

CHAPTER ONE

SPEECHLESS BEFORE APARTHEID

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*J. M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning*

One of the souls was weeping. "Do not suppose, mortal" said this soul addressing him, "that because I am not substantial these tears you behold are not the tears of a true grief."

—J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in line with the basic Freudian insight that we are destined to repeat that which we fail to work through, was set up "to establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross violations of human rights occurred, and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such acts in future" (Preamble to the "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995" qtd. in Dawes, para. 9).<sup>1</sup> But how does one create the collective subject that a national process of working through would seem to presume in a country where racial groups are so very differently implicated in their country's history? What kinds of truth, what modes of working through, bring about reconciliation? What is the relationship between the testimony of apartheid's victims and the confessions of apartheid's perpetrators and between both these forms of truth telling and the recovery of factual truth? Is reconciliation simply dependent on "establishing the [factual] truth in relation to past events" or does it require some demonstration of grief on the part of victims and perpetrators alike? What happens when a surfeit of factual truth is offered, as in the amnesty appeal of

the *Vlakplaas* officer Dirk Coetzee, almost as a substitute for an authentic admission of remorse?<sup>2</sup> What happens when truth is reduced to information?

As a way of indicating the enormity of the task before the Commission, a sceptical prospective commissioner suggested that “only literature can perform this miracle of reconciliation” (Krog 18). Without wishing either to dismiss the effectiveness of the TRC or to romanticize the role of literature, I want to interrogate the idea that literature can offer a way of working through a collective history by examining three of Coetzee’s earlier novels. Written during the 1980s, at the height of the apartheid era, these novels testify to the suffering engendered by apartheid precisely by refusing to translate that suffering into a historical narrative. Rather than providing a direct relation of the history of apartheid, Coetzee’s narratives instead provide a way of relating *to* such a history. They teach us that the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery *of* history, nor yet in the psychological recovery *from* history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable *before* history.

The truth-telling aspect of Coetzee’s narratives consists not in the presentation of factual information but in the attempt to demonstrate a “true grief,” a grief that acquires a certain materiality or historical weight despite the insubstantial, fictional context. In “The Inferno,” the shade’s tears call forth a reciprocal response from Dante, who, like the reader, is moved by the suffering of the damned. Dante’s tears bear transgressive witness to the tyranny of God’s Law,<sup>3</sup> but they cannot effect reconciliation because Dante is powerless to alleviate the shade’s suffering; he and the shade remain on opposite sides of the Law. In the same way, Coetzee’s novels bear witness to the tyranny of apartheid while remaining powerless to effect reconciliation. Acutely aware that, like Dante, he is no more than a tourist in an underworld of suffering, Coetzee nevertheless strives to affirm the ground of a certain solidarity, an affirmation that would look forward to a day when reconciliation would truly be possible.<sup>4</sup>

Following the publication of *Doubling the Point*, a wide-ranging collection of essays by and interviews with Coetzee, together with the book-length study, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell has emerged as one of the principal apologists for the work of Coetzee. In order to defend him against the influential neo-Marxist critique of Coetzee within South Africa, which accused the novels of failing to represent adequately the material conditions of apartheid,<sup>5</sup> critics such as Attwell and Susan Gallagher have endeavored to *re*historicise Coetzee’s fiction by emphasizing its discursive relevance to the time and place in which it was produced. As Attwell himself generously recognizes, his work is indebted to an argument initially put forward by Teresa Dovey in *Lacanian Allegories* that each novel “is positioned within, and deconstructs, a particular subgenre of discourse within the culture” of South Africa (Attwell “Problem” 595).<sup>6</sup> However, this rehistori-

cization of Coetzee's work sits uneasily with the deliberately unspecific locales of much of Coetzee's fiction and with Coetzee's own insistence on artistic autonomy and on the relationship of "rivalry, even enmity" that pertains between the discourses of literature and history ("Novel" 3). In reading the novels "back into their context," Attwell admits that he is forced to read Coetzee "against the grain" ("J. M. Coetzee" 8), a practice that is somewhat at odds with the meticulous respect for Coetzee's views both as a novelist and as a theorist that he demonstrates throughout the interviews collected in *Doubling the Point*. This chapter attempts neither to dehistoricize nor to rehistoricize Coetzee's fiction, but rather to establish their agonistic, dialectical relation to history.

In a review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer ascribes Coetzee's decision to write what she describes as allegory to a "revulsion" from history.

It seemed he [chose allegory] out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else in South Africa, he is up to his neck and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. (3)

Gordimer seems to be calling for a mode of realism in which places, events, and people are identifiably South African, as in, for instance, her own novel *Burger's Daughter*, which chronicles the life of a real anti-apartheid activist.<sup>7</sup> Only this direct reference to historical reality, Gordimer seems to imply, rescues the novel from political irrelevance. However, as Rosemary Jolly has argued, Gordimer misunderstands the nature of Coetzee's allegories. The indeterminate settings of the narratives are not simply symptoms of a perverse desire to dehistoricize apartheid; they are instead an attempt both to represent and to contest the historical conditions of apartheid. Jolly thus reads *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a "frontier" novel,<sup>8</sup> "true to the violent domain of conquest in the present . . . but . . . remain[ing] faithful to the future in that its crucial locations are those which suggest the potential for transition" (78). I would add that Coetzee's novels do not provide an allegory of the historical events themselves but of our *relation* to these events. The "state of shock" that Gordimer presents as her diagnosis of the condition from which Coetzee's novels suffer is in fact the novels' own self-diagnosis, the explicit *subject* of each narrative. Rather than pretending that the atrocities of apartheid do not induce a "state of shock" (what would it mean not to be shocked by apartheid?), Coetzee's novels dramatize the problem of relating to a history that defies relation. They attempt to work through their inability to relate (to) the history of apartheid, their inability to "normalize" relations between history and the novel.

