering of the “sounds of the island.” What might these sounds be, outside the ontology of imperial discourse? Would these sounds be intelligible as sounds within the discursive framework of Enlightenment logic, a sphere from which nonrational recognition of responsibility remains forever and necessarily in exile, denying even the traces of its expulsion? If our sensory recognition of Friday’s voice is tied to the memory of an “*as she said*,” is it not hopelessly lost, fragmented, sundered from whatever authentic narrative we are hoping to expose?

This is the death, finally, that Derrida, Butler, and Levinas are tracking: a terribly final non-response, a void in which speech is constitutively fragmented, smashed into shards, which we feel compelled to cover with a discursive re-presentation of death through speech, because “those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (Butler, *Precarious* 141). Butler’s argument illuminates the epistemological ‘flip side’ of the two discursive constructions of death that Derrida charts in his eulogy for Jean-Francois Lyotard: the “beautiful” death, which sublates individuated experience to honourable collective memory to ensure that there is really no death (*Mourning* 235), and the “worse than death” of Auschwitz, in which “it is the extinction of the very name that forbids mourning” (237). Soldier, friend, loved one, die the death we prefer, so that the death does not take place. Terrorist, colonized, Other, die the death we will not even signify, so that there has never been anything worthy of the signifiers ‘death’ and ‘mourning.’ Using Butler, doesn’t Derrida’s formulation hold as true for life as it does for death? Isn’t Susan and Foe’s endeavour, finally and abjectly, the colonial fantasy that the colonized live the life they prefer, a life that transacts neatly, legibly, and safely within the parameters of imperial hegemony, which is to say, *a life that has never been worthy of mourning*? The worse-than-death stands behind the removal of Friday’s tongue: not merely an attempt to silence him, but to annihilate, to reduce him to nothingness, in fact, to kill. However, the power of Coetzee’s work lies in his ability to reveal that “[a]t the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face. [...] To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill” (Levinas qtd. in Butler,

Precarious 138). Friday never faces the originators of this attempt to annihilate. Was his tongue cut out by cannibals, colonists, slave-masters, Cruso, the author of the story, or all of the above? What Friday receives is the ‘worse than life’ that murders the name of the victim, and in so doing “constitutes the very meaning of the order ‘die,’ or ‘that he die,’ or even ‘that I die’” (Derrida, *Mourning* 237).

To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. Face to face with the Other, infinity never escapes the body of the other, never takes up stately residence within the ideality of my thought, never comfortably congeals in aesthetic or mathematical tropes of sublimity that allow me to ‘know’ objects by possessing them. *There shall be no mourning.* No soothing words, no comfortable homilies, no “consoling image, like the figure of a life that was indeed fulfilled,” and conversely, no eradication, no murder, no “disguised extinction of the name always lying in wait” (239). The indomitable yet spectral presence of Friday returns again and again, confounding the reader’s expectations: “The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday’s tongue” (*Foe* 117). Friday’s loss is a loss of auto-affection, the loss of a loss of disjunction between thought and word, the death of any pretense that the object Susan imagines in her thought comes before, and determines without touching, the actual object before her. At a stroke (the knife stroke that cuts out his tongue?), Friday becomes categorically withheld from the colonial register, which must supplant the infinity of the unavailable object with the supreme rational cognition of imagination’s limits, emptying the colonized body of the humanity that might allow Friday a place in the ethico-discursive ontology of mourning. Friday’s mouth, the *embouchure* from which the “sounds of the island” emerge, nonverbal and unspecified, indeed, perhaps never distinguishable from the roar of the waves or the beating of one’s own heart, aggregates what is ob-scene to rational

thought, linguistic knowledge, and empirical perception.

Friday's mouth remains defiant to the end, confounding the rational expectation (Susan's expectation, perhaps our expectation) that what emerges from it will transact within the realms of orderly rational empiricism. Anticipating the aperture to a realm of legible signs, we are transported instead to a place we did not expect, a site both *of* grief and *in* the throes of grief, because it, like the mouth, is lack, ghostly, neither making things in the world nor occupying a position of static being in the world, both spacing and place (Derrida, *Touch* 35). This is Friday's mouth, with its dark, undifferentiated issue, an "incommensurability of extension, as incommensurability between two ways of being extended, two spaces or two spacings [that] goes through a thinking of place, as a place or locus that is reduced to neither objective extension nor to objective space" (*Touch* 24). Neither spacing nor space, neither object nor subject, the mouth forms words that are always already in mourning: for themselves, for the guises they convulsively display, for the mouth itself, necromancer, being of two worlds, "[t]he revenant, between life and death" whose liminality "dictates an impossible mourning, an endless mourning—life itself" (35). The issue, the stream, running "northward and southward to the ends of the earth" (*Foe* 157), unending and unyielding, engulfing all visible matter, is insensible to the parameters of what 'should' issue from a mouth, that is, words, but here words, at the moment of their utterance, are "caught and filled with water and diffused" (157). Not logical for a mouth to cover the surface of the earth with its issue, surely, not possible for a seemingly infinite stream to originate "without breath, without interruption" (157) from a finite corporeal entity, Friday's body. Nonetheless, the reader encounters infinity that has resolutely refused to depart the colonized body, that will not be contained in a rational appreciation of imaginative limits, for Coetzee does not permit the faculty of

reason to regain control of the narrative. Instead, as Michael Marais notes in his examination of the Levinasian ethic in Coetzee's work, our "violent desire to comprehend Friday's silence, and thereby invest him with form and substance, has made way for an attentional response to his otherness" (172). The encounter is phantasmatic, figuratively macabre, neither dream nor nightmare nor sober reality, drenched in the colours of mourning, narratively illogical, and obsessively circling Friday, whose voice remains withheld until the very last, while "the reader figure reads with eyes that are shut" (172).²⁶

"The psyche is extended, knows nothing about it"²⁷

If the mouth, for Derrida, and the face, for Levinas, must necessarily gesture to a totality that supersedes and destabilizes their traditional metaphoric and symbolic deployment, we can say that "the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation" (Butler, *Precarious* 144). This permanent discursive rupture, forever grieving and forever moved to tears, this "something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent" (144), subtends, in *Foe*, the curious structural inversion or doubling that poignantly echoes Nancy's figuration of Psyche as the extended, untouchable soul: "Psyche is extended in her coffin. *Soon* it is going to be shut" (qtd. in Derrida, *Touch* 13,

²⁶ Marais invokes Maurice Blanchot's reading of the myth of Orpheus descending into hell to rescue Eurydice, an attempt that can succeed only so long as he does not look at her. Though Orpheus looks away from Eurydice, Blanchot argues that the 'looking-away' itself becomes an act of desire, "the gaze which contacts her excessively and loses her" (qtd. in Marais 165) and which leads to Orpheus yielding to temptation, looking directly at her and thus losing her forever. Marais contrasts the act of looking away with its suspension through closing one's eyes, which Coetzee's unnamed narrator is forced to do as Friday's stream "beats against [his] eyelids, against the skin of [his] face" (*Foe* 157). For Marais, in writerly terms, "the 'detour' of looking away, owing to the writer's desire for the Other, becomes the intentional gaze" (168) that reintroduces the looker's hegemony and banishes the possibility of engaging with alterity, while shutting one's eyes "is no longer driven by totalizing desire, but by respect for the Other" (165). I cite Marais's argument to elucidate the extent to which the Levinasian face to face encounter accords the looker an implicit mastery and a choice in its very tropology, and to signal an ethico-philosophical aporia that I will examine in chapter three, when I discuss *Disgrace*.

