

Hope and Incarnation in the Works of J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract

Throughout his oeuvre J.M. Coetzee dismantles the Cartesian vision of human life in which the body is merely a cage enclosing the true self, the consciousness or soul. His fiction demonstrates that this dualistic vision turns the subject inward upon herself which alienates her from her body, the world and other people. For Coetzee, it was largely this dualistic vision that allowed for the conception of absolute otherness upon which the age of European expansion and colonization was premised. He draws on Merleau-Ponty's 'being-in-the-world' and on the Christian idea of the Incarnation to construct his own unique vision of a unified body-soul. This unified conception of being turns the subject outward into the world where she can reach out to other people. This reaching out can take the form of moments of '*ekstasis*,' or standing outside the self, which, in the best of cases, is also *caristas*, or selfless love. For Coetzee, this love is a kind of earthly grace.

Résumé

Dans son oeuvre, J.M. Coetzee démonte le concept Cartésien de la vie humaine, pour laquelle le corps perd son importance et n'est qu'un enrobage pour l'esprit, qui lui règne sur le tout. Ses romans démontrent que cette vision dualiste renferme le sujet dans ses propres pensées, ce qui l'éloigne de son propre corps, du monde, et d'autrui. Pour Coetzee, cette vision dualiste des Européens leur a causé de percevoir les indigènes comme des Autres absolus avec lesquels ils ne peuvent s'identifier. Cette vision est à la base de l'esclavage et de la colonisation. Pour construire son propre concept de l'unité du corps et de l'esprit, Coetzee utilise l'idée chrétienne de l'incarnation et de 'l'être au monde' élaborée par Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Le concept d'un être unifié libère le sujet de son monde interne, et l'ouvre vers le monde d'autrui où il peut s'approcher des autres. Ce rapprochement permet au sujet de développer une charité, ou 'Caritas,' envers l'autre, ce qui constitue, pour Coetzee, une forme de grâce.

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Introduction

Critics who write about J.M. Coetzee's work inevitably rely heavily on postcolonial theory, a field of research which has two major branches. The first is the poststructuralist branch, which focuses on the long-term effects of colonial discourse and education systems on colonized countries and works to deconstruct this cultural domination. And the second is the Marxist branch, which characterizes colonization as a system of economic exploitation and focuses on the material history of oppressed peoples. Most scholars who write and think about Coetzee's oeuvre discuss, explicitly or implicitly, the ways in which his novels inhabit these theoretical categories. Coetzee carried out graduate research in linguistics and stylistics and his novels and critical essays reflect this interest in form. The influences of structuralism and poststructuralism are evident throughout his work to date, and critics of the poststructuralist school of postcolonial theory have had a field day with his work for this reason. His fiction nonetheless maintains a certain scepticism about these approaches, a certain dissatisfaction with the limitations they present, and critics often point to a desire to go beyond language, or even to return to an Adamic language in his texts.

Largely due to his evident experimentation with language and linguistic theory, critics of the material history school have frequently been frustrated with Coetzee's work. This was particularly true in South Africa itself in the 1980s. Many South Africans at this time expected writers to make what Nadine Gordimer, quoting Roland

Barthes, called the “essential gesture” of opposition to injustice and oppression.¹ As a result of this standard of social activism, Marxist critics such as Michael Vaughan considered Coetzee’s early work insufficiently engaged and therefore not ‘useful’ to the people of South Africa. For him, and many others with similar political leanings, Coetzee “[gave] privileged attention to the predicament of a liberal petty bourgeois intelligentsia” while pushing into the background “material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa” (65).² David Attwell disputes this point of view in his ground-breaking study, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, published in 1993. Attwell, a South African academic himself, though not a Marxist, was one of the earliest voices in attempting to bridge the gap between the poststructuralist criticism (largely coming from outside South Africa) and the material history analysis (largely coming from within). He argues that: “Coetzee has absorbed the lessons of modern linguistics –the textual turn in structuralism and poststructuralism –yet seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of contemporary South Africa” (Introduction 1).

Critics have found much to work with in Coetzee’s fiction by looking at it through other theoretical perspectives as well, but these works of criticism generally contribute to the debate described above rather than avoiding it. Although Coetzee is quoted as saying: “If one believes that stories must aspire to more than merely to be interesting, then one must go beyond psychology,” he himself admits that “the traces of

¹ Gordimer explains the meaning of this phrase in her Tanner Lecture entitled “The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility,” given at The University of Michigan in October of 1984. She argues that: “ours is a period when few can claim the absolute value of a writer without reference to a context of responsibilities” (5).

² There were, of course, exceptions to the Marxist disappointment with Coetzee, however. Menan Du Plessis, for example, argues that “the movement of [Coetzee’s] fictions is towards a true materialism” (121), and the reason that “bourgeois Marxists” haven’t picked up on this is that they “simply cannot afford the devastating self-criticism that an applied reading of Coetzee’s work provides” (125).

my dealings with Freud lie all over my writings,” and there is an important body of work looking at the novels psychoanalytically (“Autobiography” 245). Perhaps the best known work in this category is Teresa Dovey’s *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, in which she uses Lacanian theory to argue that the deconstructive and Marxist perspectives are not actually in opposition to each other. There is also some important work looking at the novels through a feminist lens. This criticism tends to focus around *Foe*, and increasingly around *Disgrace*. Most of the feminist scholarship on *Foe* argues that Coetzee deconstructs linguistic and literary conceptions of women in this work in order to expose the role language plays in gender oppression and inequality. There is, of course, considerable disagreement over how successful he is in this deconstructive enterprise. This body of work is headed up by poststructuralist theorist Gayatri Spivak in her article: “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee’s *Foe* Reading Defoe’s *Crusoe/Roxana*.” Most feminist work on *Disgrace*, on the other hand, deals with whether or not the novel does anything to improve the situation of women in contemporary South African society. Two excellent examples of this work are: Elleke Boehmer’s “Sorry, Sorrier, Sorriest: The Gendering of Contrition in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” and Rosemary Jolly’s “Going to the Dogs: Humanity in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, *The Lives of Animals*, and South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”³

I hope it is evident in the chapters that follow that I, too, am sensitive to this language vs. history divide, but I feel that the emphasis on these two branches of postcolonial theory has allowed some elements of Coetzee’s writing to be given too

³ In her Introduction to *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, Sue Kossew gives an extensive overview of the literature written on Coetzee up to 1998. This was where I began my own exploration.

little attention. He consistently places the body, the individual human (and indeed animal) body, the organism, in a central position in his works. He posits the body as a counter to both the dangers of linguistic/cultural domination and the emptiness and uncertainty of a deconstructed language. For him the body has a sort of access to authority and truth that language cannot have. As he puts it himself in an interview with David Attwell: "If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" ("Autobiography" 248). Coetzee focuses on the body as 'real,' then, not as a construct (as certain deconstructionists would have it), but something outside the world of language, something with a material reality all its own. Still, this material reality is different from the material realm of History. Just as he resists seeing bodies as discursive constructs, he resists seeing people's physical manifestations in the world as merely roles in a wider historical drama. He consistently refuses to turn his characters into historical lessons or models of behaviour and focuses instead on their individual existences. His characters are, in other words, embedded in life but not necessarily in History.

The reason the body has such power for Coetzee is specifically because 'the body' is not, for him, merely the physical part of the person (as opposed to the invisible spiritual or intellectual part). The body is not merely a circulation system, a nervous system, and a dermatological covering; it is profoundly implicated in being, and is inseparable from the soul or the mind or the consciousness. This is where my analysis parts ways with the (very small) body of work that has been done on the role of the

body in Coetzee's fiction. A few critics have discussed the metaphors of disease in Coetzee's oeuvre (Fiona Probyn and Mike Marais among them), with reference to *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*, in which the personal diseases of the protagonists (cancer and epilepsy respectively) reflect the degenerate state of the societies in which they live (apartheid South Africa and pre-revolutionary Russia). But in these articles the body becomes merely a symbol of the body politic and is not the focus of attention in and of itself. In his article "J.M. Coetzee and the Question of the Body," Brian May discusses the significance of the body in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. He argues that in *In the Heart of the Country* "the body is no more resistant to linguistic troping than any other thing" (400) but that Coetzee moves beyond this in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to give some sense of the "presence, primacy and power" of bodies (416). While I agree with much of what May says in his analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I am disconcerted by his discussion of bodies as if they had nothing to do with the people of whom they are a part. In my reading of Coetzee's work I argue that it is precisely this distancing of bodies from the other elements of selfhood that he is struggling to resist.

Even more unexplored than the importance of the body in Coetzee's fiction is the role of Christianity. The fact that critics have left this significant element of his works almost entirely untouched can perhaps be explained by the virtual monopoly that postcolonial theory has over these works in academic circles. Many postcolonial theorists remain reluctant to acknowledge the positive ways in which Christian themes are sometimes used in contemporary postcolonial literature, and this certainly applies to those critics writing about South African fiction. This reluctance is understandable

considering the role Christianity played in the whole colonizing project. In South Africa the Dutch Reformed Church was heavily implicated in creating apartheid mythology and in justifying the apartheid state. But Christianity also played a significant role in anti-colonial struggles; Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Anglican Church, for example, helped bring down the apartheid regime. In any case Christian ideas can easily be used in a philosophical rather than religious sense. This is certainly what Coetzee does here. Overcoming this reluctance on the part of postcolonial theorists, then, can only be good for the field.

I began my reading of Coetzee's oeuvre with the assumption, backed up by the literature surrounding his work, that his novels have nothing to do with Christianity, but I kept encountering a longing for absolution, for salvation, in his protagonists that was hard to reconcile with a completely secular perspective. This longing, and the experimentation with Christian themes which I later began to recognize in his works, becomes progressively more pronounced over the course of Coetzee's career. In his earlier works this preoccupation with Christian themes manifests itself mainly in a rejection of the type of Christian morality which allowed for, and played such a large role in, colonization. In both his fiction and non fiction (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, *White Writing*), Coetzee explores multiple variations of the myth of the Garden of Eden and of the fall and the implications these myths took on in the process of colonization. He also explores the myth of the Promised Land (*White Writing*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*) which played such an important part in the 'Afrikaner civil religion.'⁴

⁴ In *The Mind of South Africa*, Allister Sparks describes how apartheid was built on the belief that Afrikaners were God's chosen people, a belief based heavily on the mythologizing of certain historical

Alongside this rejection of a certain Christian morality Coetzee places other elements of Christianity, elements which he uses positively. That is, he does not simply introduce them in order to reject them; he introduces them in order to say things for which a secular vocabulary is not really sufficient. Many critics have written about Coetzee's interest in confession (his article "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" has received a great deal of critical attention), but few have interrogated the Christian underpinnings of this interest in any depth. Several of Coetzee's works are essentially extended confessions in which the protagonists seek some sort of grace (*In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron*, *Disgrace*). But it is only in his later works that the focus shifts from the confession itself toward an examination of the grace that is sought. In *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, particularly, grace receives an extended treatment, and we get a sense of Coetzee's unique understanding of what grace means. Numerous Coetzee novels also contain Christ-like figures who are victims of brutality but also possess a mysterious power to survive and be reborn (*The Life and Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, *Disgrace*), and Coetzee explicitly acknowledges his belief in the power of the imagery of the crucifixion in an interview with David Attwell. He says: "I understand the Crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any reinterpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or whatever, that we can give to it" ("South African" 337). This interest in Christ-figures, in both the crucifixion and the resurrection, comes to play a large role in the definition of grace that he has formulated in his recent work.

events, mainly the Battle of Blood River and the Great Trek (109-10). I discuss this apartheid mythology/theology in greater detail in Chapter One.

Coetzee's focus on the body as a site of resistance and his positive use of Christian imagery and themes are intimately intertwined. In demonstrating this link I have relied on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is, of course, best known for his work in the area of phenomenology, but who also wrote some short, fascinating essays on Christianity. In his work in phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty breaks down the distinction between the body and the soul (or the 'being-in-itself' and the 'being-for-itself') and posits instead what he refers to as 'being-in-the-world,' a conception of human existence which acknowledges that the body is not an object or a machine, nor is the consciousness an invisible disembodied animating principle; the body and the consciousness are one whole entity constantly acting upon and being acted upon by the world. A person is defined, then, not by her physical appearance or by her abstract, immutable essence, but by her existence in the world, her experiences, her actions, her being. I use Merleau-Ponty's conception of 'being-in-the-world' and the implications that go along with it in terms of how people relate to one another throughout my study to help define Coetzee's vision of the body and to get a handle on the role the body plays in his texts. I also use Merleau-Ponty's intriguing essays linking his own phenomenology of the body with Christianity, specifically Catholicism. In "Faith and Good Faith" he argues that Catholicism is simultaneously deeply conservative and admirably radical, because, on the one hand, it posits a fallen world and a transcendent God (thereby articulating a disdain for the world and for the flesh), and on the other hand it emphasizes the Incarnation, God who is also man and who lived in the world (thereby rehabilitating the world and the flesh). This division within Christianity, articulated by Merleau-Ponty, gets at the heart of Coetzee's use of Christian themes. He

rejects the elements of Christianity that Merleau-Ponty classifies as conservative while using those elements Merleau-Ponty celebrates as radical to articulate his own unique understanding of being human and his own particular conception of grace.

In the first work I look at here, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee focuses on dismantling the dualistic vision of human life in which the body is merely a fleshy cage which houses the true self, the invisible, immutable essence, the consciousness or soul. He demonstrates, in this text, that this dualistic vision alienates human beings from their own bodies, which, in turn, alienates them from the world and the people in it. In fact, I will argue that for Coetzee it was largely this dualistic vision, so deeply imbedded in Western theological and philosophical traditions, that allowed for the conception of absolute otherness upon which the age of European expansion and colonization was premised. In *Waiting* Coetzee demonstrates how damaging this dualistic vision has been and is, but his exploration of an alternative way of being is just beginning. While it is clear here that Coetzee is positing a unified understanding of the body and the mind, and that he is placing a great deal of emphasis on the experience and behaviour of his characters in terms of how they come to be defined as people, he has not yet explored, in this early work, how this unified self might come to be truly *with* other people.

In *Foe* (1986), Coetzee continues the deconstruction of the dualistic understanding of being, this time focusing on how language comes to be viewed under this system, and, indeed, how language is used to construct and to disseminate this vision. But in this text he moves farther than in *Waiting for the Barbarians* toward articulating a way in which this dualism can be bypassed. Here, Coetzee demonstrates,

for the first time, how his alternative vision of being could allow for genuine contact with others. By understanding that we are inseparable from our bodies, we understand that we are inseparable from the world, and this understanding can allow us to communicate with the world and with other people below (or beyond) the level of conscious thought and language. These moments of understanding show up as visionary events in this text and take on a quasi-religious significance, because this contact with others, this ability to stand outside the self, is a powerful counter to violence and oppression.

In *Disgrace* (1999) (and also in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which I use to help clarify some of the ideas I find in *Disgrace*) Coetzee concretizes the ideas he has begun to formulate in *Foe*. While in *Foe* the main moment of communion with another being is a sort of supernatural baptism, in *Disgrace* this communion with others becomes a way of living rather than a singular, mystical, episode. This ability to commune with others is clarified, here, as love, specifically a totally selfless, indeed self-erasing love, one Coetzee calls *caritas*. It is an articulation of this love that Coetzee has been working toward throughout these novels. And it is this love that his characters consistently seek, and often fail to achieve. Finally, it is this love that is the only form of earthly ‘salvation,’ the closest there is, in a secular world, to grace.

Chapter One

After the Fall: The Role of the Flesh in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

“The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being” (Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* 139).