As a way of delineating his own agonistic relation to apartheid as a dissident white South African, Coetzee constructs a Lyotardian *differend* between the privileged position of the narrator and the oppressed position of an “other” whose story the narrator seeks to narrate (Parry 40).<sup>9</sup> To put it another way, characters such as Friday in *Foe*, Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* remain radically incommensurable with the narratives in which they find themselves; unhomely figures of and for alterity, they *embody* precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to *represent*. Their bodily presence indicates an unmournable, unverbalizable history, a material history that refuses to be translated into words or conjured away by language.

Their status as the racially marked is indicated less by their actual skin color—to which Coetzee makes little or no reference—than by their simultaneous invisibility/visibility. On the one hand, their invisibility as subjects is first of all signaled by their lack of patronyms. Friday and Michael K can only lay claim to first names, while the barbarian girl lacks any name whatsoever.<sup>10</sup> This lack of the name-of-the-father indicates their extrinsic relation to the narrative’s symbolic order, to the socio-linguistic sign system that governs human relations. They become the negative image of the Enlightenment subject: a sign of the uncivilized, the inhuman, the native, the infant. On the other hand, the physical disfigurements of these figures of alterity render their status as the objects rather than the subjects of history all too visible. Their disfigurements literally dis-figure or un-name them, marking them as bodies that fail to function as the sign of individual humans. As if to emphasize the absence of an interior life, their history is hieroglyphically inscribed on the surface of their bodies, at precisely the points where we would conventionally expect to be granted access to the depths of an interior life: the eyes and the mouth. Their disfigurements function to deny us this access: Friday’s severed tongue and Michael K’s harelip constitute literal speech impediments, while the barbarian girl’s blindness renders her gaze expressionless and uninterpretable.<sup>11</sup> Their disfigurements do not so much “speak for themselves,” as the hackneyed expression goes, as illustrate the impossibility of speaking. They testify to the impossibility of verbal testament.<sup>12</sup>

However, there are also moments in each text where these figures of alterity are more than passive objects, moments of obscure activity that hint at the possibility of a secret interior life. These moments of obscure activity are acts of silent, inconsolable mourning, moments in which these nonsubjects actively bear witness both to a loss of history and to specific histories of loss. Friday scatters petals over the waves to mark the place—or so we are invited to surmise—where his fellow slaves lie submerged. Michael K grows pumpkins and melons in a field fertilized with his mother’s ashes. And the barbarian girl—at least in the Magistrate’s dreams—gestures toward the site of her

loss by constructing a model fort, a replica not only of the fort in which she was tortured but also of the fort of a previous civilization, whose ruins lie buried outside the gates of the present settlement. Like the narrators, we as readers are only able to witness these acts of mourning from afar, unable to say for sure what losses these figures are mourning. Unable to bridge the gap between their world and ours, we are nevertheless overwhelmed by a desire to align ourselves with their mournful gaze and participate in their inconsolable work of mourning.

In all three novels, then, the reader is invited to identify with the narrator's inability to identify with the other. Whereas Gordimer invites her readers to identify with both white and black characters, to imagine these different subject positions, Coetzee erects a kind of color line marking the limits of identification, even while he allows the exact color of his liminal "characters" to remain indeterminate. In representing the interior life of black and white characters, Gordimer operates under the liberal humanist assumption that the novelistic act of empathy can transcend difference. Coetzee's novels implicitly argue that to transcend the other's alterity is to efface that alterity, that the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self. Coetzee's novels insist on the difference of the other in order to explore the impossible task of relating to the other as other.<sup>13</sup> They suggest that the possibility of reconciliation lies not in our ability to *empathize* with the other but rather in an experience of *abjection*, in which, instead of gaining imaginative access to the experience of another subject, one experiences a radical loss of subjectivity, an "experience" (if one can speak of experience in the absence of a subject) that approximates (brings one closer, more proximate to) the experience of being other.<sup>14</sup> Instead of entering into the experience of another, one experiences oneself as other, as abjected beyond the social order that grounds one's subjectivity, as *subjected* to the tyranny of a law that negates one's very existence as an autonomous subject. The act of reading is thus transformed from an act of empathy that takes place firmly within the realm of the human into a radical experience of abjection, in which we are violently expelled from the realm of the human and precipitated toward the realm of the inhuman. For it is only in this underworld of suffering that it becomes momentarily possible to witness, if not to participate in, the "true grief" of the other.

Before embarking on my readings of the novels, I want briefly to explore two theoretical traditions that are central to Coetzee's mode of bearing witness. As a way of foregrounding what I see as the complementary relationship between the ethical stance of Coetzee's novels and their politics, between their relation to alterity and their relation to history, I will suggest that both deconstruction and negative dialectics, often thought of as belonging to antithetical critical traditions, are in fact similarly inconsolable ethico-political practices.<sup>15</sup>

Theodor Adorno's 1962 essay "Commitment" sheds a crucial light on Coetzee's insistence on the autonomy of art. Adorno argues, taking Bertolt Brecht's political allegories as his *exemplum*, that "committed art" (i.e., art that is directly committed to a political cause) is always "poisoned by the untruth of its politics" (187). Because they bear on the external reality of history, the politics of Brecht's plays must necessarily remain "untrue" to the internal reality of the work of art. This is not to say that a work of art cannot contain a political message, but that this message has to be understood first and foremost within the work of art itself, as the sum—or, to use the Marxist term, the *totality*—of its internal relations. For Adorno, only the totality of the work of art has any relation to the society in which it is produced: like Georg Lukács, who also opposed Brechtian theatre but for very different reasons, Adorno sees the work of art as revealing the relations of production, the economic forces, that structure reality. However, opposing Lukács' adherence to the mimesis of realism—an adherence that, as Susan Gallagher points out, is still in evidence in the neo-Marxist dismissal of Coetzee (Gallagher 29)—Adorno argues that art should provide a "negative image" of society, one that stands in dialectical contradiction to society, as its critique. For Adorno, there can be no accommodation between the spheres of life and art, no shared or homologous content, even though there is nothing in art "which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free" (190).