²⁷ A late note of Freud's, analyzed by Jean-Luc Nancy, which Derrida, in his turn, interrogates in his exegesis of Nancy's work on touching.

emphasis added). The word ‘soon’, or *tot* in the French, as Derrida notes, “is said to be an adverb of time,” but “so little says the time, it gives so little time—almost none—that one would think it is gobbled up in advance by time’s other, which is to say, space: burned, overtaken, parched, by what is extended” (13). Psyche is pure bodily extension, a “structure made up of nothing but surfaces and outsides without insides” (14), yet also the “principal of life, breath, the soul, the animation of the animal” (18), untouchable because to touch requires touching a specific part that possesses an interiority; her interior is completely and wholly exterior, her being comprised of surface, so that attempting to touch her only ever grasps futilely at a limit. Is this not the futile grasp of Susan Barton, Daniel Foe, the unnamed other narrator, Coetzee himself, and ourselves, *figured by Coetzee as such*? Hence the doubling narrative posture that finds Susan mourning Friday and the unnamed narrator mourning the unrepresentability of the story. To this I would add a third posture: Coetzee mourning what he has told but paradoxically also failed to tell. Grieving over the death of rational certainty, ideality through speech, and enlightened containment of the colonial Other, we cluster around the coffin, which contains a body comprised entirely of surface, that cannot be touched, which will never know itself as the object of our grief within Enlightenment discourse: this is not Friday per se, not an actual human being, but rather “life itself, and what in life is the very living thing, the living spring, the breath of life” (Derrida, *Touch* 18). Confronted by Friday, we replace the formalized “work of mourning” with “absolute mourning,” indicating “a direction for a representation of the unrepresentable” (52). We are forced to fold mourning into our own bodies stripped of signifying shelter, so that the work of mourning never generates distance from the facticity of what we mourn. Nothing is contained—this is where *Foe* halts, and where I will also halt, the better to take up the

exegetical thread in my final chapter, which examines Coetzee's third major work,

Disgrace.

Chapter 3

Complete mourning, no retreat from the Otherness of the Other, no refuge in rational speech, in Enlightenment reason, both of which reify the imperium despite a pretense of neutrality: Coetzee tracks these issues over the course of his early work, notably in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*. But in unmasking the complicity of reason and speech, and gesturing towards the nonrational face to face encounter with the Other whose vulnerability escapes containment via the ethics of charity and rational obligation, Coetzee does not merely rehearse the ethico-philosophical positions of Levinas, Spivak, and Derrida. Rather, Coetzee's relationship to the hegemony of colonial tradition is fraught with ambivalence, and though he is sharply critical of the presumed sovereignty of the speech act, within the Enlightenment tradition, he nonetheless negotiates a liminal space in which a sustainable ethical solution transcends oppositional rejections, holding the validity of any totalizing enterprise under permanent erasure. We cannot throw speech or language out, because we are caught within the confines of an artistic form that is inextricable from language.

Published after the formal abolition of apartheid and set explicitly in Cape Town and the surrounding lands, *Disgrace* becomes an intriguing vehicle for Coetzee's sociopolitical critique. David Lurie, a divorced, middle-aged white professor of romantic poetry, seduces and forces himself sexually on one of his black students, Melanie Isaacs, which eventually reaches the ears of his department. Willing to plead guilty to the charge of sexual harassment but unwilling to demonstrate his sincerity through the medium of public confession, David leaves the university and seeks refuge with his daughter Lucy Lurie, who owns a farm in the outlying area. Unexpectedly, three black men trick their way into the house, locking David in the closet while they rape Lucy, who subsequently

refuses to press charges against her attackers despite David's protests. Later, Lucy discovers that she is pregnant, and that one of her rapists is a relative of her neighbour Petrus, an emerging landowner and rising entrepreneur in the new, post-apartheid South Africa. Lucy categorically rejects David's repeated attempts to understand why she will not press charges, and, in a further complication, decides to let Petrus take possession of her land so long as she retains control of her house.

In chapter one, I tracked Kant's construction of the European scholar, who employs his rational judgment in the public forum to guide his civilization from barbarism to Enlightenment. As I have demonstrated using Spivak's analysis of the Kantian sublime, the binary opposition between human and nature is clear; as nature becomes that which is not Man, he (and I use the gendered terms quite deliberately) assumes the mantle of agent: he is subject, dominator, manipulator, world-shaper. Keeping this in mind, I would like to discuss David Lurie as a vestigial embodiment of Enlightenment thinking, an echo whose temporality is already challenged by the changing political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, where the strategic subreptions of the Enlightenment have become visible as strategies, no longer unacknowledged discursive fields or ways of legitimating colonial oppression. To explain his seduction and rape of Melanie to Lucy, David quotes a fragment of poetry: "Do you remember Blake? [...] 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'? [...] Unacted desires can turn as ugly in the old as in the young" (69-70). Later on, he seeks refuge in what he calls "the rights of desire," attributing his actions to "the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (89). Desire, in David's case, comes face to face with ethical responsibility in the novel, which offers a metacritique of the protagonist's own moral compass in the opening line: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well"

(1). David pays a black woman for sex that carries no obligation or responsibility, uncomfortably echoing an older era when white colonists “exploited ‘coloured concubines’ without offering the women long-term security, or caring whether or not they became pregnant” (Plaatje qtd. in Graham 437)²⁸: when David expresses his dislike for Soraya’s makeup, she swiftly removes it and never wears it again for him, proving to be a “ready learner, compliant, pliant” (*Disgrace* 5). In this chapter, I will interrogate David’s seduction and ‘not-quite-rape’ of his student Melanie Isaacs from an ethico-philosophical standpoint, showing how David’s desires rely on an apparent compartmentalization of the senses through rational speech that actually masks the complicity of speech, touch, and sight in mediating objective ‘truth.’ I will situate David’s ethical position in relation to the confessional model in post-apartheid South Africa, and demonstrate that for Coetzee, a reevaluation of our literal senses, of what we see and touch and hear and speak, must define an emerging, post-Enlightenment ethical framework that has space for the personal, the unquantifiable, and “the singularity of every living, and dead, being” (Attridge 188).

No analysis of the discourse surrounding confession and silence in *Disgrace* can function without addressing the novel’s obvious invocation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to bring closure to the apartheid era by encouraging guilty parties to confess their transgressions without fear of punishment.²⁹ The objective and the method met with opposition, from whites who felt “that they had in fact atoned for the sin of apartheid by giving up political power in the first place”

²⁸ Lucy Graham deftly situates David’s carefree attitude to sex and responsibility, with respect to both Soraya and Bev Shaw (who has planned things out enough to have a condom available), alongside his anger towards Lucy’s rapists who thought “nothing” (Coetzee 157) of her in the act.