Throughout J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* the protagonist, known only as the Magistrate, struggles with the seductive but detrimental belief that the outpost of Empire he has in charge was once a kind of pre- (or extra-) historical Garden of Eden. The Magistrate himself was the patriarch of this earthly paradise; he benevolently ruled over the junior officers, enjoyed the company of any woman he wanted, and benefited from the bounty of plant and animal life. He was a hedonist, unashamedly revelling in the things of the flesh, good food, good wine, the bodies of women, young and old. In the Magistrate’s nostalgic vision, before the arrival of Colonel Joll and the representatives of the Third Bureau, the outpost, or oasis, was untouched by corruption and decay; the body and its needs were natural, beautiful, at one with the spirit. But with the arrival of these outsiders bodily deterioration and shame invade the Garden; they are allowed in because the Magistrate refuses to turn a blind eye to Colonel Joll’s activities. Joll’s job is to investigate rumours of a military build-up among the Empire’s enemies on the frontier, and immediately upon his arrival Joll begins taking prisoners and ‘interrogating’ (i.e torturing) them. He starts with a young boy and his grandfather picked up along the road near the outpost then conducts raids deep into enemy territory. He takes prisoners from the fisherfolk, a people described as poor and harmless who live very nearby, and later from the barbarians, a

supposedly more dangerous, warlike people who live in the mountains beyond the salt lake. In witnessing Joll's activities, the Magistrate believes that he has eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and from that moment on he is unable to return to his unmediated, prelapsarian state. With 'knowledge' comes the fracture between the body and the spirit and the body becomes tainted with sin. The Magistrate becomes obsessed with the 'unclean' physical act of torture and enacts rituals of cleansing and purification to counteract this perceived sully of the physical body. At the same time the Magistrate develops a deep sense of shame over his own body and its needs. He is disgusted by his bulging stomach, his sagging, aging flesh and his confused, inconsistent sexual desires. He longs to return to the time before the arrival of Colonel Joll, when, he believes, his spirit and his body were united, but he is unable to do so. Very slowly, through his relationship with the barbarian girl, a prisoner and victim of torture who becomes his live-in companion, and through his own experience with torture, he begins to understand the detrimental, even evil, nature of his longing for purity. He nonetheless continues to hunger for some sort of reconciliation between his spirit and his now damaged and aging body. He continues to hold out the hope of some form of wholeness. Only at the very end of the text, though, does he seem to glimpse what is necessary for this reconciliation to occur. The shame he feels over his own body leads to alienation from the physical world and all those who inhabit it; if he wants his spirit and his physical body to be reunited, he must turn out toward that world and live his convictions. He must not only talk about the rights of the 'barbarians' as human beings, he must accept them, in his own life, as human beings with rights to the land the

Empire has stolen from them. He must turn away from his ideological fantasies of separation (or apartness, or apartheid) and accept the coming of the ‘barbarians.’

The myth of the fall and of original sin used in this text is part of a much broader theological and philosophical tradition in the West which glorifies the disembodied soul. The Magistrate gets trapped in this vision of human life and struggles with it throughout the text. But there is another Western philosophical and religious tradition which does just the opposite, namely glorifies the Incarnation. The Magistrate gropes toward this very different vision of life although it is never completely articulated. This movement from valorizing a transcendent, disembodied soul toward recognizing the power and creativity of a unified body/soul is one which Coetzee develops progressively over the course of his own career. Even at this early stage, however, he is already formulating a philosophy of embeddedness in the body and in the world that draws both on Christianity and the thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In “Faith and Good Faith,” Merleau-Ponty describes the differences between the two major strands of philosophical thinking mentioned above as they play out within Christianity. Referencing Hegel, he calls the first version of Christianity “the reign of the father” (174). This vision posits an “interior” God, one who can only be found by turning inward upon the self. Merleau-Ponty explains it thus:

‘Turn inward,’ said St. Augustine. ‘Truth dwells within the inner man.’ One finds God by turning away from things. Whether God is the model according to which my spirit was created or whether I experience and, so to speak, touch God when I become conscious of myself as spirit, God is in any case on the side of the subject rather than on the side of the world. (173-4)

In this vision, in other words, God is not of this earthly world but of a world of pure spirit, and He can only be accessed by rejecting the world of ‘things’ and of the body. In this vision, then, the spirit and the body are two distinct entities. While the spirit is God-like and must be cultivated, the body is animal-like and is not to be trusted. This particular interpretation of Christianity was the inspiration for a great deal of Enlightenment philosophy, particularly that of Descartes who believed that understanding of any kind could only be achieved through a total rejection of the body. What Descartes didn’t recognize is that this rejection of the body leads to alienation from other people, because truly conceiving of other consciousnesses within this system of thought is virtually impossible:

The existence of other people is a difficulty and an outrage for objective thought...Other men, and myself, seen as empirical beings, are merely pieces of mechanism worked by springs, but the true subject has no counterpart, for that consciousness which is hidden in so much flesh and blood is the least intelligible of occult qualities. My consciousness...cannot encounter, in that system, another consciousness.... (Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception* 349)

In other words, because this system of thought conceives of a body as a mere object (‘being-in-itself’) and of consciousness as an invisible abstraction (‘being-for-itself’), it is impossible for anyone to encounter someone else’s consciousness. In this system people have access only to the bodies of other people. People engage with others only as objects. The impossibility of one consciousness encountering another within this system of thought is amply demonstrated in the experience of the Magistrate who

suffers deeply from his sense of alienation from, and hatred for, his own body and from his inability to truly engage with the people around him.

The opposing strand of religious/philosophical thought in the Western tradition is defined by what Merleau-Ponty calls the God of the Incarnation who is quite different from God the Father. In this vision of Christianity:

The world ceases to be like a flaw in the great eternal diamond. It is no longer a matter of rediscovering the transience of God outside the world but a matter of entering body and soul into an enigmatic life, the obscurities of which cannot be dissipated but can only be concentrated in a few mysteries where man contemplates the enlarged image of his own condition. (“Faith and Good Faith” 175)

In this vision the world is not a lost cause of degradation and sin; it is inhabited by God, a God of flesh and blood who lived the life of a human being. Here God is not to be sought outside the creation but within it, in the form of a being, a life like our own.

This very different understanding of God leads to a different understanding of human life and human consciousness:

As for consciousness, it has to be conceived, no longer as a constituting consciousness and, as it were, a pure being-for-itself, but as a perceptual consciousness, as the subject of a pattern of behaviour, as being-in-the-world or existence, for only thus can another appear at the top of his phenomenal body, and be endowed with a sort of ‘locality.’ (*Phenomenology* 351)

Here the consciousness and the body become inseparable as part of being or existence.

There is no purity or perfect clarity of vision, here, just a genuine engagement with this

life and the people who share it with us. The Magistrate has moments of insight when he glimpses this possibility, and, as we will see, this understanding of ‘being-in-the-world’ carries with it a tremendous hopeful power of healing and creativity.

It is not only Coetzee’s protagonist in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who struggles with the difference between intellectual abstractions and embedded realities. Coetzee also toys with this distinction at the level of form. Since the time and place are never specified in the novel, many critics argue that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is simply an allegory which allows Coetzee to represent “the moral dilemmas and political paradoxes of all imperial enterprises” (Moses 116).⁵ I nevertheless contend that this novel is deeply embedded in the historical realities of South Africa in the 1970s. The correlation between the Magistrate’s delusions of purity and separation from the ‘barbarians,’ and the mythologies surrounding apartheid in South Africa are too important to ignore, as are the relationships between some of the events in the text and historical happenings during the time of its writing. By positioning the novel in the gap between ahistorical allegory and historical realism Coetzee creates a space for himself in between the major branches of postcolonial theorizing discussed in my introduction, namely the poststructuralist, discursive branch and the Marxist material history branch. This gap offers Coetzee the freedom to work out his unique philosophical outlook.⁶

But let us turn back to the connections between the text and South African history. The comfort of white, liberal South Africans was based, like that of the

⁵ The South African censorship board agreed that the novel made no direct commentary on South Africa. Their report stated: “The locale is as obscure as Erewhon, and any symbolism more so.... We...submit there is no convincing reason for declaring the book undesirable” (qtd. In McDonald 290).

⁶ In his important essay “Against Allegory,” Derek Attridge does a wonderful job of following Coetzee into this new philosophical space by doing what he refers to as a “literal reading” of the text. His reading seeks to avoid all allegorical interpretations “whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political” (60).

Magistrate, on ignorance of the violence and degradation deployed to keep their positions intact. Over the course of the 1970s, however, it became progressively more difficult to maintain this blissful ignorance. As Sparks explains, previous to the 1974 Portuguese revolution, South Africa had been cut off from black nationalist movements further north by a strip of white ruled colonies (from east to west: Angola, Namibia, Rhodesia, and Mozambique). But this revolution brought about the collapse of the Portuguese Empire and precipitated the independence of Angola and Mozambique, both of which were taken over by black Marxist regimes (Sparks 300-1). Within five years Rhodesia also gained its independence, and from the perspective of South Africa's ruling party: "the protective [white] buffer was not only gone altogether but transformed into a threatening arc of radical black states sympathetic to the ANC" (Sparks 301). In the minds of many white landowners in the "Deep North"⁷ the 'barbarians' really were at the gates. As a result of this geopolitical shift and with the inauguration of Pieter Botha as premier in 1978 came a massive increase in military spending and a significant shift in focus away from the original theology and ideology of 'separate development' toward a new military/ security complex designed to protect 'white' South Africa from the 'terrorist' threat of Moscow backed black communists (Sparks 308). This complex maintained a "*dwangpostuur*, or a posture of threat and compulsion, that would intimidate the neighbouring black states and dissuade them from allowing the ANC to use their territory" (Sparks 307). The brutality of this *dwangpostuur* reflects the indiscriminate violence of Colonel Joll's raids against the 'barbarians:'

⁷ "As befits its location in the Southern Hemisphere, South Africa has inverted the geography of American racism and developed a "Deep North" problem of white extremism, with the rural fastnesses of the northern Transvaal its equivalent to Mississippi and Louisiana" (Sparks 41).

Sometimes commando forces have been used to strike into neighbouring countries with unrestrained ruthlessness, machine-gunning apartment blocks and killing local civilians, including women and children, as well as ANC agents living there. Air attacks, equally indiscriminate, sometimes hit the wrong targets –but no matter, it’s the posture of threat and compulsion that counts. (Sparks 311-12)

Meanwhile the freedom struggle within South Africa was rapidly gaining followers, particularly after the Soweto uprising of 1976 and the torture and murder, in custody, of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko.⁸

While white liberals argued that apartheid was an inhuman regime and recognized the necessity of liberalizing it, many, in their deeply embedded racism and fear of communism, could not bring themselves to accept the possibility of black rule. Like the Magistrate these liberals were appalled by the actions of the “Third Bureau” (the defence force); were even willing, in some cases, to accept some culpability in the system, but were unwilling to bring about real change. In the end, though, it was not up to them. The black population in South Africa, always much larger than the white population, was undergoing a political awakening, and young black people were refusing to stay in their overcrowded and destitute rural “homelands.” Ultimately white

⁸ As David Attwell points out there is a close correlation between the killing of the old man, one of Joll’s first torture victims, and the murder of Steve Biko (“Reading” 74). The absurd excuses given for both these deaths are virtually identical. In Coetzee’s text the official version reads: “‘During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful’” (*Waiting* 6). At the inquest into the death of Steve Biko, Major H. Snyman, a member of the Port Elizabeth security police, testified that during the interrogation “Mr. Biko...got a wild expression in his eyes suddenly and jumped off the chair...[the interrogators] tried to grab Mr. Biko, who was ‘clearly beside himself with fury’” (Woods 187). According to Snyman’s testimony it took five police officers to subdue the prisoner and that “during the scuffle,” Biko fell, “hitting his head against a wall...” (Woods 187-8).

liberals would be forced to practice what they preached; the reality on the ground, the undeniable presence of so many black people, had to catch up to and overturn the ideology of separation. By the 1960s it was clear that: "...even if the 'homeland' builders exceeded their most optimistic expectations, the demographics of population growth and black urbanization were such that there would still be at least four times as many blacks as whites in 'white' South Africa by the end of the twentieth century" (Sparks 372). It is of this hopeful reality that Coetzee offers us glimmers at the end of his text: the possibility that the 'barbarians' will finally take over. Blacks, in other words, would get the rights they deserved and whites would cease to debase and shame themselves with their guilt and their hypocrisy.

Coetzee's text begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll from the Third Bureau so the reader is never directly privy to the life the Magistrate lead in 'the oasis' before this time. But in the beginning, before he understands that his life is changed forever, the Magistrate describes his routines in the following terms: "I ...administer the communal lands, supervise the junior officers...preside over the law court twice a week. For the rest I watch the sunrise and set, eat and sleep and am content" (8). Everything in the town is in its proper place and under the proper authority and the inhabitants live in natural time, measured out by the rising and the setting of the sun. More importantly, in this glowing past life the Magistrate was truly engaged in the world. He was not alienated from his own physical being, or from the people of the town. He had no feeling of shame or fear of filth in terms of his sexuality:

I remember how in the first years of my appointment here I used to roam the obscurer quarters of the town toward dusk...; how sometimes a restless wife,

leaning over the half-door with the hearthfire gleaming behind her, would answer my gaze without flinching; how I would fall into conversation with young girls promenading in twos and threes... then perhaps lead one away into the darkness.... If there was anything to be envied in a posting to the frontier...it was the easy morals of the oases, the long scented summer evenings, the complaisant sloe-eyed women. (45)

The Magistrate depicts this life as prelapsarian. There are no enraged husbands, no feelings of guilt, no back door abortionists. There is no conflict between the flesh and the spirit; they are united in perfect pleasure and innocence. He does go through some phases during this time when he is less interested in sex, but he considers this part of a natural cycle, like the passing of days and years (46).

With the arrival of Joll at the oasis the Magistrate's bountiful summer is over, as is the natural time of the sun and the seasons. According to the Magistrate, Joll shatters the natural and imposes the time of Empire, a time marked by tasks accomplished and enemies vanquished. History has arrived at the oasis, a history intimately linked with that of South Africa. In *White Writing* Coetzee asserts that the earliest colonization of South Africa was not meant as a settlement but as "a trading post, a garden" to provide fresh produce for trading vessels on their way around the Cape of Good Hope (1). Why, then, he asks "did the garden myth, the myth of the return to Eden and innocence, fail to take root in the garden colony of the Cape?" (2) He answers this question by describing the deep distrust of idleness the protestant colonizers of the Cape felt: "Mankind was widely held to be so weak that without the discipline of continual work it was bound to relapse into sin" (20). Instead of seeing the life of the native South

African as an ideal one of relative ease and plenty, these settlers branded it as one of “[i]dleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor” (18). We see this attitude reflected in that of the Magistrate who says the outpost’s nearest neighbours, the fisherfolk, live in a “state of nature” but also calls them “filthy” and claims they could all too easily become a “race of beggars” (19). For early South African settlers the denunciation of laziness became all the more necessary as they, like the Magistrate, lived lives of relative idleness themselves. This hypocrisy created quite the ethical dilemma; as Coetzee puts it: “[this lifestyle] seems further to betray the colonizing mission, since in order to justify its conquests colonialism has to demonstrate that the colonist is a better steward of the earth than the native (the text usually cited in support is Matthew 25: 14-30)” (31). In order to distance themselves from the life of idleness they lead, the Afrikaners rejected the myth of the Garden, which was widespread in certain other colonies,⁹ in favour of a different biblical precedent, that of the Chosen People and the Promised Land. Following this myth they could more easily claim that they were not usurpers of the land; they were its rightful possessors. As we will see, the Magistrate has drunk deeply of this mythology.

In 1948 Daniel Malan explained this conception of Afrikanerdom as a kind of new Israel: “Our history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We hold this nationhood as our due for it was given us by the Architect of the universe. [His] aim was the formation of a new nation among the nations of the world” (qtd. In Sparks 31). In the minds of these apartheid myth-makers, Afrikaner nationalism was closely linked to the Biblical covenant between God and the Israelites, his chosen people. God lead

⁹ The ‘New World’ of the Americas was often figured as an Eden, and its inhabitants were described as living in a state of original innocence (*White Writing* 2).

the Afrikaner nation to miraculous victories, first against Zulu warriors at the Battle of Blood River, and later against the British at the Battle of Majuba Hill, all in order to award them the land of South Africa as their own (Sparks 112-15).

Coetzee evokes the Biblical story of God's gift of the land of Canaan to the Israelites by setting his oasis on the borders of a salt lake, just as the land of Canaan borders on the Dead Sea. In this way the Magistrate's idealized view of the outpost and the sense of ownership the inhabitants of the outpost feel is linked to the perception white South Africans had of the land they inhabited. A young guard typifies this sense of right and ownership when he asks the Magistrate: "Why can't [the barbarians] leave us alone? They have their own territories, haven't they?" (99).