It is no coincidence that the two artists that Adorno cites as having produced this "negative image" of society are the same two authors that have been widely seen—not least by Coetzee himself—as Coetzee's literary predecessors: Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Nevertheless, when art is called upon to declare its commitment to the revolutionary struggle—in 1930s Germany or 1980s South Africa—it is unsurprising that Lukácsian realism comes to seem a good deal more satisfactory than the hermetic work of a Kafka or a Coetzee, in all its fastidious refusal not to be "poisoned by the untruth of politics." Have Coetzee's novels merely afforded a welcome respite from the day-to-day realities of apartheid? Or have they instead provided some way of working through the history from which they appear to abstain?

To answer this question, we need to return briefly to Adorno's essay, the last part of which deals with the question of whether it is possible—and indeed ethical—to produce art after Auschwitz. Standing by his earlier pronouncement that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (188), Adorno nevertheless agrees with Hans Magnus Enzensberger's reply that "literature must resist this verdict":

The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; Pascal's theological saying, *on ne doit plus dormir*, must be secularized. Yet this suffer-

ing, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can find its own voice, consolation, without being betrayed by it. (188)

Without wishing to posit an historical equivalence between the *shoah* and apartheid, I would argue that Coetzee's art seeks for itself the task of bearing witness to "the abundance of real suffering" engendered by apartheid—and more broadly by the history of colonialism, the larger context within which Coetzee insists South African apartheid must be understood. The dialectical movement of Adorno's thinking captures the agonistic position that Coetzee is forced to adopt. To create art seems blasphemous in the face of excessive suffering but, equally well, art may be the only means of remembering this suffering, of giving "suffering its own voice." Art cannot help but betray its intentions, in its translation of that which it seeks to remember into art: "The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into its opposite" (189). In an attempt to arrest the slide from remembrance to forgetting, Coetzee creates works of art that attempt to remember their own inability to remember, narratives that draw attention to their own incompleteness, the silence at their core.

Like the work of Beckett and Kafka, Coetzee's novels attempt to remain speechless before history (Adorno 191). Their fundamental position is that of Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, called upon to witness and to name the destruction of a township, "the crime being committed in front of [her] eyes": "To speak of this'—[she] waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—'you would need the tongue of a god'" (91). Like Coetzee's novels, her speech is a mode of remaining silent. In an interview, Coetzee himself underlines his own speechlessness by speaking of how he is "overwhelmed," how "his thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world" (*Doubling the Point*, 248). And Adorno ends his essay by invoking exactly the same figure of the artist overwhelmed, incapacitated, before the spectacle of history, in his reference to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. In earlier sketches, he tells us, the figure was intended as a cartoon of Kaiser Wilhelm, but the final version, owned by Walter Benjamin, "flies far beyond . . . any emblem of caricature or commitment" (194)—beyond direct political reference and a politics of blame toward an acceptance of an unavoidable implication in history.

In Benjamin's perhaps too familiar description, the Angel sees history not as "a chain of events," as an immediately recognizable narrative of "the way it really was" (255), but instead as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage . . . in front of his feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" but is

instead ceaselessly blown into the future (257). On the one hand, then, Benjamin's Angel is a true "historical materialist," refusing to transcend the materiality of history, refusing to explain away the rubble of the past by turning it into a coherent historical discourse.<sup>16</sup> On the other, the Angel of History is still an angel, one who would like to redeem history by making whole what has been smashed. Although he is unable to carry out such a task, his thwarted desire is a mode of remembrance that recognizes each historical fragment as nonetheless waiting for—in want of—redemption, as part of an historical present that is "shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263).

In secularizing Pascal, Adorno implicitly recognizes the religious origins of his ethic of remembrance. Coetzee does likewise in his reading of Dante's encounter with the shade. Benjamin comes from the opposite direction, supplementing the secular Marxist tradition with an explicitly sacred ethic of remembrance, drawn from the Jewish Kabbala. All three make reference to religion in order to suggest the relation of memory to the future. Coetzee's novels, in their refusal to transcend the materiality of history, constitute works of remembrance that "point towards a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life" (Adorno 194).<sup>17</sup> In anticipation of the end of apartheid, they labor, as Derrida would say, "in memory of the hope" of a just future.

Adorno's concern with how art might remember suffering without forgetting it parallels Derrida's concern with the ethics of representation. In "Cogito and the History of Madness," for instance, Derrida argues that it is impossible to write a history of madness without reimprisoning madness within a discourse of reason. Like Adorno, he recognizes the inevitability of betraying those to whom one seeks to do justice, and in so doing, betraying one's own project. However, this act of imprisonment or betrayal is never total. The same movement that reimprisons madness within reason also provokes a crisis *within* reason. Madness itself, in its absolute difference from reason, exceeds Foucault's grasp but nevertheless installs itself at the center of Foucault's project as a silence that must remain, in Foucault's text as in any other, a silence. If, as Foucault argues, "madness is the absence of a work" (qtd. in Derrida 54), then madness can only reside in the absence of *Foucault's* work. Foucault's work succeeds precisely where it fails: silence becomes not only "the work's limit [but also its] profound resource" (55), its most successful way of delineating the history of madness.