²⁹ Elleke Boehmer observes that the family of the murdered activist Stephen Biko objected to “one of the key principles on which the TRC was founded: that of amnesty for perpetrators of political motivated acts, from whichever side of the apartheid divide” (34). Boehmer’s statement provides an accurate summation of the tension surrounding the TRC, which she characterizes as “a heroic ethical project and powerful iconic drama, yet also fraught with contradiction and ambiguity” (34).

(Diala 51), and from anti-apartheid activists who were sharply critical of both the religious overtones of the confessional approach and the emphasis on forgiveness over justice. Just as Diala notes that “the TRC, in elevating forgiveness in the name of peace above justice in the name of principle, excludes natural justice” (51), Pieter Vermeulen argues that, for Coetzee, the “committee's assumption of the possibility of fully transparent expression” (188) is as flawed as the “private/public opposition” (188) that permanently exiles trauma to phantasmatic lack in the public register, which can only record events. Vermeulen invokes Søren Kierkegaard’s “demand of ethical communicability” (187) through rejection of silence to read *Disgrace*, arguing that “the citizen’s ‘ethical task [...] to develop out of his concealment and [...] become revealed in the universal’ (187) is the same imperative that motivates the investigation into David Lurie’s sexual misconduct. David’s refusal to furnish the committee with specific details and surrender an ‘authentic’ (sincere) confession of guilt to the legal apparatus becomes a Kierkegaardian or “demonic” silence that withholds the facticity of his crime to create and sustain the boundless, depthless desire for “pre-linguistic sensuous fulfillment” (188). Within a discursive framework that demands full transparency through sincere confession from the defendant, these silences are impossible.

Neither disclosure nor silence is a fully justifiable ethical response. Though the committee's failure to extract the ‘truth’ from David reveals their “equation of religious rhetoric with the legal” and “conflation of catharsis with contrition” (Diala 57), David's decision to withhold is “as corrupted and unheroic as the infinite regression of secular confession” (Vermeulen 188). Bereft of ethical obligation, desire’s refuge in solitude and secrecy is problematic, yet dragged into the purifying light of official inquiry, muzzled but prompted to speak, to confess as if the confession were simply to oneself, for

oneself, its confession will have just allowed a terribly important thing, the object of judicial inquiry, to vacate the locutionary register.³⁰ Moreover, it will have then effaced not only the trace of this escape, but that there ever was anything present that was excessive to the discourse of public confession in speech. Coetzee stages this discursive failure not to absolve David, but to illuminate the space where Melanie's testimony might reside, and where it is not throughout the entire judicial proceeding, underlining the dilemma of post-apartheid South Africa: the limits and silences of testimony before the law. As Lucy Graham notes, "[t]he central incidents in both narrative settings of *Disgrace* are acts of sexual violation, but notably, in each case, the experience of the violated body is absent, hidden from the reader" (433). *Disgrace* sets the imperative of disclosure against a withholding of alterity, from which comes tension over what we cannot apprehend in the discursive register of rationality and public debate, especially since the case involves trauma generated through physical acts which are by no means as distinct from the discourse surrounding them as they appear to be. Is speech, within both the public and private narratives of *Disgrace*, not complicit with the faculty of touch, or rather, is the ontological distinction between speech and touch not founded, really, on a catachresis that resolutely disavows the way in which touch and speech *touch each other*, at both the discursive, conceptual moment and the physical, embodied moment when we encounter the Other?

In speaking of touching, we declare the ethical limit in words. In touching the

³⁰ It is interesting to note the change in Coetzee's perspective on the viability of the confessional model as South Africa transitions from apartheid to democracy. *Age of Iron*, set at the height of the apartheid crisis, finds Mrs. Curren offering long-winded, contrite apologies for her lack of involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle: "It is a confession I am making here, [...] as full a confession as I know how. I withhold no secrets" (165). By contrast, David Lurie explicitly rejects the confessional model at his hearing. While Coetzee by no means absolves David of his crime, he does seem to align himself more firmly, in the aftermath of apartheid, with authors such as Zakes Mda, a sharp critic of the TRC: "I want to create. The TRC doesn't enable me to create. It went beyond the boundaries of the imagination, there where there is no place left to create a thing, only to report" (Mda, *Interview*).

Other, we touch on where rational speech might fail, thus obviating ethical responsibility. For David, professor of romantic poetry, academic and scholar, the complicity of speech and touch is apparent in his relationship with Melanie, which is a mixture of coercion, seduction, racialized social authority, and deception, reflecting the uncertainties of the post-apartheid era, as the secretary of David's department notes: "You people had it easier. I mean, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were. [...] Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy" (8-9). Perhaps a sensory anarchy as well, a confusion of what we are supposed to speak of and what we touch upon, provisionally, unexpectedly, in this new South Africa where skin colour is no longer taxonomized and made the legal basis for enforced segregation. The hitherto distant object of speech is suddenly before us, offering the possibility of a touch, a stroke, a caress, but also of a blow, a wound, an injury. Yesterday, there was only the logic of apartheid, which made such violations the norm; today, David, the dethroned colonialist, must choose whether to embrace or strike the face of the Other, whose humanity the law has forced him to acknowledge. Ethically and affectively, the face — "signification without context" (Levinas 86), fragile, exposed, threatened — tempts the subject with "an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (86).

I offer a complication of the Levinasian ethic to demonstrate, as I asserted at the start of this chapter, both the philosophical evolution of Coetzee's work and the extent to which his ethical engagement operate within and against European intellectual traditions, even those that themselves oppose Kantian rationalism. Using Derrida's work on touching, I argue that in *Disgrace*, the Levinasian ethic fails to remove the viability of the will to violence when confronted with the face: violence is the terrible Other of the face,

held at bay by an ethical injunction that actually offers it sub rosa, behind the curtain, an invitation to narcissism without restraint, to the decadent exercise of one's power. The basis for my reading germinates in an encounter that Derrida imagines between Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, in which Derrida postulates Nancy's Psyche (the human soul, whose figuration I discussed in chapter two) as the face that compels a choice from Levinas's Eros: "What if the one's Psyche had met the other's Eros? How would I have been able to bear witness to that?" (*Touch* 84). What shall we say about the way gender clandestinely enters the scene, bifurcating itself as the masculine Eros (desire) and the feminine Psyche (soul)? The troping of Psyche illuminates the gendered nature of the face, through the way both Nancy and Levinas identify the feminine with the abject, the non-responsive, almost the nonhuman:

The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity. The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the "Eternal Feminine," is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity. [...] The virgin remains unseizable, dying without murder, swooning, withdrawing into her future [...] The principle "you shall not commit murder," the very signifyingness of the face, seems contrary to the mystery which Eros profanes, and which is announced in the femininity of the tender. [...] In this epiphany the face is not resplendent as a form clothing a content, as an image, but as the nudity of the principle, behind which there is nothing further. The dead face becomes a form, a mortuary mask; it is shown instead of letting see—but precisely thus no longer appears as a face. (Levinas qtd. in Derrida 86, 88, 89)