In *White Writing*, Coetzee describes how this idea of the covenant played out in Afrikaner literature, specifically in the form of the *plaasroman*. In this genre:

...the ideal farmer...is wedded to the soil of the farm, he is not consciously aware of his married state or becomes aware of it only when it is too late, when he is threatened with losing his farm. Why should this be so? The answer is that the farmer is *natuurmens* (natural man); and once natural man becomes able to articulate his essence in language, he is thereby removed from the realm of nature." (88)

This farmer is, in other words, inhabiting a certain prelapsarian realm, and he has an unmediated relationship with the world around him until he is threatened with the loss of his land. At this point he must relearn his obligations to the land:

Besides farming the land in a spirit of piety toward *voorgeslagte* and *nageslagte*, (past and future generations), besides being a good steward, the farmer must also

love the farm, love this one patch of earth above all others.... in good years the farm will respond to his love by bringing forth bountifully, while in bad years he will have to stand by it, nursing it through its trials. (86)

This is the only way for the farmer to truly understand the land and to know himself. This describes very closely the relationship the Magistrate bears to the outpost. He believes that he lived in the outpost, before the arrival of the members of the Third Bureau, in an unmediated state. But once Colonel Joll and his henchmen arrive he must relearn his relationship to the outpost; he must redefine himself. He tries to make himself believe that the people of the outpost have a right to it because they make it bear fruit; he even tells himself the barbarians will, perhaps, acknowledge this when they come: "But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam...they will be won over to our ways. They will find that they are unable to live without the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, without the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits" (155). The Magistrate is resentful of the agents of the Third Bureau in part because they put his ownership of the land in question. *They* clearly have no right to the land; indeed, he says they are "ravaging the earth, wasting *our* patrimony" (82 emphasis mine). The Magistrate's love for the outpost is palpable throughout, and his willingness to stick with this "patch of earth" through good times and bad is evident when he argues, in his would-be history of the town, that: "We would have made any concessions, had we only known what, to go on living here" (154). The Magistrate's feeling of connection to this outpost and his vision of it as a gift from God to his own people is a clear parallel to the theological, political and literary formulations of Afrikaner nationalists.

While the Magistrate conceives of the outpost as a kind of Garden of Eden, then, he is unable to reconcile this view with the knowledge that this land was stolen from its original inhabitants. In order to defend himself from his own guilty conscience he falls into Empire's myth of natural right and the Promised Land. In this way he is directly associated with South Africa's deeply conservative, right-wing National Party. It is only at the end of the text, when he has acknowledged his own complicity in the crimes of Empire, that the Magistrate returns to the myth of the Garden, this time not one created by the walls of the outpost, but one that exists outside the walls in the community of the fisherfolk. Here the terms have shifted –the native people are living in the Garden and it is the Magistrate himself who is a “beggar”:

In the early hours of the morning the fishermen pole their flat-bottomed boats out across this calm surface and cast their nets. What a peaceful way to make a living! Perhaps I should leave off my beggar's trade and join them in their camp outside the wall, build myself a hut of mud and reeds, marry one of their pretty daughters, feast when the catch is plentiful, tighten my belt when it is not....What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. (133)

While this vision is still an idealized, unrealistic one, the Magistrate recognizes, at least for this moment, how desperately wrong he has been. He understands that he never lived in the Garden, that his people are not chosen.

In the early part of the text, however, the Magistrate continues to behave as if Empire did not exist before the arrival of Colonel Joll, that all these justifications and

explanations are only necessary because of the “fall” Joll forced upon him. Colonel Joll is figured as Satan.¹⁰ While he claims to be seeking the truth, he is persistently defined by doubleness, disguise. The Magistrate depicts him as both seductive and evil and feminizes him in opposition to an ideal of gentlemanly, ‘civilized’ behaviour: “...with his tapering fingernails, his mauve handkerchiefs, his slender feet in soft shoes I keep imagining [him] back in the capitol he is so obviously impatient for, murmuring to his friends in theatre corridors between the acts” (5). The Magistrate is infuriated by “his cryptic silences...the paltry theatrical mystery of dark shields hiding healthy eyes” (4). But the suggestion hangs in the air that he may not, after all, have healthy eyes -- that he has to hide the vacancy, the darkness that would be glimpsed if anyone were to look into them. The Magistrate is unable to see Joll as another human being with desires, and longings, and needs of the flesh. He becomes a sort of shape-shifter, a pair of “black glassy insect eyes,” one of those “who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars,” an essence of evil, a serpent.

This vision of Joll as a disembodied, shape-shifting essence fits closely with Elaine Scarry’s conception of the torturer. In her view, the torturer focuses completely on the realm of voice or consciousness, which manifests itself in the question he asks. This allows him to utterly discount the pain he witnesses and inflicts. The victim of torture, on the other hand, is forced to focus completely on the realm of the body (29). Barbara Eckstein pushes this idea further and connects it directly with the dualistic strand of thought in the Western tradition I have described above, when she says:

¹⁰ In his essay “Into the Dark Chamber,” Coetzee gives a list of clichéd representations of the torturer, among them “a figure of Satanic evil” (364). He argues that the writer must avoid falling into these clichés. It is clear, however, that the Magistrate’s perspective and that of Coetzee are not the same. While the Magistrate conceives of Colonel Joll as Satanic, at this point, this conception is self-serving and is not to be trusted.

...what may well allow the torturer to tolerate or even ignore the prisoner's pain –despite, or even because of, the fact that he himself may have experienced torture –is an indoctrination in otherness, an atmosphere of otherness. This is the Cartesian otherness of the body separated unequivocally from the mind, the soul, and the sources of “truth.” (184)

In this conception, the role of the torturer is to bring about the total separation of mind and body, a separation without which there can be no knowledge: “In a Cartesian world, knowledge depends upon not merely doubting but dismissing the signals of the body” (Eckstein 181). “Descartes asserts that the body is a prison from which the mind must be liberated, that one cannot allow the body to mystify the mind” (Eckstein 181). When the Magistrate is first acquainted with torture, then, he is also brought face to face with otherness, with the separation of mind and body. This separation, in a Cartesian world view, the world view which dominated during the age of European expansion and colonization, is what constitutes knowledge. It is knowledge, then, that the Satanic Joll forces upon the Adamic Magistrate: “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering” (21).

Knowledge, which has forced the Magistrate out of his Garden, is based upon the alienation of the mind and the body. From this point on, the Magistrate's world is no longer a straightforward one in which order and authority are clear and language is self-evidently meaningful. This shattering of the natural order of the Garden is demonstrated when the Magistrate goes out hunting for the first time since Joll's arrival. He finds that he is no longer able to accept the terms of the hunt as he has always known them; he can no longer see the killing of an animal as his natural right:

[I get]...the sense that this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things... "Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms." (39-40)

The Magistrate can no longer take for granted his position at the top of the hierarchy of life forms on earth and this, in turn, throws into question his whole system of meanings.¹¹ He feels that he is uncomfortably close to the lower orders of creation, the animals, and he becomes disgusted with the part of himself that demonstrates this uncomfortable closeness, his body. The Magistrate is now awash in shame and uncertainty.

After the Magistrate's 'fall,' as he begins to feel an increasingly deeper alienation between his spirit/voice, and his body, he begins to attach negative connotations to the body in a way he had not done before. With the knowledge of sin, comes shame. He becomes obsessed with the unclean and with cleansing. He wonders how the torturers are able to deal with the physical degradation they bring about and he imagines they must perform some ritual to cleanse themselves of the taint: "I find myself wondering too whether he [Joll] has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes...?" (12). The

¹¹ Josephine Donovan points out that in several of Coetzee's novels a sensitivity to the needs of animals is "almost a sign of grace" (82). While the Magistrate sees his behaviour as a sign of weakness, then, we can already begin to see it as an awakening. The role of animals in this movement toward grace becomes much more evident in *Disgrace*, and I will discuss it in greater depth in my third chapter.

Magistrate feels that he is unclean himself, that he too is tainted with these crimes, and his whole world view has now been dragged through the mud. He longs for one giant purification in which the Empire could start again; a clean slate could be created on which to build a new Garden: "It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people [the prisoners] were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain" (24). And yet he recognizes, too, that this purification is impossible, that this cleansing is the type practiced by Colonel Joll and the men of the Third Bureau: "the new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages" (24). He recognizes that he is now trapped in a world where purity and evil are deeply intertwined.

The degradation the Magistrate now associates with the body and its functions extends to his sexual life as well. He imagines that other people are as repulsed by his sexuality as he has recently become: "The older a man the more grotesque people find his couplings, like the spasms of a dying animal" (32). He has come to associate sex with death, decay, evil. He dreams

of a body lying spread on its back, a wealth of pubic hair glistening liquid black and gold across the belly, up the loins, and down like an arrow into the furrow between the legs. When I stretch out a hand to brush the hair it begins to writhe. It is not hair but bees clustered densely atop one another: honey-drenched, sticky, they crawl out of the furrow and fan their wings. (13)

Here we have a version of Yeats' "The Second Coming." The Magistrate imagines his own "rough beast" which "Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born" (lines 21-2). A new, ugly, world of chaos and darkness is coming into existence.

The Magistrate's disgust with his own sexuality and his longing for purification transform his desire to have sex with the barbarian girl into a desire to clean her. He begins "the ritual of the washing" which creates spells of sleepiness "or enchantment, blank, outside time" (30-31). This act of washing brings him, momentarily, outside history again, back into the time of the seasons and of the natural. He believes that he is attempting to understand what has happened to her, he feels compelled to know more, to understand more deeply what she has been through. He says: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). And yet, he wants to know only at the level of the intellect. He sees these marks on her body as signs, words he must learn to read, like the symbols on the poplar strips that he finds at the archaeological site. He thinks of her scars as ideas, in other words, not as events, simultaneously physiological and psychological, in the life of the girl.

What the Magistrate is truly attempting to do is to engage with the girl's pain. He wants access to the mystery of her experience as a victim of torture. But, again, his method for gaining access is an intellectual one; he wants her to translate her experience into words: "'Tell me,' I want to say, 'don't make a mystery of it, pain is only pain'" (32). But this experience cannot be translated into language; it can only be accessed as experience. To put it another way, the Magistrate thinks of experiences as something people 'have' instead of something people 'are.' To have some sense of the girl's

experience, he would need to have a sense of her being, a fact which he never considers. As Merleau-Ponty explains: “*to be an experience* is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them” (*Phenomenology* 96). “*To be an experience*,” in other words, is *to be in the world*, to inhere in flesh, in the visible. Because the Magistrate conceives of his mind and his body as distinct, it is only his body which inhabits the world while his ‘self,’ his consciousness hovers invisibly nearby. As a result of this, he cannot *be* his experiences; he cannot truly be *with* other people.

In his frustration at his inability to confer meaning on the girl’s scars, the Magistrate begins a very different cleansing ritual. At this point he is no longer trying to cleanse the girl of her experience of torture, he is rather trying to cleanse *himself* of the fall, of the sin she represents to him. As in his fantasy of wiping out the prisoners altogether and starting afresh, he realizes that he wants to eliminate the girl, to erase her: “So I begin to face the truth of what I am trying to do: to obliterate the girl” (47). Again, he is longing for a purity he knows to be impossible and evil.

The Magistrate’s sexuality has not been entirely diverted into his cleansing rituals with the barbarian girl, however. He still feels sexual desire for the young prostitute at the inn, and, indeed, has sex with her multiple times. Yet this sex drive is also circumscribed by his desire for purity since this girl’s body is free from signs of decay and death. He acknowledges this to himself when he says: “When I was young the mere smell of a woman would arouse me; now it is evidently only the sweetest, the youngest, the newest who have that power” (46). As Brian May points out this girl symbolizes transcendence; the Magistrate thinks of her as a bird, because her

“‘fluttering and shivering’(42) ...suggest departure from heavy clay into ecstatic flight” (May 406). In addition, her professional title is “‘The Star,’ which suggests ecstatic brilliance, remoteness, a timelessness that is never shaken” (May 406). The Magistrate’s sexual desire for her is not an acceptance of his physical being, but simply another sign of his longing to escape the ugly confines of his body into a realm of ideals.

Things finally begin to change when he returns to the oasis, after his trip into the desert to return the barbarian girl to her people. He is no longer able to avoid an understanding of his own being when he becomes the victim of torture himself. It is only at this point that he begins to understand the girl’s scars. Before his torture, when he is imprisoned, he becomes more disdainful of his physical being than ever: “I realize how tiny I have allowed them to make my world, how I daily become more like a beast or a simple machine” (84). With this reduction comes a loss of a sense of what is right or fair: “If I was the object of an injustice, a minor injustice, when they locked me in here, I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (85). He feels that he is being robbed of his higher cognitive powers, of what differentiates him from mere animals, he feels that he is robbed of what makes him human.

Yet when the actual torture begins he realizes that he has been wrong. He has been robbed of superfluous conceptions, ideologies, prejudices, and he has been left with only his deepest essence, *only* what makes him human. Now he is just a body and a soul. Here, for the first time, the Magistrate begins to define an understanding of what it is to be a human being that is very different from that put forward by Descartes and the version of Christianity that inspired him. The Magistrate realizes that his physical

being is not merely “a beast or a simple machine;” *it is* his humanity. He says of the torturers: “They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal” (115). To be human, in the end, is to be a physical presence in the world, an infinitely vulnerable presence.¹² And the soul is not something separate from this, something higher, something clean and untouchable: “He [the torturer] deals with my soul: every day he folds the flesh aside and exposes my soul to the light; he has probably seen many souls in the course of his working life; but the care of souls seems to have left no more mark on him than the care of hearts leaves on the surgeon” (118). Here the soul becomes a sort of organ, part of the dirty, damaged organism, like the lungs or the heart. The Magistrate, in this moment, has realized that what offers hope in human life is not a false purity, an abstract notion of cleanliness and ‘civilized’ behaviour, but rather a deeper, more fundamental power, that stems from the physical being. He asks himself: “Is there a point at which I will lie down and say, “Kill me –I would rather die than go on”? Sometimes I think I am approaching that point, but I am always mistaken” (117). This power is that of life itself, of ‘being-in-the-world,’ which refuses to be snuffed out.

For Merleau-Ponty it is this concept of being that links mind and body together to form a unified and powerful whole. He defines this idea of ‘being-in-the-world’ in the following manner:

The reflex, in so far as it opens itself to the meaning of a situation, and
perception, in so far as it does not first of all posit an object of knowledge and is

¹² The fact that the Magistrate has been stripped down to simple presence or being is emphasized by the similarities between his experience of torture and that of the barbarian girl. As Jennifer Wenzel points out the Magistrate and the girl mirror each other here demonstrating that the pain of torture tears away constructions such as gender (67-8).

an intention of our whole being, are modalities of a pre-objective view which is what we call being-in-the-world.... It is because it is a pre-objective view that being-in-the-world can be distinguished from every third person process, from every modality of the *res extensa*, as from every *cogitatio*, from every first person form of knowledge and that it can effect the union of the 'psychic' and the 'physiological.' (*Phenomenology* 79-80)

The processes that partake of both our physical bodies and our minds (i.e. reflexes and perception) create an existence for us which is prior to (or underneath) our objective formulation of the world. It is this existence which defines the unity of our bodies and souls, or our physical selves and our thinking selves. Merleau-Ponty says of the psychiatrist who studies this mind-body correlation: "...[he] could not fail to rediscover himself as experience, which means as an immediate presence to the past, to the world, to the body and to others at the very moment when he was trying to see himself as an object among objects" (*Phenomenology* 96-7). He might have been describing the experience of the Magistrate in this quote. As the Magistrate begins to conceive of himself as nothing more than an object, "a simple machine," he is forced to acknowledge that he is something he has never before conceived of: 'experience,' 'presence,' 'being-in-the-world.'