The same argument governs Derrida's analysis of the work of mourning. Whereas successful or "healthy" mourning is the assimilation or integration of loss into consciousness, unsuccessful or unhealthy mourning, what Freud termed melancholia, is marked by the failure to integrate loss into consciousness (the secret denial that the loss has even occurred). For Derrida, it is precisely in this failure of integration that mourning becomes ethical. While successful mourning constitutes an idealizing "consumption" of the dead, the

absorption of difference into the self-same, failed mourning “leav[es] the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove” (*Mémoires* 6). In his foreword to Karl Abraham and Maria Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, Derrida describes this failure of integration as an “encryptment” of the dead within the living: “Cryptic incorporation marks an effect of impossible or refused mourning” (xxi). Both senses of the “cryptic” are drawn on here: the dead remain secretly entombed within—internal to but sealed off from—the consciousness of the living, and they also remain enigmatic, coded, untranslated. The fixation on the body of the dead evoked by the idea of burial is further emphasized by the term *incorporation*. While successful mourning is a movement of transcendence that allows the soul or spirit of the dead a kind of secular afterlife in the memory of the living, unsuccessful mourning is the failure to move beyond the corpse, beyond the fact of physical death. While successful mourning is a movement of *idealization* in which the dead are abstracted into a *memory*, unsuccessful mourning *incorporates* the dead as a foreign body, as a material *trace*.

In *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida links his critique of mourning to his critique of Foucault’s project by paralleling successful mourning with the historicist desire to recover the past.<sup>18</sup> The historicist narrative attempts to do for the collective memory what the language of mourning—elegy, epitaph, ode, obituary, oration—attempts to do for the individual memory, namely obtain mastery over the past by translating it into a recognizable form. In seeking to come to terms with death, the language of mourning seeks to memorialize or commemorate the dead by translating loss into words, silence into speech. Similarly, the historicist project seeks to render the past legible, to translate the past into discourse—and in so doing it must necessarily efface the difference of history, what Paul de Man referred to as “the materiality of actual history” (de Man, qtd. in *Mémoires* 30).

I find de Man’s phrase useful because it reverses the usual assumption that historicism deals with material history while poststructuralist discourses such as deconstruction reduce everything to “textuality” or even ahistorical abstraction. In fact, as we shall see in Coetzee’s fiction, it is only in the breakdown of historicizing narrative that we are able to glimpse the materiality of history. What de Man calls “true mourning” is precisely the failure to assimilate the dead into an historical narrative, precisely the refusal of this gesture of appropriation. Successful mourning enables the past to be assimilated or digested; one remembers in order to be consoled, ultimately in order to forget. By contrast, true mourning confronts an indigestible past, a past that can never be fully remembered or forgotten.<sup>19</sup>

To say that Coetzee’s bodies mark the site of “actual material history” is to recognize on the one hand that they are intensely material or “substantial” bodies, “humanity” reduced to a meaningless “pile of blood, bone and meat

that is unhappy" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 85), and on the other, that they are the site of a loss or a disappearance, that far from housing a soul or a subject, they contain "a story with a hole in it" (*Michael K* 110) through which the subject seems to disappear. Coetzee's bodies attempt to mourn their own loss, to tell the story of their own eclipse. And in so doing, they open out onto a wider history of loss, a history that is not their own and that indeed cannot be owned, a history that *ungrounds* them as individual subjects.

This, then, is why I would describe Coetzee's novels as works of failed or inconsolable mourning. Derrida's analysis of mourning sheds light on Coetzee's decision not to grant his figures of alterity patronyms—as a refusal to historicize the suffering of the dispossessed, a refusal to allow the reader to digest this suffering and then forget it. While naming makes representation—and thus mourning—possible by enabling us to speak of others in their absence, to remember and ultimately to forget them, the "failed" names of Friday, Michael K, and the barbarian girl arrest this process of representation and mourning. Precisely because they are not adequately named and thus remembered, they cannot be forgotten. Precisely because they are not fully individuated characters, they serve as reminders of all those who have been denied humanity, reminders of the history of barbarity that, as Benjamin famously noted, underwrites the history of civilization.<sup>20</sup> Coetzee's novels seek to find a way of relating to this "underwritten" history, this history that is simultaneously internal and external to the history of civilization, central yet excluded. Because they are themselves narratives, part of the history of civilization, they must attempt to relate to that which they themselves exclude, to that which they are themselves forced to under/overwrite. Their metafictional contortions are a way of gesturing toward their own excluded interior, their own encrypting of the realm of material history.

My reading of these novels will not attempt to decrypt, to render legible, this cryptic history. For this would be merely to repeat the futile attempts of their narrators, Susan, the doctor, and the Magistrate respectively. Rather, I will attempt to chart a movement that takes place in the wake of the failure to read Coetzee's figures of alterity, the failure to recover a history. In other words, I will attempt to trace both a story of disappearance and a disappearance of story, to follow Coetzee's figures of alterity as they seem to exit their own narratives and gesture not only toward a forgotten history but also toward the history of a Forgetting.

#### FRIDAY'S SILENCE

*Foe*, Coetzee's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, differs from other postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts in that it does not attempt to recover the voice

of the colonized other. Rather, it strives to remember the silencing of this other, the history of Forgetting of which Defoe's novel is itself a part. In Defoe's original narrative, Friday is passed over or lost as a subject from the moment that, having been rescued from his fellow "cannibals," he lays his head under Crusoe's foot and has this gesture interpreted by Crusoe as "a token of swearing to be my slave for ever" (Defoe 200). Coetzee's text marks the violence of this act of ventriloquism by representing Friday as always already silenced, as unable to speak because his tongue has been ripped out of his mouth.