Remorselessly, Derrida tracks down the ways in which Levinas tethers Psyche to "femininity, infancy, animality, irresponsibility" (87). What Levinas articulates as the nakedness of the human soul is actually the ethical basis for exiling female consciousness from subjecthood: her body is both the keeper of the inexpressible and the inexpressible itself; there is nothing further. Once reduced to "the nudity of the principle," the female

subject's Being is lost in the contemplation of the feminine and the tender. We encounter a reflexive troping of eroticism as male-initiated penetration, of Eros, the masculine principle of desire, opposed to Psyche, the feminine principle of what is desirable: the female always retains her secret, her voluptuousness, even when she is raped, making her both violable and inviolable: violable in the act, but endlessly available for future violations because she does not register contact as rape. The victim who is not even aware of her own violation, "neither a thing nor a person, but animality, childhood, a young animal, barely a human life, barely even a life, almost the death of a life ignorant of its death" (87). The reflexivity of this figuration demonstrates that Levinas's ethical preoccupation does not prevent him from staging an ethical encounter that is problematic both on a general theoretical level, with regard to feminist constructions of subjectivity and selfhood, and on the specific cultural and sociopolitical terrain of *Disgrace*, a novel in which two rapes occur and in which one of those rapes (that of Melanie) traffics heavily in the image of the female as forever inaccessible, eternally feminine. But how does Coetzee manipulate this image to critique the practical and ethical insufficiencies of the face-as-female in *Disgrace*?

It is through speech that David establishes the ethical responsibilities of touch, and through language that he inscribes the body of the Other as limit, as the touchable depth-as-surface whose insensate quality renders her forever available to stroke, caress, possess, and, with no discursive break, violate. To problematize Levinas's formulation, what happens when the caress (voluptuousness) is *itself* the violation? Does an unguarded fascination with what inheres in a conception of the caress as "the night of the erotic" (Levinas qtd. in Derrida 86) leave us vulnerable to the tropological seduction of the caress as narcissism, as expression of introjective desire, detaching us from any ethical

imperative? When David characterizes his sexual intercourse with Melanie as “[n]ot rape, not quite that” (25), from what vantage-point of solipsistic desire is he making this claim, and based on what unspoken cultural and gendered privilege? Has he simply denied the violation so that the promise of future ‘violations’ (which the aggressor will never term as such) remains open, possibly paralleling the attitude of Lucy’s rapists? Forms of violence touch through shared epistemic violence.

Indeed, the threat of violation inheres from the moment David pursues the sex worker Soraya in the streets of Cape Town, breaking the unspoken agreement of nonrecognition between client and server “amid a flux of bodies where *eros stalks* and glances flash like arrows” (6, emphasis added). The encounter is voyeuristic and ominous, as David tells himself that he “is all for double lives, triple lives, lives lived in compartments. Indeed, if anything, he feels great tenderness for her. Your secret is safe with me, he would like to say” (6). The secret clusters in incestuous folds that allow Eros to violate Psyche without attaining Psyche’s secret, refracting desire inward. But Soraya is unwilling to remain a secret infinitely withheld, to assume Psyche’s pose as purely insensible extension. In the brief second of a shared glance, Soraya breaks the tether of the “unchecked dominance of desiring objectification” (Vermeulen 191): she knows that he is watching her, and soon after ceases to see him as a client. The self-proclaimed servant of Eros must take himself elsewhere.

By contrast, Melanie offers David the promise of a secret concealed and congealed in the feminine face, an invitation to be a “member of a dual society, an intimate society, a society without language” (Levinas qtd. in Derrida, *Touch* 90); the spur toward voluptuousness without ethics is the erotic abandon of the Other, her retreat from language, her infantile vulnerability. Catching her unaware in the college gardens, David notices that

Melanie is “dawdling” (11) — a term often used to characterize the behaviour of a child — while he describes a body composed of exteriors, colourful, accessorized, childlike, subtly racialized:

She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes. Her outfits are always striking. Today she wears a maroon miniskirt with a mustard-coloured sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings. (11)

A head bob: childlike, nonverbal; a small body: infantile; she wears child’s toys as ‘baubles’; her smile is sly, potentially deceitful, guarding a secret. Though David surmises that Melanie is probably aware of the “weight of the desiring gaze” (12), the connotations of his prior description undercut his sense of her awareness as an adult rather than as a child. David tells himself that he pursues the woman, though he describes, desires, and eventually possesses the girl. The possessive gaze refracts through speech to emerge stripped of anterior meaning and specificity, desiring but appearing not to proceed from David, because it is “women” who are sensitive to the glance of “Eros,” not Melanie reacting to David.³¹ Noticing the raindrops in her hair, “[h]e stares, frankly ravished. She lowers her eyes, offering the same evasive and perhaps even coquettish little smile as before” (12). Though David uses the term ‘ravished’ to indicate that Melanie fills him with rapture, the older, more antiquated definition of the word — raped — suffuses the scene with veiled menace. The two meanings of ‘ravished’ — enraptured and raped — circle each other warily; one might say that they enter the room simultaneously, as the

enabling condition of the word’s usage and context. David has got Melanie here, in his

³¹ While it is undoubtedly true that “[t]he discourse of Eros, which Lurie first teaches in the classroom, is [...] self-deluded, based on intellectual distance and even vanity, lacking a sense of responsibility for others” (Boehmer 39), the implicit subordination of the object of Eros’s gaze, in this figuration, is no less significant. The convergence of Levinasian tropology (Eros before the nude female face) and David’s use of classical Greek myth betrays the reflexivity of a masculine construction of the feminine as eternal, secret, nonhuman, *and thus outside the sphere of ethical responsibility*. ‘Eros’ is not simply personally irresponsible: his very morphology presumes and demands an abjectness in the Other.

home, alone, past the 'security gate,' away from the university; furthermore, the person he has 'captured' here is one who, containing and standing in for the feminine principle of Psyche — unknowing, ignorant, purely extension, almost dead, indeed, barely alive — merits no ethical responsibility: "The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility—this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life 'a bit silly'—has quit her status as a person" (Levinas qtd. in Derrida, *Touch* 87). At what point does rapture turn to rape, and who determines when that point arrives? The man, who is conveniently also the narrator.