The Magistrate has come a long way toward breaking down the Cartesian conception of otherness that is responsible for the shattering of his 'fall.' This otherness caused him to see himself as alienated from his own body, which, in turn, caused him to be alienated from other human beings, in particular the barbarian girl. But the prejudices of a lifetime do not evaporate overnight, not even under the horrific

circumstances the Magistrate lives through. When he leaves the prison and the representatives of the Third Bureau desert the outpost, the Magistrate returns to some of his old ways of thinking. He dreams again of the Garden, of the old time before the arrival of Colonel Joll. And he continues to believe that this Garden will be one of separation: “the barbarians will come out again. They will graze their sheep and leave us alone, we will plant our fields and leave them alone, and in a few years the frontier will be restored to peace” (132). When he does consider a confrontation with the barbarians, he envisions yet another apocalyptic purification: “Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a saviour with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise?” (143). The saviour he dreams of is one who will wipe the slate clean and allow for a new beginning, one who will erase the past instead of demonstrating how to move into the future. He is dreaming of the wrong saviour.

Yet even as he deludes himself with this dream he knows he is wrong. He knows that the arrival of Joll was not truly a fall, that he was never innocent of the crimes of Empire:

For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow....But I temporized...I said to myself “Be patient, one of these days he will go away, one of these days quiet will return...Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I

have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth.” (136)

He knows that his Garden is an illusion, a convenient and necessary lie. And for the first time he is able to see that Joll is not Satan either, that, in fact, he is a human being much like the Magistrate himself. When he sees him for the last time he says: “I stare at his pale high temples. Memories of his mother’s soft breast, of the tug in his hand of the first kite he ever flew...shelter in that beehive. He looks out at me, his eyes searching my face. The dark lenses are gone” (146). The Magistrate has been able to get past his total othering of the torturers, and we are left hoping that he will be able to do this with the barbarians as well.

Through his own experience of torture he has come much closer to understanding the barbarian girl. But when he speaks to his cook and sometime lover, Mai, about her, he bridges the gap that separated him from her more completely. Mai tells him that everyone who worked with her in the kitchen liked the girl; that they all used to laugh together, but that the girl was also often very unhappy over the way he treated her. The Magistrate is, at first, unable to register this information, but his picture of the barbarian girl is finally complete. She has finally become not a history of torture, not the mystery of a foreign culture, but a human being. It is this understanding that allows him to picture the coming of the barbarians in a positive light for the first time. He muses: “Perhaps when the barbarians come riding in...she will come riding with them...then everything will be on a new footing” (152). Here, the arrival of the barbarians has become not a bloodbath, but the possibility of a new beginning, the hope of a new understanding. Moments later when Mai confesses that she is terrified at the

thought of the barbarians coming, the Magistrate tells her ““They won’t harm the children.... They won’t harm anyone”” (153).

There is a heavy emphasis on the presence of children in these last few pages of the novel and on the hopeful, optimistic outlook that belongs to children. This reinforces the sense that the coming of the barbarians will not mean the end, the death of those in the oasis and the utter destruction of their way of life. Far from it: “The children never doubt that the great old trees in whose shade they play will stand forever, that one day they will grow to be strong like their fathers, fertile like their mothers, that they will live and prosper and raise their own children and grow old in the place where they were born” (133). Mai’s baby plays a role in these last pages, as do other town children building a snowman.

The scene of these children at the end of the text is reminiscent of the Magistrate’s recurring dream of a girl in the middle of the town square building something out of snow. The Magistrate has the dream for the first time before he ever meets the barbarian girl, shortly after he realizes that Colonel Joll is torturing the prisoners. In the dream he sees children playing in the snow; they are “building a snowcastle on top of which they have planted a little red flag” (9). In the center of the group of children there is a girl, who is older than the rest. The Magistrate tries to imagine what she looks like but cannot. Coming as it does, right after the intrusion of the Empire into the Magistrate’s life, this dream seems to represent the future of Empire. The children here are building a fort and defining their ownership of, and authority over, it by planting their flag on its roof. With the arrival of the barbarian girl into the Magistrate’s life, though, the girl in the dream merges more and more into her.

And his inability to see the girl's face reflects his inability to read the scars on the barbarian girl's body. Both girls are opaque, unreadable, amorphous to him. The second time he has the dream, the girl is still building a castle, building the Empire. The barbarian girl, as we have seen, represents to him the history of Empire, as she has the history of Empire written on her body. At this stage she is not a human being to him and her face looks like that of "an embryo or a tiny whale" (37). The third time the Magistrate has the dream, it manifests his longing for purification and a new start. He sees the girl as "a smiling child, the light sparkling from her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes" (53). She is perfect and untouched by Empire, and indeed, the Empire itself seems to have been washed clean, purified of its human detritus. The girl is building a perfect replica of the garrison town itself; the walls are thick, the watch towers standing strong, the battlements in place, but there is no one living inside. The Empire has become only an idea, a conception which cannot be translated into human realities.

While he is being tortured the Magistrate dreams often of the girl. In what is perhaps the most complex and significant dream in the text, he sees the girl "digging away in the bowels" of what he believes is the castle she is building (109). But as he looks more closely he realizes that he is mistaken: "...it is not a castle she has built but a clay oven. Smoke curls up from the vent at the back. She holds out her hands to me offering me something, a shapeless lump which I peer at unwillingly through a mist. Though I shake my head my vision will not clear" (109). The darkness of this imagery, the mention of "bowels," the ominous curls of smoke, and the Magistrate's unwillingness to look at the object the girl is offering him bring to mind the ovens of

concentration camps. And again the idea of ‘purifying’ the Empire, of eliminating the unwanted elements hangs in the air. The next dream-image, however, contrasts sharply with this terrible destructive potential:

She is wearing a round cap embroidered in gold. Her hair is braided in a heavy plait which lies over her shoulder: there is gold thread worked into the braid....She smiles at me: what beautiful teeth she has, what clear jet-black eyes! Also now I can see that what she is holding out to me is a loaf of bread, still hot, with a coarse steaming broken crust. A surge of gratitude sweeps through me. (109)

While this picture is warm and reassuring, it, too, betrays the Magistrate’s state of mind. He seems unable to imagine the girl as she truly was when he knew her. He cannot bring himself to accept her scars, and to acknowledge that she has gone on living with them. Here he pictures her, once again, as young, beautiful and unscarred. She is dressed opulently and her offer of bread is reminiscent of a folk-tale princess or fairy. The Magistrate acknowledges this when he says: “When I dreamed of a woman I dreamed of someone who would come in the night and take the pain away. A child’s dream” (128). The first image of the dream is of the ‘final solution’ that Empire can enact, eliminating its ‘enemies’ altogether, while the second image is of a dream world untouched by Empire. The Magistrate does not, in his dreams, imagine a possible future real world, a world that is broken and imperfect, that is scarred by Empire, but that lives on and heals despite this. It is only at the very end of the text when the imagery of the dream is transferred into reality that we get a hopeful glimpse of a real future. Instead of building a castle, the children in the square are building a snowman.

This future will be based not on walls, and towers and battlements, not on flags and ownership of territory; it will be based on people. Not perfect, idealized people either:

‘Someone fetch things for the mouth and nose and eyes,’ says the child who is their leader. It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere. They settle the head on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with a cap. It is not a bad snowman. This is not the scene I dreamed of (156).

This image of the future is not what the Magistrate had in mind. It is neither the perfect Garden, nor the power and might of Empire. It is on a human scale, it is flawed, but it is, after all, “not bad.”

This future is that of the new South Africa. The racist dream of purity and violence of Empire that constituted apartheid will finally come to an end and a new way of living, a new multi-racial democracy will have to unfold. The foretold coming of the ‘barbarians,’ at the end of Coetzee’s novel is figured almost as a different kind of salvation. Not the type of salvation that the Magistrate has envisioned (one which would return him to the false purity of the Garden), but an imperfect salvation which will force the Magistrate to live his convictions, which will force, in other words, his body and his mind back into harmony. He once said to his torturer, Mandel, in a moment of bravado: “I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them” and, moments later, forecasts a time, in the not too distant future, when the ‘barbarians’ will take over the land of the oasis again (51).

At the end of the text, it has become clear, he will get what he wished for with this stronger, braver, part of his being.¹³

Just as the coming of the ‘barbarians’ to the oasis is inevitable at the end of *Waiting*, the failure of apartheid was inevitable in South Africa. As Allister Sparks explains it, the “‘arithmetic of apartheid’ did not add up” (372). No matter how hard the regime tried to keep black people out of ‘white’ South Africa their population was simply too large and growing all the time. As Sparks articulated it in 1990:

...the black tide is flowing more strongly every day, washing away the Group Areas Act, the Separate Amenities Act, and all the other sand castles of white delusion....and throwing people together in a convergence of mutual discovery that is both traumatic and formative and that will change South Africa forever.
(373)

Because of this power of numbers, the physical presence of black South Africans, the inescapable reality of their bodies, became a hopeful motif in much of the literature written in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. In Njabulo Ndebele’s short story “Fools,” for example, a group of black people and a group of Afrikaners both want to spend the day picnicking in a town park; the Afrikaner man is defeated in his claims to the territory, despite the fact that he gives the black narrator a cruel beating: “The blows

¹³ This vision of the coming of the barbarians as a kind of salvation, or solution to the Magistrate’s dilemma is complicated by the opposing vision of barbarians-as-solution set out in Constantine Cavafy’s poem, “Waiting for the Barbarians.” In this poem the people of Rome wait all day in trepidation for the coming of the barbarians, but they do not arrive. The poem ends: “So now what will become of us, without barbarians. / Those men were one sort of solution” (lines 34-35). Clearly in this poem the barbarians are a solution because the fear they provoke causes the people to unite against them and draws attention away from internal problems. Indeed, the community defines itself in opposition to what it conceives of as the savagery of the barbarians. At the end of Coetzee’s novel, a similar opposition arises with the townsfolk considering themselves more civilized than the barbarians despite the violence they themselves have wrecked on both the prisoners and on one another. Still the hope remains, here, that this ludicrous conceit of the townsfolk will not hold out for long, that the barbarians will, in fact, arrive and take over the town, that they will become a very different kind of ‘solution.’

stopped and I knew I had crushed him. I had crushed him with the sheer force of my presence. I was there and would be there to the end of time: a perpetual symbol of his failure to have a world without me” (276). It is the black man’s presence that the Afrikaner cannot destroy; he cannot erase him no matter how hard he tries. The ideology, the mythology of apartheid is, in this way, countered, not by more potentially damaging ideology, but by the very *being* of the black man.

Coetzee clearly parallels the coming of the ‘barbarians’ to the coming of black rule in South Africa and depicts this coming as a sort of salvation from corruption and hypocrisy for the white population, and, in so doing, he uses the hopeful motif of black presence so perfectly represented in Ndebele’s story. He goes beyond this motif, however, to emphasize the healing and creative power of embodied existence as a counter to dangerous and violent ideology. While the Magistrate is busy pouring over the girl’s scars, he cannot help but recognize that her body is, in fact, healing: “So I lie beside this healthy young body while it knits itself in sleep into ever sturdier health, working in silence even at the points of irremediable damage, the eyes, the feet, to be whole again” (33). While the girl will never be the way she was before this horrific encounter with Empire, she does heal, and she is still young and healthy. Her body has no grand master plan of history, it has only the power to heal, to work towards being “whole again.” This physical healing is not certain, but it is strong and good. More importantly, however, this is not the healing of a physical body which is separated from a consciousness, this is the healing of a whole being. The Magistrate acknowledges this himself when he says:

While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers. I would do well to take these thoughts seriously. (56)

Here the Magistrate describes a shift in the barbarian girl's way of being in the world. Her process of healing is not merely the workings of blood vessels and the nervous system, but a reworking of what it means for her to be. Her existence in the world has shifted, she is now a different person, a different self, and she knows this in her physical being. She recognizes herself physically. Merleau-Ponty explains the bodily self-consciousness that makes this shift possible:

There is a vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangibility in itself. (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139)

Here, Merleau-Ponty explains how the perceiving body recognizes itself in the world. James Steeves helps to explain this difficult passage:

Reflective awareness occurs not in a thought about self, but in embodied experience. And this experience, in turn, is an event that occurs within the flesh of Being, a Visibility a Tangibility inaugurated in the very separation or *écart* between sensing and being sensed.” (145)

It is in the gaps between subject and object within ourselves that our sense of self emerges. It is this paradox, this tension, this gap which creates the potential for a new

way of being in the world, the potential for healing in the life of the barbarian girl. And it must be in this space that the Magistrate will find his own ability to heal, where he will formulate a new sense of his own being.

In this way, this pre-objective 'being-in-the-world' seems to speak in Coetzee's novel. Michael Moses argues that Coetzee posits a sort of "natural language," in this text, but, for him, this language is "only the inarticulate speech of the body in pain" (126). Moses goes on to explain that: "[this] unmediated and prehistorical language of men and beasts naturally contains no discrete articulate words; in such a tongue the name of justice cannot be spoken" (127). I agree that the language of the 'being-in-the-world' does not speak of justice, but Moses fails to recognize that this language nevertheless speaks of *healing*. In South Africa, after the years of apartheid (and pre-apartheid) violence and degradation, justice was not possible. The psychological and sociological damage carried out on individuals, families and communities could not be erased or reversed. Even the punishment of those who carried out these acts and who participated in formulating the system that made them possible was found to be too dangerous to carry out. Coetzee seems to have foreshadowed, in this novel, what eventually took place in South Africa. Its people were not given justice, but they were given something more concrete. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was not a work of justice, but of honesty, of openness, of explanation, of closure, of healing. Since then the people of South Africa have been in the process of reformulating their own ways of being in the world, their own ways of healing, both personally and nationally.

Chapter Two

‘The Word Made Flesh’: Friday as Christ Figure in *Foe*

In the previous chapter we have seen the dichotomy that Coetzee sets up, and Merleau-Ponty helps to define, between two major strands of philosophical and religious thought in the Western tradition. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the first strand of thought manifests itself within Christianity with a focus on “God the Father.” It is a dualistic vision in which the intellect and the body are distinct, and God and understanding can only be accessed through the rarefied, purified intellect divorced from the shameful, sinful body. This vision requires the subject to turn inward upon herself. Again following Merleau-Ponty’s explanation, the second strand of thought manifests itself within Christianity as a preoccupation with “the Incarnation.” Here the body and intellect form a unified whole, and God and knowledge must be accessed through active participation in a physical, earthly life. This understanding of human life forces the subject to turn outward into the world of other people. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the Magistrate experiences a sort of ‘fall’ into the dualistic vision and attempts to work his way out over the course of the text. We have seen how Coetzee, here, gestures toward the creative, healing potential inherent in a unified body-intellect or body-soul, but doesn’t delve too deeply into the implications of this potential. In *Foe*, he picks up more or less where he left off with this question.

While the focus in *Waiting for the Barbarians* was very much on the body and the shame and disgust it provokes in a ‘fallen’ world, in *Foe* the focus is very much on language. The realm of ‘God the Father’ is characterized by the Word and the realm

of 'the Incarnation' is defined as that of the flesh.¹⁴ Coetzee uses two texts by Daniel Defoe to define what the realm of the Word consists of, but rewrites them, or writes back to them in order to define the opposing realm of the flesh. The realm of 'God the Father,' as represented in Defoe's texts, is one of universal, moral absolutes. Defoe's literary innovation, which later came to be known as the novel, "combine[d] in one narrative experience the pleasures of realistic narrative with the moral efficacy of the parable" (Boardman 37). This was, in other words, a narrative where "action and ideology become one" (Boardman 37). By being both realistic and moral the novel awards itself a monopoly on truth. This type of text divides language into 'good' and 'bad,' where 'good' language is aligned with God and 'bad' language is, predictably, aligned with the devil and sin. White men on good terms with God are 'naturally' superior to everyone else and utilize an authoritative language, one which is direct, clear, and devoid of confusion. Those who have fallen away from God by succumbing to physical or material desires are forced to use a broken, slippery language full of deception and ambiguity. And because women and people of colour are believed to have stronger bodily urges and weaker powers of intellect than white men, they are implicitly conceived of as alienated from God by their very nature. In this way both the racial and the sexual 'other' are used and discarded, their perspectives erased. In order to crack open this monopoly on truth Coetzee has his Cruso¹⁵ and his version of

¹⁴ Quoting from John 1:1-14 "The Word was God...and the Word became flesh" Catholic Theologian Cipriano Vagaggini explains what 'the flesh' refers to: "Obviously, 'flesh' here means man. But precisely in this context, the evangelist can speak of man with the word 'flesh' because in his biblical notion of man the 'flesh' is in the foreground of its view and expression of man. Flesh means man; the notion begins with the flesh in order precisely to point up the essentiality of the flesh in this particular man" (36). Flesh, in other words, does not refer to material body in opposition to spirit or intellect, but refers, rather, to the whole being of man.