Instead of recovering the voice of Friday, Coetzee imports his narrator, Susan Barton, from another of Defoe's novels, *Roxana*. Susan arrives on the island in the last year of Crusoe's island narrative.<sup>21</sup> She refuses to pass over the fact of Friday's silence and comes to suspect that it was Crusoe who cut out Friday's tongue. However, this and other acts of what Coetzee, with a nod toward Freud, terms "speculative history" underline the way in which she comes after Friday's "othering" and thus can only ever be—like the reader—a belated witness to his suffering.<sup>22</sup> She discovers the impossibility of penetrating "the silence surrounding Friday" (142). Nevertheless, as in *Madness and Civilization*, this silence comes to take up residence in the absence(s) of Susan's narrative. Susan comes to feel that her own account of what happened on the island, which, on returning to England, she tries to persuade Foe to write, is rendered radically incomplete without the story of Friday's "mut(e)ilation" (Begam 119). As she tells Foe, "the shadow whose lack you feel [in my story] is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (117).

How is it that Susan is able to encrypt Friday's story within her own? How is it that Friday's silence comes to haunt the center of *her* narrative? What are the motives and consequences of this act of encryption? On the one hand, Susan is guilty of a violent appropriation of Friday as cultural capital; in becoming Friday's self-appointed guardian, she merely takes over Crusoe's position as Friday's owner. As her repeated failures to bring Friday to speech indicate, Friday's story is as sealed off as ever, and like Crusoe before her, she finds herself ventriloquizing Friday's desire, only this time it is the desire to be free, rather than enslaved, that is attributed to Friday: "Friday's desires are plain to me. He desires to be liberated, as I do" (148). On the other, her insistence that the story she has to tell is the story of what happened on the island and not the alternative story of *Roxana*, her refusal to be the central protagonist of her own novel, constitutes a mode of self-negation: she refuses to acknowledge as her own the child who dogs her every move once she returns to England precisely because to accept this narrative of loss and restitution (that of *Roxana*) would be to render her own narrative complete and thus leave no room for the story of Friday's silencing. Her refusal to recognize herself as a mother is a power play that allows her to claim an

alternative position as the “father” of Friday’s story but, in refusing the restoration, the consolation, of the child, she is able to remain incomplete, inconsolable.

Spivak usefully suggests that we read Susan as “the agent of other-directed ethics” (164). My emphasis on the work of mourning leads me to suggest that by positioning Friday’s story as a hole in her own narrative, Susan allows the emptiness of her own narrative to bear witness to Friday’s loss of history—and to the wider history of loss to which the “fact” of his mut(e)ilation itself bears witness. I place quotation marks around the word *fact* in order to emphasize the double reference of Friday’s mut(e)ilation, as something that does not actually occur in Defoe’s narrative, but which undeniably did occur during the material history of slavery that the narrative occludes. Coetzee does not attempt to remember or recover this material history, not so much because this history is not available, but because he is interested in how this history has been occluded, in how it was possible to write a novel such as *Robinson Crusoe*, to (re)write the barbarity of slavery as benevolent paternalism.

But Coetzee is interested in more than a *critique* of this forgetting of history. The narrative also actively bears witness to this occlusion of material history. This process of bearing witness is structured as a *mise en abîme*, in which the hole in Susan’s subjectivity reveals the hole in Friday’s subjectivity, which in turn reveals the historyless limbo to which Friday’s ancestors have been consigned. This structure is set up early on in the novel: having allowed Cruso to “do as he wished” with her body (thereby negating herself by suspending the question of her own desire), Susan then interrogates herself about the nature of this abject experience:

We yield to a stranger’s embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep; and when we awake we have lost the direction of our lives. What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives? (30)

Immediately after this passage, Susan witnesses Friday floating near the shore on a log. She initially assumes he is fishing, but then sees him scattering petals and buds onto the surface of the water; she concludes that Friday is “making an offering to the god of the waves . . . or performing some other such superstitious observance” (31).

Coming straight after Susan’s meditation on her moment of abnegation, it is impossible not to see Friday’s actions as his own mode of “giving [him]self to the waves.” However, it is also one of the only moments in the novel in which we gain a glimpse of Friday’s “true” nature, one of the only moments in which he is not acting under compulsion; suggestively straddling the log (it is

elsewhere hinted that he may be castrated), it is as if he is momentarily free to articulate his own desire.<sup>23</sup> But as we shall see in *Life and Times of Michael K*, this desire is itself a desire for negation, the dangerous, life-threatening, even death-desiring desire of those unable to sever their emotional ties to the dead: *if*, as Foe and Susan come to suspect, Friday is floating above a slave ship, the watery grave of his fellow slaves, then we can read Friday's scattering of petals as an act of inconsolable mourning, as the sign of either an inability or a refusal to recover from history.

However, I highlight the word *if* in order to indicate that we are in the realm of "speculative history." My "interpretation" of Friday's act relies not only on Susan and Foe's subsequent speculations, but also on the veracity of Susan's account of the scene, on the truth of her witnessing. Because the scene follows directly on from her meditation on self-forgetfulness, it as if the scene itself is experienced as a *dream*: we are only able to witness Friday's own act of bearing witness through a crack in Susan's subjectivity, through a lapse in her own being in which she has momentarily forgotten the narrative of her self. Of course, dreams are notoriously the scene of a certain wish fulfillment; Friday may well be acting under compulsion after all, may well be merely doing Susan's psychic bidding. But, as we shall see, the novel keeps open the possibility of another understanding of dreams as the place where our own desire is suspended and "other voices make themselves heard in our lives."