Ethical responsibility, if measured in purely rational and locutionary terms, does not surface in the opposition of ontologically distinct faculties of speech and touch; instead, it evacuates the scene of David's seduction of Melanie precisely because the governing agent, rational speech in the public realm, is necessarily absent in this *private* situation. When David invites Melanie to spend the night with him, he touches her cheek, proclaiming that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). Instead of charting a conventional narrative trajectory that shatters the seduction of the speech act through touch, triggering an unambiguous social awareness of an ethical and personal violation — a resounding 'no!' from Melanie accompanied by revulsion and immediate withdrawal — Coetzee stages a dialectic scene of coercion in which speech and touch anticipate, presuppose, and augment each other's valence. Will touch lead to rapture, or to violation? And is the trembling liminality between the two states itself a weapon that the sexual aggressor uses to conceal an ethical aporia, namely, the rapture of violation? When David embraces Melanie as she leaves his house, he takes pleasure in feeling "her little breasts against him" (17), but we gain no sense of how Melanie herself reacts to the gesture: the

embrace, presaging violence, constrains Melanie into self-oblivion, crushing selfhood out of the ethical register. In the next chapter, David continues his pursuit:

“Hello?” In the one word he hears all her uncertainty. Too young. She will not know how to deal with him; he ought to let her go. But he is in the grip of something. Beauty's rose: the poem drives straight as an arrow. She does not own herself; perhaps he does not own himself either. (18)

As David touches the limit of ethical responsibility by claiming Melanie “does not own herself,” we can discern the role of the discursive instrument (the phone) in shaping and mediating the physical encounter; David's voice is “the voice that touches—always at a distance, like the eye—and the telephonic caress, if not the (striking) phone call” (Derrida, *Touch* 112). Speech and touch shadow each other, reciprocally and surreptitiously, in two moments when we are supposedly only talking about one faculty or sense. David speaks a touch, an extension or absolute limit evident in his description of Melanie as “[b]eauty's rose”: nature passive, nonsentient, immobile, indeed already the ‘mortuary mask’ (to quote Levinas) whose abdication from selfhood simultaneously frees the European subject from responsibility to the Other. Where the Other, in no uncertain terms, has no ownership of herself, David, the European subject, can glide between the two poles of reason (an ethical citizen with duties towards fellow citizens) and unreason (the play of narcissistic desire on non-citizens) through the deployment of the word ‘perhaps,’ which indicates a mobility and an intrapsychic complexity that Melanie never receives.

David invokes the primacy of unmediated desire (“he is in the grip of something”) through words that he infuses with European cultural symbols. ‘Beauty's rose’ and the driving arrows (violent and masculine sexual intrusion) recall his words to Melanie during their first encounter at his home, when he quotes Shakespeare to aid his attempts at seduction: “From fairest creatures we desire increase, [...] that thereby beauty's rose

might never die” (16). David depends on white colonial culture (Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Greek mythology) to legitimate his point of entry into a state of unreason, where the Other has no rights of privilege or person, and where the vulnerability of speaking touch as limit, in troping surface as extension without depth, signals both the ethical prohibition against violence and its baleful opposite, the murder of the Other. In figuring both dinner and phone call as caresses, which lose themselves “in a being that dissipates as though into an impersonal dream” (Levinas qtd. in Derrida, *Touch* 87), Coetzee forces the reader into an examination of ethically disengaged desire, which is antithetical to the confessional discourse of the TRC. At the scene of what David terms “not rape, not quite that” (25), we witness the culmination of narcissistic desire, unmediated by ethical restraint or any concern for the interiority of the Other, as David violates his student, fully aware that he is “the intruder who has thrust himself upon her” (24) and that she does not want to have sex with him. The other evening’s rapture has revealed itself as rape: violence has emerged out of the face “which Eros profanes” (Levinas qtd. in Derrida, *Touch* 88).

What enables David’s violation of Melanie is a confusion of European culture and European discursive models, until finally the rationale for his pursuit of Melanie comes to be nothing in particular, simply given from above, an irresistible urge to which no sane being can remain insensible, and which informs the arc of David’s life as Coetzee presents it. David’s self-professed opposition to the university’s “great rationalization” (3) — communication classes that have crowded out his own academic interest in romanticism — demonstrates how David and the university actually share similarities in their reliance on reason and speech as ways of transmitting culture. Presuming a transparent unmediated access to being through language, the concept of the Communications class

privileges the word through reason, banishing unreason to nonbeing in its declaration that “[h]uman society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other” (3-4). However, David himself, as a professor of romantic poetry, shares the same veneration for the Word, using reason as a shuttle between the prosaic image and the pure abstraction of Idea (ideality) to indicate the emergence of the sense-image, the imaginative impossibility of which reason becomes aware and simultaneously reinforces *its own supremacy* in the perception of a lack. David’s notion that the “origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (3-4) underscores the supremacy of reason in both models, which are actually the same model.

David’s in-class lecture on the Sublime in Wordsworth’s “The Prelude” makes us aware, Spivak notes, “of the inadequacy of the imagination (thus tripping the circuit to the superiority of reason)” (*Reason* 11). He lectures: “As the sense-organs reach the limit of their powers, their light begins to go out. Yet at the moment of expiry that light leaps up one last time like a candle-flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible” (22). This “glimpse” occurs precisely at the moment the senses reach their limit and imagination fails to be a proper supplement to what the senses lack: as imagination falters, reason’s awareness of the imaginative lack produces a “glimpse of the invisible.”³² No accident that “The Prelude” stands as Wordsworth’s tribute to “the mind of man” (14.450) that is “in beauty exalted, as it is itself / Of quality and fabric more divine”, also “Reason in her most exalted mood” (14.455-56). The poet, then, returns to an appreciation of reason, manifested in the mind of man, by recognizing that the latter is “A thousand times more beautiful than the earth” (14.451). In the Cartesian model, reason is what separates man from nature and animal, what allows him to order the world as he wishes, and what

³² Recall my elucidation of Spivak’s critique of the Kantian Sublime in chapter one.

renders him, in the final analysis, human; unreason is the world of nature, the unspoken and the unspeakable. Reason, as Neil Badmington notes in his summary of Cartesian humanism, marks “the absolute difference between the human and the inhuman: only the former has the capacity for rational thought” (4). Wordsworth, like many poets of his era, deploys lush, wild, untamed nature in his poetry in order to clearly define man’s place in opposition to it. This philosophy suits David perfectly, since his entire pursuit of and liaison with Melanie is the project of the faded imperialist poorly concealed under the rhetoric of reason mastering the Sublime.

Various identified as rabbit, creature, and burrowing mole, Melanie has no claim to ethical treatment in David’s moral framework; exoticized through her dark skin and “almost Chinese cheekbones” (11), she is lesser, and thus readily available for sacrifice. He can be the disembodied agent, inhabiting no place in particular, surveilling, naming, ordering, and possessing flora and fauna. David invokes the Sublime and simultaneously exiles it (Melanie) to nonbeing by positioning her as beyond his imagination; framing their relationship in mythological terms (gods, goddesses, Eros, Aphrodite), he obliterates the concrete edifices of power that mediate their encounters, tripping the reader to the “ugly discrepancy between [David’s rape of Melanie] and his sentimentalisation of it” (Heyns 61). Infinity, which the western subject cannot tolerate in untamed nature, now takes up comfortable residence in the subject himself through his domination of the hitherto-mysterious colonized object.³³ Through violent touch, the Other merits no ethical obligation in the Enlightenment tradition, which has no place for her in rational speech and which will have consequently not even registered her violation as a punishable offense. Kant’s Greenlander is banished back to the margin.

³³ For more information on this strategic move, please refer to my earlier analysis of Kant’s use of magnitude in formulating the concept of the sublime.