¹⁵ Throughout *Foe*, Coetzee spells this name without the final 'e' that Defoe uses.

Roxana, Susan Barton, refuse their 'natural' positions, to varying degrees, and deny the 'realities' imposed on them by Defoe's texts.

More importantly, though, Coetzee, aware that his text too carries the authority of the Word, attempts to keep one of his characters, Friday, outside the boundaries of the text. In this way Friday comes to define what I have called the realm of 'the flesh.' In his silence, Friday refuses (or is unable) to wield the power of the Word himself. And while the other characters are floundering, attempting to express themselves in a language that never seems quite right, Friday communicates without language. And his communication is, paradoxically, powerless and very powerful. Just as the Word is defined by the text of the Bible (and in a broader sense all texts which claim moral and religious authority), the flesh is defined by the life of Jesus Christ (and, by extension, the lives of all other human beings). In Catholicism textual scholarship, the reading of the Bible, is of paramount importance, but salvation is not achieved in this way. Salvation takes place only through the flesh of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in order to bring about the salvation of mankind, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) in the form of Christ. And "through this incarnation and death we are redeemed from sin and liberated from the Mosaic law" (Vagaggini 37).¹⁶ The flesh, in other words, goes beyond and replaces the law, the Word. Using this religious imagery Coetzee presents Friday as a sort of Christ figure, who supersedes language, to liberate the reader from the withering

¹⁶ Cipriano Vagaggini was nominated by Pope John XXIII as *peritus*, or expert, for the Second Vatican Council. He helped draft the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and was a key figure of renewal within the church in the 20th century. With his interest in the role of the flesh in salvation he is a particularly good spokesman for the branch of Catholic thought I am discussing here.

power of the Word, which, in this case, refers to all Euro-centric, brutalizing discourse perpetuating inequality and violence.¹⁷

Defoe's association of language with morality and authority is an idea imbedded within Christianity itself. In Genesis God speaks the world into existence, and Adam's naming of the animals and the plants in the Garden of Eden determines his position of mastery over them. Eve is not a part of this naming process. *Robinson Crusoe*, as a tale about regaining admittance to the Garden of Eden, demonstrates the reinstatement of a pre-fall language where the signifier and the signified are reunited. In this way language moves from being slippery toward being pure and solid and good. Crusoe cements his rightful authority over Friday by naming him and then teaching him to speak so that he can tell him what to do. Not surprisingly the first word Crusoe teaches Friday, other than the name he has given him, is 'Master.' In *Roxana*, on the other hand, we are dealing with a fallen language since it is in the mouth of a fallen woman. Roxana lawlessly usurps the power of language by constantly rewriting her own story to get what she wants from the unsuspecting men in her life. This usurpation is not tenable, however, and she must face the truth at the end of the novel, the truth that her natural position is one of motherhood and subordination. Because she is unable to fit

¹⁷ As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, critics have almost completely ignored the religious elements of Coetzee's texts. But James McCorkle is one exception to this rule; in his excellent article on *Foe* he draws attention to some Christian motifs. He argues, for example that "Barton also posits Friday as Christ, herself as Thomas, and then Foe as the clergy who utilize and contain Christ's teachings so as to exert social and political control" (494). While the body of McCorkle's essay does not deal explicitly with these religious elements, his position does have some interesting parallels to mine. He argues that "The relationship between Foe and Barton...suggests the dynamics of endocannibalism, which Peggy Sanday describes as the cannibalism of relatives, where '...human flesh is the physical channel for communicating social value and procreative fertility from one generation to the next'" (496). Endocannibalism is, of course, one of the sacraments in the Catholic tradition. In taking the Eucharist members of the congregation eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. My argument, however, focuses on another one of the sacraments, namely baptism.

this role, she cannot be redeemed and is therefore made into a warning about damnation for the reader.

Coetzee attacks this Christian perspective with another Christian perspective. As we have seen, in the New Testament, Christ comes to earth in the form of a real man and is subject to physical torture and death in order to bring about the salvation of mankind. “The purpose of the Christian life is to participate both in body and soul in the death of Christ in order to arrive at the resurrection both of the body and the soul with him, and to attain to a likeness of him” (Vagaggini 28). This participation in the death and life of Christ is achieved through the sacraments, beginning with baptism. This rite “puts our concrete persons, body and soul, in contact with the physical body of the dying and rising Christ, who bestows on us the religious reality of the transition from death to life that he once experienced” (Vagaggini 50). This contact “is not only psychological, but real. It is of an ontological order that is supernatural and mysterious which for this reason we call mystical” (50). It is this ontological mystery of baptism that we witness at the end of the text. Friday comes into contact with the reader/narrator, not through language but through his being. It is this standing outside the self in order to come into direct contact with the whole being of another that allows for ‘salvation,’ for liberation from the Word.

It is important, in any interpretation of this text, not to try to explain away the mystery of its ending, or indeed the mysteriousness that surrounds Friday throughout. And I certainly do not wish to be guilty of this by an overly simplistic reading of the Christian motifs present here. It is precisely the mystery and the confusion of the text which give it its power against the dominant discourse, and which makes it resistant to

becoming an authoritative power in its own right. By using Christian motifs to deconstruct the absolute moral authority of Christianity and by using text to dismantle textual domination, Coetzee puts his whole enterprise into question and leaves himself on shaky ground. But then shaky ground is the only appropriate terrain for someone who wishes to remain uncertain, unauthoritative, open.

In Defoe's text, by contrast, Crusoe is an authoritative narrator. Within days of arriving on the island he realizes that if he is to be aware of the time he will need to keep some record of the passing days. This desire to keep track of passing time is closely linked, in Crusoe's mind, to his relationship with God; he says: "it came into my Thoughts, that I should lose my Reckoning of Time...and should even forget the Sabbath Days from the working Days" (48). This very first example of record keeping, of a form of language, is directly associated with the need to obey God's law. Immediately after deciding to keep a sort of calendar, Crusoe also locates several pens and some paper with which to jot down notes and journal entries. He is only able to keep the journal until he runs out of ink, but these early years on the island are also those in which he develops a real relationship with God for the first time. He documents how, in his ignorance of God's Word, he is unthankful for having survived the wreck, for the more or less miraculous growth of corn, barley, and rice on the island, and for his survival of a horrifying earthquake. Only when he falls into a fit of fever does his life start to turn around. In a dream, he sees the flaming figure of a man descend from the clouds and say to him "Seeing all these Things have not brought thee to Repentance, now thou shalt die" (65). When he comes out of his fever he finds the Bibles he scavenged from the ship and begins to read. At first, in his sinful state, he

misunderstands God's words; when he reads: "Call on me, and I will deliver you," he believes that this means God will deliver him from the island, and he isn't able to believe this promise (71). Only after begging for God's forgiveness is he able to "come to a true sense of things" and see that the Biblical passage means that God will deliver him from his sins (71). If he comes into a relationship with God he will not need deliverance from the island. This is indeed what comes to pass. As Crusoe becomes more deeply acquainted with the Word of God the island becomes a sort of paradise where Crusoe lives for eighteen years before his dominion is challenged; he acquires a "country house;" there are plentiful grapes; his grains grow, and he makes bread; he fashions clay pots, and he domesticates goats. As he says himself: "I gave humble and hearty Thanks that God had been pleas'd to discover to me, even that it was possible I might be more happy in this Solitary Condition, than I should have been in Liberty of Society, and in all the Pleasures of the World" (82).

Eventually Crusoe is even relieved of his "Solitary Condition." He discovers a human footprint in the sand, and he is so overcome with anxiety about the possibility of being eaten by cannibals that the island no longer seems like such a paradise. One night, though, he has a marvellous dream in which a group of cannibals arrive on the island, and their sacrificial victim escapes, kneels before Crusoe and becomes his servant (143-4). Again, God speaks to Crusoe through a dream, this time telling him to have patience, that he will not be devoured by cannibals, instead he will be given a companion. "About a year and half" later this vision becomes a reality with the arrival of Friday (145). Crusoe reinstates his position of total power on the island through language: "first I made him know his Name should be Friday...I likewise taught him to

say Master and then let him know, that was to be my Name” (149). Like Adam naming the plants and animals, Crusoe names Friday, consolidating his complete control over him. Also like Adam, Crusoe is given a companion to keep him company in the garden. But, we almost immediately discover, unlike Adam’s troublesome companion, Friday knows his place: "At last he lays His Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head, as he had done before; and after this; made all Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude, and Submission imaginable, to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he liv'd" (149).

Crusoe turns to the Word of God for guidance in his relationship with Friday. Friday questions the scripture a certain amount but only enough to make Crusoe “a much better Scholar in the Scripture Knowledge than I should ever have been by my own private meer Reading” (160). And, indeed, the Word is so clear, so lacking in ambiguity or deceitful slipperiness that Friday quickly leaves off questioning and becomes a very good Christian:

As to all the Disputes, Wranglings, Strife and Contention, which has happen’d in the World about Religion, whether Niceties in Doctrines, or Schemes of Church Government, they were all perfectly useless to us... We had the sure *Guide to Heaven*, viz. The Word of God; and we had, blessed be God, comfortable Views of the Spirit of God teaching and instructing us by his Word, *leading us into all Truth*. (160)

Crusoe and Friday are exempt from the religious strife that rages away from the island because they live in perfect harmony with God’s Law. To them God’s Word requires no interpretation or explanation; it is as clear as day. And indeed: “the three Years

which we liv'd there together [were] perfectly and completely happy, *if any such Thing as compleat Happiness can be form'd in a sublunary State*" (159).

In Coetzee's text, of course, this solid, truth-telling language is shattered, and Crusoe and Friday have no relationship to this Judeo-Christian God. Crusoe does not keep track of time; he does not keep a journal, and "he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy" (12). His story itself is shattered and he has multiple histories for himself and Friday. Susan Barton washes ashore on Crusoe and Friday's island after a mutiny breaks out aboard the ship she is taking back to England from Brazil. She is appalled at Crusoe's laissez faire attitude about record keeping. Manifesting a world view not unlike Defoe's Crusoe at this point, she encourages Crusoe to write things down so that they are not forgotten: "I spoke fervently, I believe, but Crusoe was unmoved. 'Nothing is forgotten,' said he; and then: 'Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering'" (17). This Crusoe is not impressed with the power of language, he does not link language with life itself and with truth as Barton does moments later in their conversation when she says: "it is in our nature to forget as it is in our nature to grow old and pass away," equating forgetting with death itself (18). It is imperative not to forget so that you can one day "persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word" (18). Also like Defoe's Crusoe, Barton associates language with civilization, and therefore with God. She asks Crusoe why he hasn't taught Friday to speak: "you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilization and made him a better man" (22). When she learns that slavers cut out Friday's tongue, rendering him silent, she can explain it only by the absence of God: "Was Providence sleeping?" she wonders (23). Crusoe's answer is revealing: "If Providence were to watch over all of us...who

would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar-cane? For the business of the world to prosper, Providence must sometimes wake and sometimes sleep, as lower creatures do” (23). Crusoe posits a god very different from the omnipotent, omniscient, authoritarian, monotheistic one. The god Crusoe refers to is sometimes tired and must sleep; this god is like human beings or indeed like animals, a god of flesh and blood.

The relationship between words, truth, and earthly reality are further complicated in the links between the text of *Foe* and the text of Defoe’s *Roxana*.¹⁸ *Roxana* starts out with a fall, one that, as David Durant points out, parallels the original fall (227). When her maid Amy insists that she owes the jeweller for all the kindness he has done to her, Roxana says: “had I consulted conscience and Virtue, I shou’d have repell’d this Amy, however faithful and honest to me in other things, as a Viper and Engine of the Devil” (72). But of course Roxana does not resist the temptation to be taken in and cared for, and in living with the jeweller as man and wife Roxana falls away from what is true and good in the eyes of the Christian God. As a result of this fall, Roxana’s words, like her virtue, are shattered, and are no longer aligned with truth. From this point on in the book Roxana’s words and life are characterized by constant deception. When the jeweller dies he leaves her quite well off, and she no longer has any need to prostitute herself or lie. But she is fallen; only lies are available to her. Since she has no relationship with God, her language cannot be truthful, nor is she allowed to engage in naming, a use of language that is authoritative. Ostensibly, of

¹⁸ *Roxana* is the story of a woman who is abandoned by her dissolute (and stupid) husband and is forced to leave her children to be raised by the parish as a result. She supports herself through a series of romantic liaisons with wealthy men, including a jeweler and a prince, but after numerous narrow escapes from death and damnation she decides to change her ways and settle down with an honest Merchant. At this point, however, one of her daughters, from her original marriage, returns to find her. She is terrified that this daughter will expose her scandalous past to the Merchant, and her maid Amy eventually disposes of the daughter. As a result of this murder both Roxana and Amy come to an unspecified bad end.

course, the text includes no names because it seeks not to implicate any real people in criminal or immoral activity, but within the text this clearly functions to demonstrate Roxana's alienation from authority.¹⁹ She herself has no name throughout most of the text; Roxana is not her 'real' name but one spontaneously assigned her when she is putting on a performance.

After her fall, Roxana begins a series of deceptions and elaborate disguises. It is important to note, however, that this is not the type of alienation from God that anyone, man or woman, could experience. As Veronica Kelly persuasively argues, this almost satanic manipulation of words and truth is a fundamentally female phenomenon. Kelly demonstrates this point through an examination of an elaborate passage in which Roxana forces her lover to wipe her face very hard with a handkerchief and then washes it in front of him with warm water to prove to him that she is not "painted." She says: *"Pray let your Highness satisfie yourself, that you have no Cheats put upon you; for once let me be vain enough to say, I have not deceiv'd you with false Colors..."* (108). Kelly gives the passage the following exegesis:

...though the point of the passage seems to be that Roxana is a natural beauty, it creates the opposite effect: we come away from it convinced not that Roxana is undisguised, but that her disguise is beyond detection, neither ornamental nor external but, paradoxically, a doubleness essential to her as woman. (148)

Over the course of the story it becomes more and more clear that there is no 'real' Roxana hiding under the Turkish outfit or the Quaker costume; Roxana is many things at once; she is multiple, divided, shattered.

¹⁹ With the exception of her maid Amy, Roxana consistently refers to people by their occupations or titles only, i.e. "his Highness," "the Jeweler," "the Quaker." She refers to her daughter as "the Girl."

Nevertheless, Defoe wants to make it clear to his readers that God has not given up on Roxana; He provides an opportunity for her to redeem herself near the end of the text. Out of the wreckage of her deceptions emerges a truth which cannot be denied. Her daughter, a physical manifestation of the past before her fall, tracks her down and demands to be acknowledged. Roxana is deeply tempted, when she first sees her daughter, to throw everything away and take this chance at salvation:

It was a secret inconceivable Pleasure to me when I kiss'd her, to know that I
kiss'd my own child; my own Flesh and Blood, born of my Body; and who I had
never kiss'd since I took the fatal Farewell of them all, with a Million of Tears,
and a heart almost dead with Grief ...No Pen can describe, no Words can
express, *I say*, the strange Impression which this thing made upon my Spirits.

(323)

For the first time since her fall, Roxana comes into contact with truth, and she realizes her words are inadequate to describe it. And yet, as Durant says: "All the forces of the world conspire with the full weight of her experience to insist that truth is far too risky to attempt" (231). She wants to repent and to re-enter into a relationship with God and the truth, but she has gone too far to turn back. At one level, the level the text consciously puts forward, she is simply unwilling to go back to the 'good' life, the life the patriarchy accepts as good for women, the life of a mother. But at a deeper level, a level the text refuses to acknowledge, it is impossible for her to go back. As we have seen, Roxana cannot simply strip off her disguise; she *is* disguise. To return to the truth would necessitate a complete elimination of her being. Roxana does not truly repent even at the very end of the text, and so her narrative remains morally ambiguous. She

exists outside the realm of the truth so even her moralizing against herself within the text is not to be trusted. She often comes off as deeply attractive and sympathetic, and one can almost read her condemnation of herself as ironic. For this reason the proper morality must be stamped onto the text from an authoritative, external perspective, in the form of Defoe's "Preface." Here the lesson of the story is spelled out for the reader so as to preclude any confusion: "*when Vice is painted in its Low-priz'd Colours, 'tis not to make People in love with it, but to expose it*" (36).