This alternative interpretation of dreams is articulated later on in the novel. While they are lying beside each other in Foe's bed, Foe asks Susan about the function and value of dreaming: "Would we be better or worse . . . if we were no longer to descend nightly into ourselves and meet . . . our darker selves, and other phantoms too" (137–38)? The final encounter with Friday will make it clear that this is a deliberately racial reference, but what Foe (Coetzee) has in mind at this juncture, I would suggest, is the idea that a descent into the self is ultimately an encounter with that which is irreducibly other within the self. To follow out Foe's reasoning: it is this nightly encounter with our own encrypted otherness that enables us to be "better" rather than "worse," to relate—ethically—to the otherness of those we encounter in our *daily* lives.<sup>24</sup>

Foe then goes on to speak of another "descent"—Dante's descent into hell—and of grief: "One of the souls was weeping. 'Do not suppose, mortal,' said this soul addressing him, 'that because I am not substantial these tears you behold are not the tears of a true grief'" (138). As I noted earlier, the soul, addressing Dante, and also, of course, the reader, makes an appeal based on the truth-value of his grief, and in so doing his tears acquire a certain materiality that causes Dante to reciprocate in kind, offering his own tears as a sign of his own substantial grief. Susan's response to this, "True grief, but whose? . . . The ghost's or the Italian's" (138), reminds us of the privileges of

authorship and of the gap that separates Dante's remorse from that of the shade. Nevertheless, Foe—and the narrative itself, as the ending makes clear—cannot quite give up this dream of a place where it would be possible to shed truly reciprocal tears.

As a descent into the self, as a loss of self-consciousness, dreams mark the encounter with what is ordinarily, in our waking lives, most *external* to us—namely, the pain of others—as something *internal* to our own consciousness.<sup>25</sup> For Coetzee, most notably in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, dreams are the site of a transmission of pain, of an identification with the suffering of the other that is only possible because it takes place outside the realm of self-knowledge. While in their waking lives Coetzee's characters encounter the limits of empathic identification with other subjects, their dream lives open up the possibility of an abject identification with the other as other.

Julia Kristeva describes abjection as the experience of being thrown out of oneself, literally ab-jected, a “descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct” that guarantees our individuation and separation as subjects, a re-experiencing, in reverse, of the moment of our separation, in order to arrive at a place where self and other are “inseparable” (*Powers of Horror* 18). But this “contamination” of self and other is precisely the opposite of the transcendent movement of an empathic identification. Like Derrida's concept of failed mourning, Kristeva's concept of abjection is directed against the Platonic tradition in which matter is idealized and the other absorbed into the self. Abjection is a reduction of the self to the body in which the body becomes radically defamiliarized, bereft of the cultural codes by which we usually recognize it. The abject body is auto-referential: no longer operating as a sign of the human, it accrues its own weight or pathos and becomes an image of its own pain. “Significance,” Kristeva writes, “is indeed inherent in the human body” (10).

Echoing Kristeva's description, Coetzee's narrator describes the extratextual, extrahistorical location of the last pages of *Foe* as “a place where bodies are their own signs” (155). As I suggested in the introduction, the image comes into its own as an image of death. Outside the realm of representation, the image can at last realize itself not as a mimetic imitation of something else, but as itself. Here, in this underworld, this world of death, the image discovers its abject vocation, what Derrida describes as its “being-for-death” (“By Force of Mourning” 176). The last movement of the novel reenacts Dante's descent into a world of bodily pain and stages its own abject encounter in which the boundary between self and other is precisely *not* transcended, but instead *materialized*. In the wake of the narrative's failure to bring Friday to speech, the abject sight of Friday's body/corpse reduces the narrative to silence, to that speechlessness before history that Adorno argues is proper to the modern work of art.

This final movement is in fact two movements, two descents, narrated without quotation marks, as if Susan had relinquished her hold on the narrative, as if this were not a narrative at all, as if in order to enter “the home of Friday,” one would have to give up all claims to narration. On the first descent the nonnarrator enters an unnamed house, forces open Friday’s clenched teeth, and hears “the faintest faraway roar . . . of the waves in a seashell . . . the sounds of the island” (154). If this first descent restages Susan’s frustrated desire to bring Friday to speech, the second descent is a repetition of the first—but with the difference that the nonnarrator becomes involved in an act of reading. After identifying the house as that of “Daniel Defoe, Author” (155) (and thereby entering a house of fiction), he picks up Susan’s abandoned manuscript and begins to read it: “Bringing the candle nearer, I read the first words of the tall, looping script: ‘Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further.’ With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard” and subsequently “under the water” (155), as if he were diving through the hole in Susan’s narrative—and thus through the hole in Friday’s history—where he comes upon a shipwreck, the true “home of Friday” (157). To read the text—or rather the thing itself, the actual material manuscript—is to be led beyond the text, as if it were possible to follow the image’s lead, its silent movement toward a world beyond the world of representation.

Kristeva describes abjection as the communication of a nonverbal speech: “[a] sad analytic silence hover[s] above a strange foreign discourse, which strictly speaking shatters verbal communication . . . it is necessary that the analyst’s interpretative speech . . . be affected by it in order to be analytical” (30). On this second descent, as the nonnarrator attempts to prise open Friday’s mouth, he dislodges a stream of bubbles: “Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused” (157). These strange, foreign syllables constitute a material language, the language, as it were, of material history, the bodily sign of a substantial grief. They function as a form of metonymic remembrance, in their silent recollection of the modalities of Friday’s silence, of the *O*s that Friday is said to utter as a mode of prayer in *Robinson Crusoe*; of the “walking eyes” that Friday draws on the slate that Foe gives him (147); of the aporia of Friday’s history as he traces it on the surface of the water; of the hole in Susan’s narrative, which is also described as an “eye” or a “mouth” (141); and even of the island itself.

The last line of the novel “wakes” us out of the narrative, out of the dream of being able to encounter our “darker selves,” but nonetheless suggests a possible “transference” of the affective bubbles of Friday’s nonspeech into the tears of the nonnarrator—and perhaps the reader: “His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. [. . .] Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face” (157). The nonnarrator’s eyelids function as a threshold. The bubbles of

Friday's lament cannot occupy the same space as the nonnarrator's tears, tears that announce the cessation of the dream, the moment of severance, the irrevocable moment of waking in which we are forced to recognize the gulf that lies between a privileged world where we may dream of "slipp[ing] overboard" into a text and the realm of "actual material history."