To be touched, on the surface of one's skin; more, to be aware of a touch that treats surface as its own depth, deferring interiority to a realm beyond apprehension; finally, to be the subject of a caress that doesn't know *what* it touches, that obviates the materiality of skin in an unseemly haste to luxuriate in a limit — we witness, in these polyglot configurations of tactility whose operation we have now discerned in *Disgrace*, the prefiguring of the Other's murder. After her rape, Lucy quietly frames the central question, which Coetzee refuses to dismiss or resolve : "When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. [...] When you have sex with someone strange — when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her — isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood — doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?" (158). And is there not a similarly epidermal quality to the justice that public speech creates, glossed in the locutionary register, generating judicial surface as depth, murdering that which is categorically inexpressible in words, as confession, the "of itself other" or "the origin of the very concept of alterity" (Levinas 66)? Murder announces its dire possibility through touch as well as through speech: touching the Other, touching to grasp limit, giving ourselves over to the touch of someone who falls helplessly under our sway, over whom we can exercise limitless power. A limit that indicates no limits: the limit case of ethical responsibility. The Levinasian face, then, from which the embrace and the caress germinate, to which they spasmodically gesture, raises the spectre of murder as the condition of possibility of a terrible ethical choice in *Disgrace*: confronted with this "most naked, most destitute" face (86), what precisely, according to Coetzee, forbids David to kill?

“When our eyes touch...”³⁴

Don't we have to make a choice between looking or exchanging glances or meeting gazes, and seeing, very simply seeing? And first between seeing the seeing and seeing the visible? For if our eyes see what is seeing rather than visible, if they believe that they are seeing a gaze rather than eyes, at least to that extent, to that extent as such, they are seeing nothing, then, nothing that can be seen, nothing visible. Away from all visibility, they founder in the night. They blind themselves so as to see a gaze. (Derrida, *Touch 2*)

There is a spectral melancholy to the way Derrida frames this most significant of questions, whose primacy will have quietly but insistently recast the whole issue of ethical responsibility as an issue of attentiveness, of grounding, detaching the act of seeing from the treacherous slippage of the word itself, fleeing soundlessly from contract, statute, law, and from the politics of charity or civic obligation. We have come to a place where, in order to see, we must see beyond what we fear the Other is considering when he stares³⁵ at us. I can't see your gaze, I can only cease to see that you are seeing, I can only tighten my grasp that will always already reveal nothing, and now — one can sense that I am terrified of you, of what you might be thinking as you gaze on me, of what you might do or be planning to do, of all that resides in you to which I can never penetrate. I'm petrified, transfixed, expecting the worst — you are lost (and my eyes are “seeing nothing”). I've lost sight of you in the seeing, lost touch of you at a limit. I can't see or touch you, I grope towards something in the night, praying that that something is not murderous, all the while keeping a clenched fist, in case you *are* murderous. But if you're doing the same thing, in your corner of a darkened room, aren't we on the point of collapsing into an abyssal state of violence? Consider the following:

³⁴ The title of the opening section of Derrida's *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*.

³⁵ I use the word 'stares' deliberately in opposition to seeing, because I feel that a stare indicates more potential for the viewer to lose himself in the presence of what he sees, rather than to search obsessively for that which cannot be viewed: another person's gaze

To which surface of the eye do lips compare? If two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact—the one with the other? What is contact if it always intervenes between x and x? [...] If two gazes come into contact, the one with the other, the question will always be whether they are stroking or striking each other—and where the difference would lie. (2)

Stroking or striking, which is it? Confusion. Is there a difference, and how would that difference sign itself in this spacing where our eyes touch? For if our eyes are touching, they are not gazing, only seeing, but they are touching each other as limit, “coming into contact—the one with the other.” For eyes to touch, must they not forgo what we expect them to do, namely, to gaze, to possess and to control? And what would it mean to be blind not because of any loss of faculty, but because of the presence of the Other whose eyes are pressed to ours? To whom would we be responsible then, and in what way, for what term, by what rules, to what end?

Through the possibility of this contact, this scandalous intimacy which is the liminality and blindness of eyes touching, I argue that David's dilemma — as voyeur, intruder, violator, and aggregate of the uncertainty of the ethical encounter—is the question of whether to stroke or to strike, to kiss or to kill, and what the difference between the two might be. In gazing, David prefigures the violence he will inflict on the objects of his lust, and parallels the attitude of Lucy's rapists. The face, therefore, as an ethical arbiter, is insufficient, because the gaze implies mastery that incites the will to dominate, a reification that speech, as Coetzee shows in *Disgrace*, subtends and extends. Consider the uneasily surveillant and sexualized paranoia that manifests in the brief moment when David sees his own daughter partially naked and unaware of his gaze: “The last time he saw his daughter's breasts they were the demure rosebuds of a six-year-old. Now they are heavy, rounded, almost milky. A stillness falls. He is staring; the boy is

staring too, unashamedly. Rage wells up in him again, clouding his eyes” (207). Rapture returns, only to align itself even more explicitly with violation through the boy Pollux, one of Lucy's rapists, who is also staring at Lucy's nude breasts. The epistemology has not changed: the woman's body still is “the beyond of the face as it threatens the epiphany of the face, a dead woman, desirable still, perhaps, dead and stretched out before Eros” (Derrida, *Touch* 88-89). Like Melanie, Lucy retains her status, through the masculine gaze, as violable-inviolable feminine. If David once thinks of Melanie as a person whom he has abused and wronged, escape from ethical responsibility is impossible, but *seeing* and *touching* her allow him to *speak* her into nonbeing, into animality, until she is nothing but a “rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck” (Coetzee 25).

We have not lost hold of touch here, have not managed to hide from sight, nor to remain silent before speech, and it is this interpenetration of so-called distinct faculties, this commingling of sensory data, on which the ethical issue turns. Coetzee introduces these confusions of sense and sensing not to permanently destabilize meaning in a certain postmodern fashion, but to indicate how our notion of what it means to ‘grasp’ the ‘ungraspable’ (both Levinas and Marais deploy this descriptive aporia) accords touch a distinction, a valence, and an apartness, obscuring its hegemonic and hierarchical relationship with the other senses. To touch something a certain way, we must first see it a certain way; paradoxically, to behold an object in ideality,³⁶ we must have first touched on it in a very particular, very intimate and specific manner. When we speak of either of these two experiences, of seeing in order to touch and touching in order to see, do we not sign and then erase a collusion of faculties, which will have just generated the exact epistemology that we are trying to track down and deconstruct? Does this move not

³⁶ A pure expression of the will, which I discussed at some length in chapter two.

throw our endeavour to trace an ethics of responsibility for the Other into doubt? And in order to extricate ourselves from this quandary, that we may begin to grope towards an alternative ethical framework, are we not obliged to right the sensory balance by revoking the “absolute privilege” and “titles of philosophic nobility” (Derrida, *Touch* 116) that let touch stand apart from and above the other senses? And if so, what fills that vast and vacated space or spacing?