Just as he does with *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee completely overturns the moral universe of *Roxana*. Susan Barton, in *Foe*, is not portrayed as a fallen woman, although her sexual behaviour is very similar to that of Roxana. The first instance of sex in *Foe* is more of a revelation than a fall, and, although we know this is by no means the first time Susan Barton has had sex outside of marriage, the text makes it clear that this is of no importance. When Barton and Cruso have sex, Barton thinks to herself: "In a world of chance, is there a better and a worse?" (30). Here Barton has denied a world dominated by God where there is a right and wrong defined by Him. Instead she defines a world of arbitrariness, of possibilities, of mistakes, where meaning must be taken wherever it can be found:

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 the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives? By what right do we close our ears to them? (30)

As a result of this sex act, Barton stands outside herself. This state of visionary openness, of momentary access to the voices of others is defined by Coetzee, in a later essay as one of “ek-stasis, a being outside oneself, being beside oneself, a state in which truth is known (and spoken) from a position that does not know itself to be the position of truth” (“Erasmus” 95). Far from being a ‘fall,’ in other words, characterized by sin and degradation and alienation from God and His one truth, this moment of physical contact allows Barton access to different versions of truth, the multiple truths of other lives, of other people. It is certainly no coincidence, then, that after this visionary moment Barton begins to see Friday in a new light. She watches him strewing petals on the water, and, for the first time, begins to think of him as a human being, as she puts it:” “Hitherto I had given to Friday’s life as little thought as I would have a dog’s or any other dumb beast’s....This casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul – call it what you will –stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior” (32). Barton’s curiosity about Friday and her desire to understand him is a key element of her journey in this text and we will return to it later in this chapter.

Barton and Friday are eventually rescued from the island and return to England, although Cruso dies during the journey. In London Barton seeks out Foe (Coetzee’s version of Defoe) to write the book of her adventures on the island, but she refuses to be turned into a lesson in morality for the future readers of her story. By making Defoe/Foe an intra-diegetical character, Coetzee denies him his extra-textual God-like power to define the meaning of the story, and he becomes just another character with a particular interpretation of events.²⁰ In *Roxana*, the main character’s ‘real’ daughter

²⁰ Coetzee inserts authors into his fictional worlds very frequently to fascinating effect. In *The Master of Petersburg*, for example, Dostoevsky appears (considerably changed from his historical self), and in *Slow*

comes back to find her and refutes all the fictions Roxana has been creating to live the way she wants to live. In *Foe* it seems to be the daughter who is a fiction invented by Foe to attempt to control Barton's story and align it with the literary modes and cultural traditions of the time. Women are not castaways and adventuresses; they are mothers, and so Barton's story must define her primarily as a woman who has lost her daughter. The story can only be complete, then, if the daughter is eventually found, and the family is reunited. This would-be daughter calls upon the authoritative power of naming that we saw in Defoe's text to prove that Susan Barton is her mother:

"Then your name is Lewes, if that is the name of your father," I interrupt. "It may be my name in law but it is not my name in truth," says she. "If we were to be speaking of names in truth," say I, "my name would not be Barton." "That is not what I mean," says she. "Then what do you mean?" say I. "I am speaking of our true names, our veritable names," says she. (76)

But Coetzee's text does not accept this authoritative power of naming and it is clear here that names 'in law,' names, in other words, which are invested with the power of the patriarchy, are not necessarily 'true' names, names which speak to the reality of their bearers' lives and relationships. After this exchange, Barton continues to deny that the girl is her daughter. When her claims about names don't work, the girl turns to the physical realm and claims that she bears a physical resemblance to Barton:

'She smiles again and Shakes her head. "Behold the sign by which we may know our true mother," she says, and leans forward and places her hand

Man, Elizabeth Costello, an author invented by Coetzee in an earlier work, pays an extended visit to one of her own characters.

beside mine. “See,” she says, “we have the same hand. The same hand and the same eyes.”

‘I stare at the two hands side by side. My hand is long, hers short. Her fingers are the plump unformed fingers of a child. Her eyes are grey, mine brown. What kind of being is she, so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses? (76)

Here, we have stronger evidence that the girl is actually not Barton’s daughter since the physical reality does not support her claims. Reality is not what Foe/Defoe, the patriarchy and a Christian God would have it be. The daughter, then, appears to be an invention on the part of Foe in an attempt to make Barton fit the proper mould. But this interpretation cannot be taken for granted. After all the ‘physical reality’ of this text is, in the end, textual as well.

By bringing a ‘fictional’ daughter into the text as opposed to Defoe’s ‘real’ daughter, Coetzee questions the very nature of reality in a text. Do words simply create reality? Is there a difference between a real daughter and a fake one? Is nothing to be trusted? Over the course of the text Barton is forced to face these questions along with the reader, and, under constant pressure from Foe, she becomes deeply confused:

‘In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt.’ (133)

In fact, by the very end of the third section of the text, Barton has come to believe that the daughter is just as 'real' as anyone else: "'We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world.'" But Foe reminds her: "'You have omitted Friday'" (152). Even in her confusion Barton knows that Friday cannot be lumped in with everyone else. Coetzee holds Friday apart. Friday is the place where the circular literary discussion will break its pattern.

At first Susan Barton doesn't take any notice of Friday at all, and when she learns what has happened to him, she thinks of him for a time as a sort of Caliban-like monster; she compares him to a fish and holds her breath so she won't smell him (24). But she is ashamed of this behaviour, and over the course of the text Friday evolves, in her description of him, into a Christ figure, both highly spiritual and very physical. Sometimes she is aware of Fridays' spiritual practices, and sometimes she describes them without assigning them any particular meaning. In Defoe's novel *Crusoe* communes with God in feverish dreams; in *Foe*, Cruso also has feverish dreams, and during one such dream he screams "Masa or Massa," a word Barton fails to understand as Master (29). At this moment Cruso puts himself in the position of slave, and in sympathetic response Friday begins to play his flute. Barton hates the repetitive tune and is unable to make any link between the playing of the flute and the fact that Cruso calms down after hearing it: "at last he grew still, and Friday ceased his noise" (29). She doesn't recognize the tune as a sort of healing ritual, and so she deplores Friday for his lack of musical exploration, his constant repetition of the same tune. When Barton sees Friday distributing petals over the water, though, she is not able to utterly dismiss his actions.

In England Barton turns more and more to Friday in her uncertainty. When the girl claiming to be her daughter first arrives at Foe's house, Barton doesn't know what to think, and she turns to Friday for help:

'Friday, Friday,' I say... 'how could I have foreseen, when I was carried by the waves on to your island and beheld you with a spear in your hand and the sun shining like a halo behind your head, that our path would take us to a gloomy house in England and a season of empty waiting? Was I wrong to choose Mr Foe? And who is this child he sends us, this mad child? Does he send her as a sign? What is she a sign of?' (79)

She addresses Friday as a beatified being, someone who might have answers. She goes on to ask Friday questions about his own life, referring to them as "the mysteries," the term used in Christianity to refer to the elements of Christ's life which are particularly important to know about (if not to fully comprehend) in order to achieve redemption through Him (84). At this point it becomes clearer that, although Friday appears to be following Barton around, in fact just the opposite is true. Barton has become Friday's disciple. She copies his rituals, playing the flute for example and dancing into a trance. As James McCorkle points out, the experimentation with Biblical themes becomes quite evident in this section when Barton and Friday travel to Bristol and are refused entry at the Inn (494). They are forced to sleep in a barn, and Barton is so cold she tries out Friday's dance to warm herself up; while she dances, she is transported "far away" and has a vision of "wondrous sights" (103) which tells her "that there [are] other lives open to [her]" (104). Here it is Friday's dance which leads her to another moment of 'ek-

stasis' and the understanding, however short lived, that they have similar miseries and longings.

In the third section of the book Barton again acknowledges that she is Friday's disciple when she tells Foe of watching him dancing and seeing, through the slits in his robe, that he has been "unmanned": "I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound" (119-20). Here she explicitly compares Friday to Christ and his enslavement and torture to Christ's martyrdom. At the same time, she casts herself as a good follower, a true believer. Here Friday's power becomes clearer still. We are told, when Barton and Friday are still on the island, that Friday has no tongue, and here we are told that he also has no phallus, that symbolic organ which Coetzee refers to as "pillar of the law behind which reasonable man stands" ("Erasmus" 96). Without the power of the Word and without the "pillar of the law," Friday is protected from becoming a figure of authority in his own right and Coetzee can afford to invest him with a different kind of power.

In Part IV of the text we get Friday's resurrection. This section is divided into two parts and has an anonymous narrator. I will argue that this narrator is a reader.²¹ The scene is of a museum piece which the speaker visits twice. Foe has been canonized as Daniel Defoe and his life has been related in History: "At one corner of the house, above head-height, a plaque is bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe, Author*, are the words,

²¹ The identity of this anonymous narrator is the subject of critical debate. While Robert Post and Peter Morgan argue that this narrator is simply another manifestation of Susan Barton, Brian Macaskill and Jean Collieran claim that this narrator speaks for Coetzee himself. Derek Attridge contents himself with asking: "What name do we use – Susan Barton, Daniel Foe, Daniel Defoe, J.M. Coetzee, our own?" ("Silence" 67). Most interestingly for me, however, is Chris Bongie who suggests the possibility that this narrator is Friday himself; in this fourth section, he says: "Friday returns to himself, in an impossible and necessary gesture of recuperation that marks the infinitely rehearsed beginnings of a (post)colonial poetics, and politics, that will be skeptical, engaged, and strangely familiar" (280).

white on blue, and then more writing too small to read” (155). The text is over, its characters, neither dead nor alive, have become a book. Their skin is papery, and there is no decay. Friday is a part of the book but is not confined to it. His body is here, in this museum, in this text, but “his skin is warm” and “his heart beat[s] in a far-off place” (154). He is alive outside this text. Just as Jesus is resurrected after death, body and spirit, and passes outside the world of the mortal, Friday is resurrected and passes outside the world of the text. If the speaker/reader is willing to listen carefully, perhaps even to dream –since this anonymous reader-speaker admits “I might even have been asleep” (154) –she/he may access Friday’s life through this text. Coetzee dramatizes here what Sam Durrant argues about literature as a whole: “If literature works, then, it works not as verbal communication but as the shattering of words. It works only if it is able to forget itself, its own status as fiction. Only then can it bring the reader into relation with a world of bodies or bring our bodies into relation” (131).

On the speaker’s second visit to the museum/text he notices “a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain” (155) around Fridays’ neck – the scar left by the chain of his enslavement (the chain he wears in the wreck) but also, as Chris Bongie reminds us, the rope with the letter written by Susan Barton setting him free (265). It is the scar of both slavery and the false emancipation of complete dependence. Once the speaker dives into the text, down to the wreck, he also wears a version of this rope around his neck: “The stub of candle hangs on a string around my neck. I hold it up before me like a talisman, though it sheds no light.”(156) The lack of light is a clear reference to the darkness of slavery and false freedom, but more importantly the symbol of the rope begins the process of blurring the lines between the reader/speaker and Friday himself.

The speaker becomes a sort of mirror image of Friday. Friday is “half buried in sand” and the speaker too sinks “hands and knees into the ooze” (157). The speaker and Friday face each other, looking directly into each other. This blurring of the lines between the body of Friday and the body of the speaker gets to the very heart of what is taking place in these last moments of the text.

The speaker has entered “the home of Friday,” a place where bodies are their own signs,” a place, in other words, where words and body become one, a place where the Word is made flesh (157). The life force that flows from Friday’s mouth becomes a sort of baptism and is more powerful than anything else we have witnessed in the uncertain world of the book. In the Catholic tradition at the moment of baptism believers are “ontologically transformed into the likeness of the dead and risen Christ... Thus in baptism we are “buried” with Christ, “also raised with him” (v.12) and “made alive together with him (v. 13)” (Vagaggini 51). In Coetzee’s text too there is an ontological transformation. The speaker’s body and soul come into contact with the body and soul of Friday and the boundaries between them are blurred in this moment of mystical communion and resurrection. Even more importantly the process of baptism “does not only unite those individuals with Christ who are assimilating themselves to him, but it also unites them to one another” (Vagaggini 52). The hope, at the end of *Foe*, is that this baptism, too, might be able to unite people. As the stream of baptismal waters flows from Friday, “it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth” (157). The whole earth is bathed in this moment of baptism, it is a mystical communion with the entire human race, yet at the same moment it is a deeply personal, physical

experience: “Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face” (157).

In Catholicism this mystical sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ brings the salvation of the believer, but what does the speaker’s ontological blurring with Friday bring about, here, in a world of unbelievers? It is clearly not religious salvation, for, as Coetzee puts it in an interview with David Attwell: “As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet” (“Autobiography” 250). Still, he is clearly fascinated with this idea, and it turns up in both his fiction and nonfiction. In *Foe* he gives Friday the next best thing to grace. As he puts it in that same interview:

Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body.

Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt...Not grace, then, but at least the body.” (248)

In Coetzee’s *Foe*, our physical being allows us access to visionary moments of *ekstasis*, “in which one knows without knowing, sees without seeing” (“Erasmus” 99-100). In which, in other words, by coming into contact with the being of another, alternative truths come to light but do not grow and dominate to become *the* truth. This standing outside the self erases the dominant ‘I’ and leaves the subject powerless. But in this powerlessness there is a different kind of power. Coetzee describes this power in powerlessness in his discussion of Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*, but he might have been describing his own text and particularly Friday’s position within that text: “[T]he power of the text lies in its weakness –its jocoserious abnegation of big-phallus status, its evasive (non)position inside/outside the play –just as its weakness lies in its power to

grow, to propagate itself..." ("Erasmus" 103). The text, in its powerlessness has the power to dismantle the dominant discourse, to supersede the law, but in doing so it must constantly resist taking the place of the tyrant it has just overthrown.

Chapter Three

An Earthly Grace: Love and Being in *Disgrace*

In Coetzee's Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech of 1987, he articulates his view that: "At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love. To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent" (97). Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* reveals this "failure of love" and traces one individual's movement toward overcoming this failure. The trajectory begins with eros, defined in the OED as "the urge toward self-preservation and sexual pleasure," ("eros") and ends with *caritas* or charity, "Christian benignity of disposition expressing itself in Christ-like conduct" ("charity"). In an interview with David Attwell concerning *Age of Iron*, Coetzee explains that for him charity is "the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world," and so, I will argue, a movement toward moments of *caritas*, or charity, is also a movement toward a certain kind of earthly grace ("Autobiography" 249). By reading this novel alongside another of Coetzee's post-apartheid works, *Elizabeth Costello*,²² I hope to show that Coetzee blames the original 'failure of love' on the Western philosophical tradition of the disembodied intellect. This tradition, which I have discussed in previous chapters, originated with ancient Greek philosophers but was enthusiastically espoused, first by Renaissance humanists, and later by Enlightenment thinkers. The solution Coetzee proposes to this problem is his own unique philosophy of embodiment. He has been

²² I have chosen to do an intertextual reading with *Elizabeth Costello* because this work touches on many of the same themes as *Disgrace* but in a more explicitly philosophical manner. Many of the pieces in this collection contain lectures or discussions on philosophy. Nonetheless, as Derek Attridge reminds us, *Elizabeth Costello* is very much a work of fiction not a philosophical treatise, and its eponymous protagonist is a woman not a mouthpiece ("Epilogue" 197-8). Unfortunately, because I am focusing on *Disgrace* here, I am not able to devote much space to exploring Costello as a character in her own right.

developing and experimenting with this philosophy throughout his career, as I hope I have demonstrated in my two previous chapters, and it draws heavily on twentieth century philosophy, particularly Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as well as on the Christian motifs of Incarnation and *caritas*.