#### MICHAEL K'S VIGIL

Coetzee's novels, I have suggested, labor in memory of the hope of a just future. Although *Life and Times of Michael K* seems initially to function as an apocalyptic projection of what might have happened in South Africa had the National Party not been forced to grant free elections (civil war), it ultimately functions as an affirmation, as a promise of the survival of human nature beyond the end of history and civilization. Critics have rightly read the novel in terms of an opposition between nature and culture. However, even the most sensitive of these readings have tended to account for this opposition by positing an ambivalence at the heart of Coetzee's novelistic sensibility. Michael Valdez Moses, for instance, sees Coetzee's work as oscillating between a Rousseauistic nostalgia for the natural state of man and a Nietzschean self-reflexive scepticism that realizes the impossibility of such a return. Moses fails to make sense of this tension beyond suggesting that the scepticism tempers, or even cancels out, the nostalgia. Rita Barnard also focuses on an opposition between nostalgia and scepticism, but suggests, via a reference to Adorno, that Coetzee's nostalgia is directed toward the future. She narrowly misses the revolutionary potential of Adorno's negative dialectics by attributing a naive utopian dimension to this "nostalgia," concluding by suggesting that Coetzee's novels look forward to a time in which "the novel could again invoke, not ironically, but lyrically, the 'country ways' of the pastoral" (Barnard 55). To return to such a mode of representation would constitute another forgetting, another denial of history. Against such utopian nostalgia, and in line with Adorno's sense of the dangers of aestheticization, Coetzee's novels instead strive never to forget: they certainly look forward to the possibility of justice or freedom, or in the South African context to a day in which humanity would no longer be stunted by the unnatural or inhuman relations of apartheid; however, such a day is predicated not on a utopian nostalgia but on our capacity to live in remembrance.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, Barnard's otherwise excellent article is a useful exploration of the tension between Coetzee's critique of South African pastoralism and his own pastoral hankerings. In his critical study *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee shows how Afrikaner pastoralism functions as an ideological evacuation of the landscape, an erasure of the native presence and labor. As Barnard

puts it, “this secret displacement is the historical precondition of the Afrikaner’s idyllic map of rural homesteading,” by which he is able to claim that the land belongs to him and he to it. Although Barnard later acutely suggests that K “finds a way to reclaim displacement, invisibility, tracklessness, as a form of freedom” (52–53), early on in her essay she suggests that Coetzee’s response to this forgetting is a simple act of recovery: “Coetzee renders visible the places that the system would rather keep out of sight and mind” (36). Had this been Coetzee’s strategy, he would surely have written a realist antipastoral, which would have laid bare the material conditions of rural labor. Instead, I would argue that, rather than rendering visible that which was excluded, the novel exposes the mechanism of exclusion; it remembers not native labor itself but the Forgetting of that labor.

The novel begins as if it were indeed possible to relate the life and times of Michael K, as if it were possible to write a subaltern history. However, by the end of the first section, K has eluded the surveillance of the seemingly omniscient third person narrative, abdicated his position as subject, and found a way out of his life and times. Attempting to become no more than “a speck upon the surface of the earth” (97), K digs himself a hole in the Karoo and enters a state of hibernation in which his body begins to disappear, in mute articulation of his refusal to be remembered, his desire only to be forgotten.

After he is dug up and taken to a military hospital, a doctor takes up the narrative, and with it, the task of memory. Finding K’s vanishing act a scandalous affront to his scientific knowledge—“The body, I had been taught, wants only to live” (164)—he attempts to feed, to “remember,” K against his will. K attempts to question the nature of the doctor’s desire: “Why do you want to make me fat? why fuss over me, why am I so important?” to which the doctor replies by asserting the law of memory: “. . . you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten” (135). And then, in his longest speech of the novel, K places the forgotten life of his mother against the doctor’s claim that no one is forgotten:

“My mother worked all her life long,” he said. “She scrubbed other people’s floors, she cooked for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forgot her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, ‘Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us.’” (136)

This passage is key to understanding K’s own bid to be forgotten as a mode of remembrance, as an attempt to identify with the way in which his mother has been forgotten. The doctor is almost right to suggest that K is not so much on hunger strike as merely holding out for the food that he grew for himself in

the veld. K does indeed crave the pumpkins grown on a farm that may or may not be that of his mother's half-remembered childhood, in a field fertilized by what may or may not be her ashes. But we know that this food offers K little physical nourishment; it only assists him in his attempt to disappear. For in eating the pumpkins, he incorporates not so much his mother as the absence of a mother whom even he cannot remember. Shortly after her death he finds that "he did not miss her, except insofar as he had missed her all his life" (34). His time on the farm is an attempt to identify not so much with his mother's idealized memory of freedom as a child as with the unfreedom of her forgotten life as a domestic servant. He attempts to live in remembrance of his mother by eating the nothing of her existence.

Another way of putting this would be to say that K's body attempts to follow the path of his mother's disappearance. At the beginning of the novel, K's mother seems to be dying of swollen limbs, almost as if her body is rebelling against the hidden, forgotten nature of her life, almost as if her body—and its history of suffering—is clamouring for remembrance. Thus K's filial devotion, his attempt to transport her back to the home of her childhood, is already a labor of mourning. As he wheels her out through the suburbs of Cape Point and into the veld, he has already begun to grapple with the weight of her history, with a history that has grown, to borrow a term from *Foe*, substantial. And when his mother, grown impossibly large, is suddenly translated into a tiny packet of ashes, how could this experience not prove traumatic for K? How could it not prove to be a crisis of remembrance? In reducing his mother's swollen body to ashes, it is as if the hospital has refused to recognize her demand to be remembered and actively consigned her to historical oblivion.