The sound of music

Amidst the wealth of critical material on the subject of *Disgrace*, the absence of any substantive examination of the treatment of music in the novel is quietly astonishing, given the fairly self-evident problematic of David as purveyor of white European culture in a country where blacks have only recently dismantled the repressive apparatus of apartheid. As a “man of the book, guardian of the culture hoard” (Coetzee 16), and proponent of Romantic poetry, David’s musical interests, grounded in European classical forms such as the opera, stand in stark contrast to contemporary and black genres of music such as jazz (which Melanie likes but David, predictably, does not). To the extent that music functions as a carrier of colonial privilege through culture, David’s attempt to write an opera about Byron speaks eloquently to the privilege of being a white professor in South Africa that still obtains in the post-apartheid era. Marais somewhat optimistically hails David’s opera as “his self-substituting gift to the Other” (176) without really interrogating the conditions in which this ‘gift’ evolves; furthermore, he fails to mention that this gift is a European art form, featuring a European protagonist, written by a white South African professor. What are the implications of an ethical gesture that is firmly rooted in the techniques, discursive strategies, and cultural devices

of the colonizing culture? I will argue that the evolution of David's opera plays an important role in clearing the way for a radical reconception of alterity, which anchors ethical responsibility through what I will term 'deculturated sound' to an acknowledgment of Being in the Other without reference to language or rational 'human' awareness of one's own suffering, an acknowledgment that forever blurs the taxonomical hierarchy of the senses by throwing what we see, what we touch, what we hear, what we utter, into confusion.

In *Disgrace*, music is the harbinger of all that confounds rationality, which is, as Elleke Boehmer phrases it, "the 'unframed framer' or deity-substitute of the intellectual" that must "give way to a self-emptying *respect* for the Other" (36), whose call to ethical responsibility defies reason:

[I]t is evident that Lurie's composition of the opera is an effect of an encounter with the radical alterity of Autrui. He is the surprised "author" of a "command" that has been received he "knows not from where." The opera is structured as his "Here I Am," that is, as "saying with inspiration." (Marais 176)

What I find intriguing about Marais's analysis is his ability to offer lucid and eloquent insight into David's growing ethical engagement without investigating the *nature* of the musical evolution that initiates such an engagement. Initially projected as a classical opera, complete with extensive lyric passages and conventional, but borrowed, European harmonies, the work evolves into a comic, largely nonverbal conglomeration of simple, single-note melodies that share more kinship with animal sounds than with conventional opera. The more time David spends on the opera, the more the work loses its European (canonical, classical, hegemonic) inflection, until what we are nominally calling an 'opera' is actually a middle-aged man, sitting on his porch, plucking the strings of a banjo to a

sitting audience of one: his dog. He shifts from the piano to the banjo,³⁷ a stringed instrument that permits the musician to sound the same note at the same pitch in different locations to obtain different timbres, or characters, of tone, implying polyvalence, expressing difference and also sameness through the quality of a shared note instead of situating themselves hierarchically on a grid. The banjo's tone and sonic texture³⁸ allow no easy escape to the Sublime: "He is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line" (184-85). What does David's flight from the sound of the piano, "too rounded, too physical, too rich" (184), reveal about the changing landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, and about Coetzee's evolving attitude to ethical responsibility?

To sit before a piano, a perfectly formed grid of notes whose relationship to each other is securely bounded by the instrument's structural logic; to know, in advance, before we sound the first note, that the instrument itself has already regulated, separated, and taxonomized individual notes, so that when we sound middle C in one location, we are confident that the note will never sound in the same pitch elsewhere on the grid — aren't we mimicking the hegemony of western European rationalism, secure in the knowledge that the notes in the grid will never 'escape' our control? In such an ethical framework, what remains of the task of retaining alterity, to unearthing and examining

³⁷ Interestingly enough, the rhythm and phrasing of nineteenth-century banjoists were instrumental in defining piano-based western genres such as ragtime (Gura 246). Scott Joplin, generally credited with being one of the founders of ragtime, acknowledged his indebtedness to the banjo in dedications that mentioned banjoists as influences, and in the credit line to his first published piece, which "reads 'Picked by Scott Joplin' [...]. Although explicitly referring to the cover art, which depicts an African American rag picker putting another item in his sack, this locution could easily describe banjo as piano playing" (248).

³⁸ Most scholarship acknowledges the West African origin of the banjo through the slave trade (Gura 12). However, the banjo's most obvious antecedents — the *ngoni* and the *akonting* (*Africa*) — bear little structural resemblance to "the odd little seven-stringed banjo" which David "bought for [Lucy] on the streets of KwaMashu [a suburb of Durban] when she was a child" (184), and to which he turns to compose his opera. Therefore, I would like to shift my focus from the origin of the instrument to its ethico-kinesthetic significance — the way in which the banjo transforms the body that plays it.

“the trace of ‘something that ought to be there but is missing’” (LaCapra qtd. in Vermeulen 192)? It is not at the piano that David learns to hear the call that comes “from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned” (Butler, *Precarious* 133), not over musical notation that he will see the Levinasian face in all its abject vulnerability. In *Disgrace*, the prohibition against violence obtains through the very realization that the ‘face’ is a catachresis, that is, a word used ‘incorrectly,’ a word that indicates a host of other possibilities that may have nothing to do with the faculty of sight. The face does not signify itself, which disempowers the gaze, stripping it of its pretensions that death does not occur; the face is elsewhere, persistently refusing the lie of mastery that the gaze seems to impart. The face indicates the futility of the very term by touching on, speaking to, and glancing at the “unpredictability, singularity, [and] excess” (Attridge 191) of factitive suffering, which will remain unavailable to the subject who does not concede the fuzziness and the indistinction of the senses on which he has come to rely. Can the face stand in for a sound or sounding? I believe so, and furthermore, that the possibility of sounding as face, as ethical responsibility, finds expression in the development of David’s opera. It is not that sound has suddenly supplanted other modalities as a way of expressing the ethical, but rather that the attenuation of sound as hegemonic control — the ‘degeneration’ of a controlled, cultured opera into a porch-chair banjo piece — has released us from the “prisonhouse in language” (Vermeulen 189) back into embodied encounters with actual beings.

Deculturated sound allows us to figure “‘a reversed intentionality, where things regard us, where the Subject dissolves into its objects’” (Critchley qtd. in Vermeulen 190). Consider David’s demeanour at the hearing in relation to our discussion on music and sound. When one of the committee members asserts that his relationship with Melanie

has “overtones” in the “wider community,” he angrily retorts that “[t]here are no overtones in this case” (50), refusing, quite characteristically at this stage, to acknowledge the validity of using the history of racial violence in South Africa as background for the hearing. However, Coetzee’s use of the word ‘overtones’ merits attention. Beyond the standard definition as “an additional quality or implication,” the musical definition of an overtone as “any of the tones above the lowest in a harmonic series” (*Oxford Paperback Dictionary* 574) flags David’s statement as a rejection of harmonic complexity and a refusal to relinquish the hegemony of the word, doubly ironic when we consider that David, by his own admission, has always heard the “harmonies of the Prelude” (13) echoing within him. Sounds can ‘stack’ or overlap in harmony or dissonance to produce a combined sonic output in which both subjects can freely interface to generate dialogue without subordination. Later, when watching Melanie’s play a second time, he reflects on “[t]he marriage of Cronus and Harmony: unnatural” (190). Cronus, father of Zeus in Greek mythology, who overthrew Uranus and wedded his sister Rhea, like David seeking once more to spread “old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken” (190); Cronus who murdered his offspring in fear of Zeus, whom he knew would eventually destroy him; Cronus, whose sister is Harmonia, kin to Aphrodite whom David invokes just before he violates Melanie: “Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that” (25). The ethical prohibition is clear. Harmony defies a return to incestuous self-love by thrusting the self into an unbidden encounter with the Other, transferring privilege from reason to embodied presence, entering into a collaborative, dialogical modality through sonic overlay and destabilizing the fixity of the word. The constitutive requirement of harmony – the presence of another – forces David out of himself, breaking the circle of narcissism and shattering “the threat of a relapse into

limitless desire” (Vermeulen 192). The question now becomes: does music indicate the full ethical progression that Coetzee attempts to chart via David Lurie in *Disgrace*?