In "The Humanities in Africa,"²³ Elizabeth's sister, Blanche, a conservative Catholic nun, sets up a dichotomy between "The Greeks," (and the Renaissance Humanism they inspired), on the one hand, characterized by "the realm of pure forms" and "marble statues" (144), and, on the other hand Jesus, or indeed some other figure with the following characteristics:

The ecstatic instead of the rational. Someone who changes forms, changes colour, according to his surroundings. Someone who can die but then come back. A chameleon. A phoenix. Someone who appeals to women. Because it is women who live closest to the ground. Someone who moves among the people, whom they can touch – put their hand into the side of, feel the wound, smell the blood. (145)

While this dichotomy is rather sweeping (and Elizabeth brings some important nuances to it later on in the story) it is nonetheless very useful as a starting point, since it is roughly coincident with the categories I have outlined above. This is not, then, simply a case of differentiating the secular from the religious. The conception of Christianity articulated by Blanche is not orthodox Catholicism, and the dichotomy she is setting up is, as she says, more like "the ecstatic" vs. "the rational." The complexities of these categories will be defined more clearly as this essay progresses.

²³ I am looking at the longer, more provocative, version printed in *Elizabeth Costello*.

If we apply this dichotomy to *Disgrace*, we see that David Lurie, the protagonist, has chosen the Greeks. He certainly lives in “the realm of pure forms,” which keeps him permanently isolated from other human beings. His preoccupation with Romantic aesthetics alienates him from ethical considerations and from the often ugly realities of embodied existence. His daughter Lucy, on the other hand, is just the opposite. While she is not a Christian (with all the historical and theological baggage that entails), she does fit the description Blanche gives of a Christ-like figure, a model for which people are longing. She is self-consciously grounded. She doesn’t believe in philosophical or cerebral abstractions; she just believes in this life “which we share with animals” (74). She is not focused inward upon herself but outward into the world. Perhaps most importantly, she dies and comes back to life in this text, in a process of self-negating, sacrificial love that is both awe-inspiring and repugnant to readers whose sensibilities have been formed by Lurie’s humanistic tradition. In doing so, she embodies a Christ-like *caritas*. Over the course of *Disgrace*, Lurie’s longing for grace draws him away from his original position, one of glorifying eros, toward a greater understanding of Lucy, and the very different kind of love she is capable of feeling.

The psychological journey undertaken by (or forced upon) Lurie in *Disgrace*, begins with a longing for transcendence. As we have seen in previous chapters, in the Cartesian tradition (and, indeed the monastic/contemplative Catholic tradition) man must, as far as possible, distance himself from his own body in order to gain access to truth (religiously speaking, enter into a communion with God). The object of man’s struggles, in other words, is to transcend his earthly existence and gain access to a higher life. At the beginning of *Disgrace*, Lurie is half-heartedly attempting this feat.

For him, the humanities, and Romanticism in particular, offer a quasi-religious access to a “higher life” (74), through flashes of “revelation” (21). The problem is that the philosophical tradition that promotes this higher life necessarily flirts with solipsism (if not giving into it entirely), since the only thing it recognizes outright is self-consciousness. This makes the recognition of other consciousnesses into a philosophical dilemma. Merleau-Ponty explains this dilemma as follows:

There are two modes of being, and two only: being in itself, which is that of objects arrayed in space, and being for itself, which is that of consciousness. Now, another person would seem to stand before me as an *in-itself* and yet to exist *for himself*, thus requiring of me, in order to be perceived, a contradictory operation. (*Phenomenology* 349)

This dilemma of recognizing other people translates itself into alienation and isolation. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* we saw the Magistrate struggling with this alienation, and we see it again in *Disgrace* with David Lurie.

Through his experience of being asked to leave the university for sexually harassing a student, and, more importantly, through the attack on Lucy’s farm, Lurie’s longing for transcendence shifts into a movement toward what Durrant, borrowing from Geoffrey Hartman, calls “descendence,” the process of “anchoring... the human mind in the material world” (Durrant 129). This is a project not of thinking but of *being*. This focus on being allows for a very different solution to the problem of other self-consciousnesses. As Sam Durrant explains (using *Elizabeth Costello*): “Consciousness of being is precisely the opposite of self-consciousness...it is more a bodily sensation than a mental thought” (128). Because consciousness of being entails a negation of

traditional conceptions of ‘self-consciousness’: “the joy of embodiedness, of living within a body, is also the joy of living outside oneself, outside the borders of subjectivity; not disembodied but ‘dis-served’” (Durrant 128). This full consciousness of being, then, is the same as the mystical state discussed in the last chapter; it is, as Durrant explains, “a moment of *ekstasis*, a state of being that literally means the state of standing outside oneself” (128). This explanation returns us again to Blanche’s articulation of what stands in opposition to “the Greeks.” When she says “the ecstatic instead of the rational,” she is getting at the distinction between standing outside the self (and thus focusing outward into the world) and being completely imprisoned in the self (focused inward). This ability to stand outside the self is also, I will argue, figured by Coetzee as *caritas* or selfless love. By standing outside ourselves, we gain access to the being of others, which creates in us a sympathy and love which is impossible to experience rationally. And it is this love, for Coetzee, that constitutes grace.

In her speech in “The Humanities in Africa,” Blanche gives her, perhaps unique, understanding of the history of the humanities. Originally, she says ‘textual scholarship’ had one goal, reading and understanding the Bible, “specifically the teaching of Jesus” (120). With the rediscovery of the works of Greek antiquity in the fifteenth century scholars began studying these works, first to perfect their understanding of Greek in order to read the Greek New Testament, and secondly to become acquainted with what man was like in “an unredeemed state” (121-2). “So to grasp the purpose behind the Incarnation –that is to say, to grasp the meaning of redemption – we must embark, through the classics, on *studia humanitatis*” (122). Unfortunately, however, according to Blanche, the humanists lost sight of this original

goal and transformed the humanities into an alternative religion (as Lurie does), one in which beauty and human potential come to take the place of the offer of Christian salvation. These humanists, Blanche says, “offered a secular vision of salvation....By the workings of man alone. Renaissance” (133). But this, she claims, is an impossibility and a lie. This was a false promise. In Africa, she says, the people were offered the delights of humanism by their Western colonizers: “*We will make you disciples of reason and the sciences that flow from reason; we will make you masters of nature. Through us you will overcome disease and all corruption of the flesh. You will live forever*” (141). But the Africans were not crazy enough to believe these promises:

“Well, the Zulus knew better,” [Blanche] waves a hand towards the window, towards the hospital buildings baking under the sun, towards the dirt road winding up into the barren hills. “This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it. Which is why African people come to church to kneel before Jesus on the cross, African women above all, who have to bear the brunt of reality. Because they suffer and he suffers with them.”

“Not because he promises them another, better life after death?”

Blanche shakes her head. “No. To the people who come to Marianhill I promise nothing except that we will help them bear their cross.” (141)

In the face of the suffering in South Africa an idealized conception of aesthetics and human potential is arrogant and out of place. What is needed is sympathy, understanding. What is relevant is suffering. Because those who believe in the humanities do not recognize this truth, according to Blanche, these disciplines, at least

in Africa, have become nothing more than a half-decent way to make a living, and are, in fact, now truly on “their deathbed” (123). Although Blanche’s sister Elizabeth disagrees with much of this speech, she too has the sense that the humanities have travelled down the wrong path, that they have failed, in some way, to offer what they promise to offer. She explains how as a young woman she and her fellow students believed that literature “promised a form of salvation” (126-7). But “our worship didn’t save us” (127). She goes on to explain how the best reading and study is always that which is craving guidance, which seeks in the pages of books understanding of how to go about living. “If the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation” (127).

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee gives us a concrete depiction of the moribund state of the humanities. As a result of “the great rationalization,” David Lurie, once professor of Modern Languages, has become “adjunct professor of communications” (3). He is forced to teach a discipline in which language is conceived of only in its most practical form: “Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other” (3-4). As Derek Attridge and others have pointed out Coetzee is depicting, here, “the dehumanizing effects” of the trend in “end-of-the-century global capitalism” toward the corporatization of the university (“Age of Bronze” 102), or as Elizabeth Costello puts it: “if she were asked to name the core of the university today, its core discipline, she would say it was moneymaking” (125).²⁴ Once the humanities have failed to offer people what they are seeking, i.e.

²⁴ See Mark Sanders for a look at the wider debate within South Africa on language and capitalist ‘rationalization.’

some form of salvation, some form of guidance, people are only able to conceive of them in the larger scheme of economic considerations, market forces, to which scrutiny they do not hold up very well. In this rationalized atmosphere, Lurie feels utterly out of place. He feels that the university where he works has been “emasculated” and he is well aware that his students don’t care what he has to say (4). He and his colleagues, he says, have become “clerks in a post-religious age” (4). In describing the present as “post-religious,” he implies that the pre-rationalization period was a religious age, one in which the mysteries and sacredness of his European literature were properly sought after and valorized. This was a time when the spiritual function of literature, the spiritual function described by Costello, was accepted and understood.

Lurie blames the “rationalization” itself for this lack of interest on his part and on the part of his students. But he openly admits that he was never much of a teacher, and he doesn’t seem to have any real sense that perhaps the rationalization came about as a result of the failure of the humanities to fulfil their spiritual function. David Lurie’s particular field is Romantic poetry, and his investment in a particular version of Romantic philosophy (what Durrant refers to as “the egotistical sublime” (130)) is clear throughout the opening sequences before his trip to Lucy’s farm. After his first sexual encounter with Melanie, a student in his class on the Romantic poets, Lurie gives a lecture on Book 6 of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. He focuses on the tension in this work between images created by the imagination and the physical realities perceived by the sense organs. According to Lurie, Wordsworth bemoans the moment when “the great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas” are “usurped by mere sense-images” (22). In interpreting this section of the poem to try to make it more comprehensible to his

students, Lurie reveals some of the fundamentals of his own character. He explains that Wordsworth seems to come to the view that the sense image need not shatter the imagined picture, but can instead be used as a trigger for the imagination: “a means toward stirring or activating the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory” (22). In his interpretation we can detect Lurie’s own tendency to distance himself from the world of physical realities in favour of the world created by the imagination. But this becomes clearer still when he goes on to compare the process of refining and purifying the evidence of the senses to the experience of being in love. “If you were blind you would hardly have fallen in love in the first place. But now, do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form” (22). Lurie does not attempt to make his example applicable to both sexes; after all, what he is describing is *his own* process of falling in love. The initial attraction is an aesthetic one, but this attraction cannot hold up to the harsh realities of life, and the beloved must be elevated, purified through the imagination, if love is to continue. This means that the realities of the beloved’s life and person are masked and ignored. We see Lurie acting out this process of “falling in love” with Melanie. Throughout his relationship with her he never wonders about her life or her personality or her confusions; he never gets beyond the fact that “her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect” (19).

Lurie, in other words, is only able to conceive of Melanie as an object, a ‘being in itself.’ While he knows she is more than this, that she possesses a consciousness, a ‘being for itself,’ the Cartesian system of thought which posits body and consciousness

as completely separate will not allow him to properly conceive it. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

There is...no place for other people and a plurality of consciousnesses in objective thought. In so far as I constitute the world, I cannot conceive another consciousness, for it too would have to constitute the world and, at least as regards this other view of the world, I should not be the constituting agent.

Even if I succeeded in thinking of it as constituting the world, it would be I who would be constituting the consciousness as such, and once more I should be the sole constituting agent. (*Phenomenology* 349-50)

No wonder, then, that his students are unimpressed, that his voice and ideas ring hollow in their ears. While he sees them as somewhat dense, incapable of the “flash of revelation” (21) that he thinks is necessary to appreciate what he is saying, he fails to see that they may very well be hungering for something more substantial, more embodied, more real, than he is offering them.

If we examine Lurie’s other behaviours and beliefs alongside Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* we can see just how fully invested Lurie is in this Romantic philosophy, to his detriment.²⁵ At the center of this philosophy is the poet’s or the hero’s own emotion and passion. Indeed it is a man’s ability to feel passion that is Wordsworth’s criterion for judging that man: “For the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants; he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not

²⁵ Lurie tells Melanie that Wordsworth is one of his masters (13), and the Romantic vision he espouses is based on that of Wordsworth and Byron. Sam Durrant suggests that Lurie moves away from this version of Romanticism toward “a Keatsian negative capability” over the course of the novel (130), a suggestion with which I heartily agree.

further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability” (243). Lurie, too, places a heavy emphasis on the importance of passion, the passion that comes from within and takes no heed of social mores and obligations. This is evident both in his professional and his personal life. Near the end of his relationship with Melanie, Lurie gives a lecture on Byron’s “Lara.” The atmosphere is charged and uncomfortable because Melanie’s boyfriend has come to class to supervise her or to embarrass Lurie in front of his students. Once again, Lurie’s interpretation of the poem speaks to his own experience. In this case he unmistakably identifies with the Byronic hero. He gives Lara the following description: “‘Erring’: a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself.... Good or bad, he just does it. He doesn’t act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him” (33). It is impossible not to link this description with Lurie’s own behaviour toward Melanie, particularly since, as he gives his lecture, there is a “current” of macho tension running between him and her boyfriend (33). Lurie’s identification with this Lucifer-figure is particularly chilling since he ends his lecture by telling his students that Lara is “a monster” and that “it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude” (34).

Lurie’s selfish privileging of passion above responsibility, indeed, above all else, is again evident in his “confession” to the committee set up to investigate Melanie’s complaint against him. He proudly asserts that he “became a servant of Eros” and laments the fact that in the past he has frequently denied such impulses (52). As his colleague Farodia Rassool explains: “it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has

caused” (53). Despite his lack of compassion for Melanie, however, Lurie truly *believes* in what he is doing. He doesn’t recognize the power of the committee to exact a confession from him, much less demand repentance and a public apology.²⁶ For him the only valid tribunal is the one described by Wordsworth wherein “truth” is located: “not standing on external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal” (Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* 251). This deep-felt, and desperately self-centered, belief that truth can only come from internal sources is demonstrated again, much later in the text, when Lurie has recognized that he has done something wrong, but has still not identified what it is. When he visits the home of Melanie’s parents he claims that the reason things went so wrong between him and Melanie is because he “lack[s] the lyrical,” “I manage love too well.” He says, “Even when I burn I don’t sing” (171). Clearly he has not understood that what he lacked was not the lyrical, but rather pity, compassion, and attention. He believes that he has failed at being what Wordsworth would have him be because he is not passionate enough, he is no poet. He cannot see that what is called for in his time and place is not Wordsworth’s ideal but something quite different.

When he loses his job Lurie goes to stay with his daughter Lucy on her farm in the Eastern Cape. Lucy lives alone now that her commune and her girlfriend have moved on; she runs a small kennel operation and raises flowers which she sells at the weekly market in town. The clash of Lurie’s values with hers is immediately apparent. At his most positive moments he sees Lucy’s life, and Lucy herself, as a reflection of

²⁶ For interesting discussions of how Lurie’s refusal to speak reflects on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission see Rose, Diala, and Kossew “Politics”.

Wordsworth's good solid, rural existence, what the poet described as "Country ways" (65). Wordsworth believed that he was focusing on the simple life, that he was turning away from the pretension of poetic diction toward the flesh and blood of real existence (Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* 246-7), but from today's standards, it is difficult to read this claim as sincere, considering the tone of condescension with which it is delivered. Lurie's appreciation, too, is tinged with an unmistakable idealizing, yet patronizing quality. As his heart sores with Romantic feeling he thinks: "A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind –this daughter, this woman –then he does not have to be ashamed" (62). But moments later he thinks again: "Does Lucy really intend to spend her life here? He hopes it is only a phase" (64). While he believes he admires her embeddedness, her embodiedness, in other words, it is really only the aesthetic concept of embeddedness he approves of.²⁷ Once again physical realities repel him. Lurie irritates Lucy by spouting lines from Blake: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (69) and by making derisive comments about her lifestyle and her choices, but he finally pushes her to a sharp response when he explains his feelings toward "animal-welfare people": "Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat" (73). Here he makes evident his lack of empathy and feeling of obligation toward animals, but also toward people. As Tom Herron points out, coming from a man who has just lost his job for forcing himself on a student, this flippant attitude toward sexual violence is disturbing (Herron 480). Lucy is clearly disgusted with this attitude and she attacks his whole philosophy:

²⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, of course, embeddedness and embodiedness are essentially the same thing. Both are ways of speaking of the 'being-in-the-world' I discussed in chapter one. Earlier in this chapter I quote Durrant who refers to this as "consciousness of being."