Thus K's cultivation of his mother's ashes, his dogged refusal to forget a mother that he cannot remember, is not just the working out of a private or personal grief. It is a protest against the state's refusal to remember; it is an attempt to remember a whole class of people that the state would rather forget, a people whom they would rather lock out of sight in camps, as a fellow worker explains to Michael, a people who they would have "come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean" (82). K's labor as a gardener is thus simultaneously an attempt to identify with his mother's disappearance and a protest against this disappearance, a protest against the Forgetting of labor. The swelling of the pumpkins, which parallels the swelling of his mother's limbs, recalls this ambivalence. On the one hand, they assist K in his attempt to disappear; on the other, as they begin to ripen they threaten to betray his secret, nocturnal labor (he only tends to his pumpkins at night, for fear of being observed), as if they too were clamoring for remembrance.

K himself understands his gardening as a mode of remembering the future, as an attempt, in a time of war, to “keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children” (109). K’s own vocabulary, together with the description of the two hills that form the crevice into which he burrows as “plump breasts” (100), makes it clear that his desire to maintain a connection with the land is intimately bound up with his refusal to sever the ties between himself and his dead mother. His labor of love fulfills not only his filial responsibilities to his mother but also his paternal responsibilities: he thinks of his pumpkins not only as the earth’s but also as his own children (113). Melancholia is thus rewritten as ethical commitment, a commitment that, like Coetzee’s commitment to his art, is also a refusal to acknowledge what others see as the more immediate political concerns of the present, an “untimely” refusal to accept that “the time for gardening [or pastoral novels] was when the war was over” (109). Interestingly, Moses also makes this connection between K’s commitment to his gardening and Coetzee’s commitment to his art, but simultaneously seeks to qualify the radical force of this desire to live outside history: “Just as K must ultimately acknowledge the hold that society has upon him, and the transitory and effectively powerless state of the solitary reverie, so too must Coetzee acknowledge that the world of fiction is not fully autonomous or immune to external forces” (153). Moses’s tone is unmistakably that of the Enlightenment: one can momentarily entertain dreams of freedom, but the mature, rational citizen will eventually realize that the true nature of freedom is responsibility. However, the tone, the alternative *ethos*, of Michael K and his author is equally unmistakably that of a Romanticism that marks a radical break with—which refuses to acknowledge—the moralism of the Enlightenment: their ethical understanding stems not from maturity but from the radical innocence of the child. As Coetzee puts it in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, children “come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice,” a memory that is perpetually at odds with the “world of laws” (139). The radical force of this memory is that—and this is what Moses, speaking from the perspective of civilization and from within its teleological timeframe, misses—it is not the solitary reverie but the way of the world that is revealed as “transitory.” K tends to his garden because he recognizes that human nature is not wholly determined by the idea of civilization; he waits for the end of the time of history as the beginning of the time of the human.

The strength of K’s resolve becomes clear in the final section of the novel, in which K disappears from the military hospital, returns to his mother’s room at Cape Point, and then imagines—at the point of his own death, in the transferential space of a final reverie—returning to the abandoned farm, pushing a fellow tramp back to Prince Albert in another wheelbarrow. This imagined journey, this dream of freedom in which K finally succeeds, perhaps, in

taking his mother home, needs to be placed alongside that of the doctor, who imagines following K out into the veld in order to discover the secret of his existence. As in *Foe*, Coetzee presents us with a double ending, a double journey. Just as the final narrator of *Foe* seeks to confirm his speculations about the shipwreck, the doctor runs after K to seek confirmation of his speculations about K's "sacred garden": "Am I right. . . . Have I understood you? If I am right hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left" (167). Only after K has outrun this attempt to reimprison him within the confines of narrative is he free to imagine, at the moment of death, the disclosure of his secret life, a life lived in memory of the hope of a day in which it would truly be possible to live. But this act of disclosure itself remains a dream. K imagines revealing himself to a fellow tramp who is only present in the narrative as a trace, as the smell of whoever last slept on K's final resting place of cardboard: it is only possible to reveal himself, or so it would seem, to his own spirit or "shade."

#### THE CRIES COMING FROM THE GRANARY

*Life and Times of Michael K* is the negative image not only of South African history but also of its fictional predecessor, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Each novelistic project collapses into the other. In *Life and Times of Michael K* the attempt to relate the "interior life" of an outcast suddenly finds itself external to this life, forced to take up the excluded, frustrated position of a narrator who cannot fathom the secret of K's existence. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the Magistrate's frustrated attempts to go beneath the surface of the barbarian girl's tortured body suddenly give way to an interior dream life containing intimations of a life beyond the confines of Empire. A hidden passage connects the Magistrate's desire to discover what happened in the intimate recesses of the torture chamber, the secret life that takes place at the heart of Empire, with the doctor's attempts to discover the secret of K's impossible existence in the wide open spaces of the veld. Both novels reveal the dialectical hinge between nature and culture, the moment where nature reveals itself as the ground of our humanity, and culture as the ground of our inhumanity, as that which renders us inhuman. It is this disjunction between the time of nature and the time of history that fuels K's desire to live in "a pocket outside time" (60) and the Magistrate's desire to "live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects" (154). Each novel works out the same dialectic between confinement and freedom, the present and the future, the pain of the captive body and the "bliss" (*Michael K* 68) of the liberated body, a bliss that nevertheless "remembers," bears an uncanny resemblance to, the suffering of the body in pain.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* dramatizes the question of how to address oneself to a history that remains inaccessible even in the very moment of its