The music of sound

I turn to the moment when David sits in his empty, destitute house – the target of a robbery while he was away on Lucy's farm – composing more of his opera:

Out of the poets I learned to love, chants Byron in his cracked monotone, nine syllables on C natural; but life, I found (descending chromatically to F), is another story. Plink-plunk-plonk go the strings of the banjo. Why, O why do you sing like that? sings Teresa in a long reproachful arc. Plunk-plink-plonk go the strings. (185)

Note the remarkable absence of harmony in the passage just cited: Byron sings in a monotone, which by definition does not vary in either pitch or intonation and consequently prevents him from generating harmony in any meaningful musical sense. The arc of Byron's vocal line – from C down to F – constitutes another musical solecism: chromatic lines constitutively stand outside the diatonic scale of any given passage, and brook no harmonization in any European classical tradition. Then, too, the end point of a chromatic run is always arbitrary; theoretically, it can span the entire register, since its 'progression' is merely an ascent or descent in semitones without regard for scalar formations; there is no 'right' or appropriate place for it to terminate. And yet, despite the seeming randomness of the note's destination, David has alighted on the fourth interval (F) of the melody's key (C), a perfect fourth (a consonant or 'pleasing' melodic interval) which, in an even more intriguing twist, constitutes a “stylistic dissonance in certain contexts, namely in two-voice textures” (Wikipedia, emphasis added). Consonance and dissonance, a perfect fourth out of a chromatic line, music generated from vocal monotones – this graceless tension between orderly harmony and anarchic dissonance is

perhaps the other, less obvious reason why Teresa is displeased with Byron's singing. We are straining the limits of acceptable form here: David's 'opera' is very close to becoming a mere concatenation of agonized sounds, stitched together by the ululation of the banjo.³⁹ What Coetzee announces, through the devolution of David's opera, is the possibility of music functioning as sounding, rather than as cultural artifact, a sounding stripped of rational and locutionary meaning, gesturing to a broader conception of deculturated sound in which "the trace is interiorized in mourning as that which can no longer be interiorized" (Derrida qtd. in Vermeulen 192).

As David's opera becomes less concerned with narrative coherence, musical and lyrical majesty, and an ironically detached indebtedness to the 'masters' whose work he had originally intended to appropriate, its focus shifts to the abjectness of raw sounds, which exist for themselves and to themselves without political and cultural reference. Goat bleat, dog bark, bird call, human wail – we find kinship with animals through sounds, not through the hierarchy of speech, which must perpetually and compulsively conceal the translocutionary trace of all that exceeds figurative and linguistic containment. David's relationship with the maimed but music-loving dog whom he later delivers to the clinic to be killed illustrates this gestating sensibility:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling. (215)

The dog responds to the timbre and texture of the banjo's emission. At David's

³⁹ The earliest banjo-playing technique involved striking "an individual string with a downward motion of the index finger [...] and then hook[ing] another string (most commonly the fifth, or shortest) with the thumb" (Gura 81). David's piece, with its suggestion of staccato rhythm, likely calls for this technique, which, in an intriguing convergence with my earlier analysis of Derrida's work on touching, is known as "down-stroking or 'striking'" (81).

strumming, the dog becomes alert and listens: the act provokes an invitation to counterfocalize outside the bounds of rational discourse and serves as site at which the attempt to ‘speak’ may be countersigned by the desired “listening public” (Spivak 24). In other words, David learns an invaluable lesson about communication between humans from a dog, who, though alien and nonhuman, is nonetheless alive to the sympathetic vibration of the banjo strings. But note the interpenetration of senses: from the sound of the banjo, the dog initiates movement, listens, and is poised to howl, while David reciprocally feels as though “his larynx thickens” and there is “the hammer of blood in his throat.” David is beginning to learn “that moral awareness depends upon a kind of visceral empathy” (Donovan 90), as Elizabeth Costello opines in her lectures on the subject of animal rights. We arrive at the scene of a profound intersubjective transformation that occurs without the chimera of touch casting a pall over the participants, inviting each to do harm to the other through the denuding of the face; one might say that the Levinasian face inheres in a scene in which the sight of the face is necessarily absent; the face is that which we must always locate elsewhere, without recourse to the gazing that will precipitate the question of whether we ought to stroke or strike what we behold, grasp, possess, seduce and are seduced into violating.

Through deculturated sound, we gain an appreciation of how the senses collude in colonial discourse, and furthermore, the beginnings of an alternative mode of respecting alterity, because sounds “all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces them” and hearing “can register [that] interiority without violating it” (Ong 71-72), in contrast to sight, which can only perceive depth “as a series of surfaces” (71). Sounding transmits a rich countervalue that never permits a lapse into the hegemony of speech, because if sound “exists only when it is going out of existence” (32), to witness an act of

sounding is of necessity to be a spectator to its demise and thus to the demise of previously held epistemologies that only the word holds in place. If I have heard a sound, it is already dead, because “[t]here is no way to stop sound and have sound” (32). If sound is the fulcrum for an enlarged understanding of how, in a responsible ethical fashion, we can make sense of our senses, David Lurie represents a flawed, provisional, incomplete, and perhaps ultimately doomed attempt to achieve that understanding. Despite all that has transpired, he still lusts after Melanie’s younger sister whose very name he views as a divine temptation: “She has Melanie’s eyes, Melanie’s wide cheekbones, Melanie’s dark hair: she is, if anything, more beautiful. [...] Desiree, the desired one. Surely they tempted the gods by giving her a name like that!” (163-64). However, Coetzee leaves the ultimate success of David's endeavour open by closing *Disgrace* with a scene that demonstrates a change in David's attitude toward death (absolute alterity): he finally decides to give up the dog, not out of callousness, but because delay, pretense, and evasion cannot shield the dog from the lethal injection of the needle, and the terror of naked singularity before death. What he can do is “caress him” and “whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle” (219), giving the dog “a gift of love, [...] a confrontation with a teasing, synaesthetic, non-presence, something that is at once numinous yet sensorily experienced as real” (Boehmer 31). The caress, once broodingly erotic and charged with danger, now joins with the whisper – really a sounding, since it is the nonsensical, irrational sound spoken to animals or children before they have learned to understand speech – to confront death “not in relation to my death but rather in the alterity of death or the death of the other” (Critchley qtd. in Vermeulen 191-92). The senses are blurred, sense has departed, but sensibility remains — “there shall be no mourning.”

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