You think I ought to involve myself in more important things...You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life.... But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow. (74)

Lucy is making a distinction between the life of the mind and the life of the body. What she ironically refers to as the "higher life" is the life of the mind, a disembodied seeking after "truth," a worship of the human imagination. This life, she makes clear, is an illusion, a dead-end. She argues that the life of a human being is no different from the life of an animal, since both humans and animals are simply embodied souls. Lurie deliberately misreads her argument and patronizingly agrees with her that "this is the only life there is" (74). He, however, does not mean the life of the body, he means earthly life (as opposed to life after death). And he goes on to make a distinction (using religious terminology) between humans and animals: "We are a different order of creation from the animals" (74). Lucy understands that her father is only able to conceive of reality through his Romantic philosophy, she sees that he cannot, and will not, at this time, make the leap onto the plain of physical existence. And so she drops the subject.

Yet Lurie has clearly heard Lucy's argument. While he repeatedly claims to be incapable of change, shortly after their conversation he goes to see the dogs and falls asleep in the cage of the bulldog, Katy; when he wakes up his heart goes out to this

unfortunate abandoned dog: “A shadow of grief falls over him: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone” (79). Immediately thereafter he agrees to help Bev Shaw at her animal-welfare clinic.

Bev’s attitude toward the animals in her care is reminiscent of the one articulated by Blanche and quoted in the introduction to this chapter, concerning the human children she tends at Marianhill. Blanche explains that all she can offer them is to “help them bear their cross” (141). Bev, too, understands that all she can hope to do is make the all too short lives of the animals at the clinic as free of suffering and fear as she possibly can. At first, Lurie responds to Bev with disdain, even disgust. To him, Bev is ugly, and even worse than being ugly, she “make[s] no effort to be attractive,” a sin against everything that he holds dear (72). His constant depreciation of her efforts and insults to her person give the impression that he rejects her life’s work of “trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa’s suffering beasts” (84). Yet the experience of working with Bev is not entirely lost on him and will return to him as he attempts to face his life in the aftermath of the attack.

Nothing in Lurie’s philosophy and world view has prepared him for tragedy. His focus, as we have seen, has consistently been on beauty and ‘pure forms,’ and he has kept himself relatively unscathed by ugliness and death. But during the attack he has no choice but to confront these realities. As he and Lucy are returning from a walk, two men and a boy approach them and ask to use Lucy’s telephone. Once the strangers get into the house they lock Lurie in the bathroom and rape Lucy (although, of course, Lurie is unaware of this at the time). When they are finished with Lucy, they shoot the dogs, then return to the bathroom to set Lurie on fire. Finally, they drive off in Lurie’s

car. At first, Lurie conceives of this as a test; he says: "So it has come, the day of testing.... How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?" (94). What he recognizes at this moment is that everything he believes in will be questioned and doubted and that his world view will only be valid, if it can survive this event. It does not survive. He comes to understand very rapidly that his skills are of no use to him at this moment: "He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless..." (95). More, importantly, however, when he is forced into his own body, forced to face the fact of his own mortality through the beating he receives at the hands of the men, he experiences a true sense of selflessness for the first time. As Michael Holland puts it, Lurie is yanked out of "an elegiac longing for a perfection that can never be recovered" and placed forcibly in the present; "his response is altruistic" (401). He thinks: "He can burn, he can die; and if he can, then so can Lucy, above all Lucy!" (96). The shift from his Romantic philosophy of the disembodied self and the inner truth of the imagination toward a focus on external phenomena and the physical cruelties of the world is captured in an important symbol: "A flame dances soundlessly on the back of his hand" (96). Here the Romantic flame of the imagination is transformed into an actual flame burning the skin on his hand. To add emphasis to the sordid reality of this situation he plunges his hand in the toilet to put out the flame. Nothing could be less Romantic.

In being forced to acknowledge his own embodiment, his own mortality, during the attack, Lurie's longing for transcendence mutates dramatically. Previous to the attack, as we have seen, this longing has been very Cartesian. He tells Lucy that he is working on "Something for the stage" with "Characters talking and singing,"

ultimately because he “wants to leave something behind” (62-3). He does not want simply to disappear into oblivion. When Lucy asks whether being a father counts as leaving something behind, he tells her that it is not the same for men as it is for women because “being a father is a rather abstract business” (63). To Lurie, the physical realm, the bodily realm is less real than that of the intellect and the creative imagination, it is ‘abstract,’ not to be trusted but to be doubted, just as Descartes doubted everything other than “I think therefore I am.” Only his thinking can be known for sure, only his thinking is real. And so, in his longing for transcendence, Lurie has followed his thinking.

In order to get at what Coetzee sets up in opposition to this longing for transcendence, we need to take a step back. Very early on in *Disgrace*, Lurie explains his understanding of the origins of language: “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” (4). This sense of the soul as cavernous and empty is echoed by Elizabeth Costello in the explanation of the Cartesian ‘formula’ she gives in “The Philosophers and the Animals.” In this same lecture Costello explains her own understanding, one which is central to my study, because it gets at the conception of reality and salvation that emerges in *Disgrace* in the aftermath of the attack:

“*Cogito, ergo sum*,” he also famously said. It is a formula I have always been uncomfortable with. It implies that a living being that does not do what we call thinking is somehow second-class. To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being – not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the

sensation – a heavily affective sensation –of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’ key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell. (78)

Here, Costello clearly articulates for us the difference between Lurie’s world view and that of Lucy. The unmoored, hollow quality of Lurie’s life is described with a great deal of accuracy, and Lucy’s true presence in her body and her environment is partially explained. After the attack Lurie continues to see the world in the Cartesian manner, but the joy he took in this understanding of the world is gone, and he is now all too aware of its emptiness. He tells himself: “In a while the organism will repair itself, and I, the ghost within it, will be my old self again. But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end” (107). And yet, he is not content to let despair take over, he begins, slowly, to grope toward Costello’s “fullness, embodiedness.”

Costello’s conception of embodiedness draws heavily on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty addressed in chapter one. As we have seen, an understanding of embodiment allows for the solving of the philosophical dilemma of other consciousnesses set up by Cartesian philosophy. Merleau-Ponty explains:

If I experience this inhering of my consciousness in its body and its world, the perception of other people and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. If, for myself who am reflecting on perception, the perceived subject appears provided with a primordial setting in relation to the world,

drawing in its train that bodily thing in the absence of which there would be no other things for it, then why should other bodies which I perceive not be similarly inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not 'have' consciousnesses? Clearly this involves a profound transformation of the notions of body and consciousness.

(Phenomenology 351)

By accepting that our bodies and consciousnesses form a united 'being in the world,' in other words, we are more easily able to perceive the "being in the world" of others.

In his movement toward an understanding of "being in the world" Lurie turns to animals as guides. He feels an obscure longing to help the sheep that Petrus, Lucy's neighbour/hired hand and later 'protector'/husband, has bought to slaughter for his party, but they draw away from him as he approaches: "He remembers Bev Shaw nuzzling the old billy-goat with the ravaged testicles, stroking him, comforting him, entering into his life. How does she get it right, this communion with animals? Some trick he does not have...Do I have to change, he thinks? Do I have to become like Bev Shaw?" (126). Like Lucy, he has decided to take Bev Shaw as a kind of guide, to follow her example. In working with the dogs at the clinic, he tries to feel a connection with them, just as Bev does, but he is awkward and uncomfortable: "he gives off the wrong smell...the smell of shame" (142). And so he finds he must begin at the end and work backwards. His primary duties in the clinic, at this stage, are toward dead dogs. To them he offers his meagre services: "...he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves..." (146). He has understood that animals are not mere machines, as Descartes would have them be, nor are they, as Lurie

claimed earlier in the text, without “proper souls” (78). But just as importantly for our purposes here, even their dead bodies have significance. Lurie claims that he brings the dead dogs to the incinerator: “For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (146). But he does not fully understand his own motivation. He just knows that he finds what he witnesses at the incinerator abhorrent. What he does not acknowledge is that his feelings toward bodies have changed. He no longer conceives of bodies as mere objects but as part of what it means to exist, to live, to be. For this reason he cannot stomach the total disregard for the bodies of the dogs. In a Cartesian view, once the spirit is gone a body is nothing; it is, after all, only a mortal coil that has now been shuffled off. But in this different view the body is an integral part of Being and even death does not render it meaningless. It is not ever acceptable, then, to abuse a body.

While Lurie feels a longing to connect to animals, he also feels a desperate need to connect with Lucy. He wants to help her and protect her, and he strives to understand her. He longs to know what happened to her while he was locked in the bathroom and is deeply resentful of being told repeatedly by Bev and Lucy: “*You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened.*” He is baffled. Where, according to Bev Shaw, according to Lucy, was he not?...Whatever the answer he is outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider” (140-1). And yet, Lucy eventually forces him to admit to himself, he is worse than an outsider, he is on the wrong side. She says:

Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. 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)

The imagery here is closely linked to the scene when Lurie forces himself on Melanie:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. 'No, not now!' she says, struggling... [It is a]s though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (25)

Both passages emphasize the oppressive heaviness and impassiveness of the rapist as he forces himself on his victim, both passages depict the rape as killing.²⁸ Lurie is not able to deny the correlation any longer at this point, and he admits to himself: "Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160). He recognizes that if he is to connect with Lucy, he must be able to truly recognize her suffering, he must try to "be the woman."

Even as he recognizes his guilt, Lurie directly implicates Byron in the same crimes that he has committed: "He thinks of Byron. Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it

²⁸ See Marais, "Little Enough," for another take on the role death plays in these two rapes. Marais goes farther than I do to argue that these two violations are "identical" (174).

rape” (160). He calls this type of rape more “old fashioned” than that perpetrated on Lucy, much more like his own kind of rape, in other words. This implicit understanding of his guilt, shared by Byron, leads him, upon his return to Cape Town, to shift the focus of the opera on which he has been working. He now finds Byron’s young and beautiful mistress, Theresa, selfish and uninteresting so he transports the opera several decades forward to a point when Byron is long dead and Teresa is a rather dumpy, asthmatic, middle aged woman. Here is the true challenge for him both as an artist and as a man: “Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman? Can he love her enough to write music for her? If he cannot, what is left for him?” (182). It is evident that Lurie’s understanding of love has shifted significantly since the lecture on Wordsworth discussed earlier in this chapter. Finally he has understood that love has to do with being, since if he cannot love Theresa she will never come to life.

Once again, it is useful, at this point, to turn to Costello for some guidance. She tells us, in “The Philosophers and the Animals,” that “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another” (80). And we do this through the medium of our own being. She gives, as an example, attempting to conceive of what it is like to be a bat: “To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being....To be full of being is to live as a body-soul” (77-8). Only once we have a sense of our own being as “body-souls,” in other words, can we hold out hope of sensing another’s being. While Lurie’s movement toward “descendence” in working with the dogs has brought about some changes in the way he thinks, he is not able to apply these changes fully to the writing of his opera. He continues to think of the purpose of literature as a “transcendent” one

in the sense that he makes very little attempt to give his characters an embodied existence. He gives them only voices (in fact Byron is actually long since dead and is literally just a voice from the after-life). When he acknowledges his failure, Lurie thinks to himself: "Poor Teresa! Poor aching girl! He has brought her back from the grave, promised her another life, and now he is failing her. He hopes she will find it in her heart to forgive him" (214). So Lurie has not been able to love Teresa enough to bring her into being as he set out to do. While he has made some important steps toward an understanding of "descendence" he is unable to give up "transcendence" completely. He has not fully understood the reality of Costello's "body soul" or Merleau-Ponty's "being in the world." Luckily, though, another character can show us the way from here.

While Lurie putters around in the foreground of this novel, Lucy is quietly bringing off a miracle backstage. Early on in this chapter I argued that the opposite of the Cartesian rationality is associated, in Coetzee's work, with certain Christ-like qualities, qualities which are explicitly articulated by Costello's sister Blanche in "The Humanities in Africa." Lucy is possessed of all of these qualities. Blanche calls for someone who "changes form, changes colour according to his surroundings" (145), and Lucy is repeatedly described as changing, shifting. Bev Shaw refers to her as "adaptable" (210) and when Lurie first comes to the farm he doesn't recognize her, so much has she changed as a result of living on the farm (59). Her adaptability is particularly marked in comparison with Lurie's rigidity of temperament. In Blanche's description, this Christ-figure must also appeal to women "Because it is women who live closest to the ground" (145). While in *Disgrace*, Bev Shaw tells Lurie that "[Lucy]

lives closer to the ground than you. Than either of us” (210). Finally, Blanche requires that this figure be capable of dying and then coming back (145). And this is something Lucy also does. She herself figures the rape as cold-blooded murder, and when Lurie leaves the farm, she writes to him: “I am not the person you know. I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life” (161). Lucy does come back to life, as we see at the end of the novel, and what remains is to ascertain how this happens and what it can tell us about the novel as a whole.

First it is necessary to return again to *Elizabeth Costello*. In the last section of “The Humanities in Africa,” Elizabeth Costello attempts to defend herself against her sister’s accusations of defeat. Blanche says “You backed a loser, my dear. If you had put your money on a different Greek you might still have stood a chance....But you didn’t, and you lost” (145). Having picked, according to Blanche, the tradition of the Greeks, instead of following the path of Christ, Elizabeth has been lead astray, and has been unable to find the transcendence, the salvation she craves. In attempting to defend “the Greeks” from Blanche’s accusation of hollowness and defeat, Elizabeth describes an act of charity she performed, an attempt to bring a moment of beauty into the life of an elderly, ailing man. But then, leaving off her letter to Blanche, Elizabeth remembers what really happened. Not only did she pose nude for this elderly, dying man, a former painter, she also performed fellatio on him. Attempting to put into words what she was trying to do she wonders: “what name would the Greeks give to such a spectacle? Not *eros*, certainly not – too grotesque for that. *Agape*? Again, perhaps not. Does that mean the Greeks would have no word for it? Would one have to wait for the Christians to come along with the right word: *caritas*? For that, in the end, is what she is

convinced it is” (154). She goes on to explain how this act is something, by its very nature, inaccessible, unacceptable to society at large. It is a mystery: “What can one make of episodes like this, unforeseen, unplanned, out of character? Are they just holes, holes in the heart, into which one steps and falls and then goes on falling?” (155) What Costello describes here is that state of *ekstasis* also momentarily experienced by Susan Barton in *Foe*, that standing outside of the self that is only possible through a consciousness of being. This act cannot be contained within Costello’s conception of herself, because it takes place outside her self. This is why only the Christian terminology can be used. As Elizabeth says, this is certainly not eros, sexual love, nor is it agape, brotherly love²⁹. It is *caritas*, love that expects nothing in return, love that is a gift, love, like that of Jesus for mankind. In attempting to defend herself against her sister, Elizabeth has defined a state somewhere in between that of “the Greeks” and the conservative Catholicism of her sister. She is not giving up her belief in the humanities and hoping for divine salvation, but she is conceiving of humanity in a paradigm much closer to Blanche’s Christian one, than that of “the Greeks.” She is acknowledging that *caritas*, might be the only salvation.

Lucy, too, seems to come to this conclusion, at the end of *Disgrace*. Lucy does not choose to be raped/killed, but she does choose to come back to life. In refusing to prosecute her rapists, in bearing the child who was conceived during the rape, and in accepting Petrus’ offer of ‘protection’ Lucy erases the last vestiges of her ‘self-

²⁹ While the OED says that *agape* is now commonly used to mean essentially the same thing as *caritas* or charity (“agape”), Costello is clearly making a distinction between them. A reciprocal, non sexual love seems to be what is meant by agape (well expressed as brotherly love), while *caritas* goes further to mean a Christ-like self-sacrificing love.

consciousness' to become conscious only of her being. She has pared herself down to her essential "body-soul":

‘Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’

‘Yes, like a dog.’ (205)

In making this choice, Lucy goes far beyond both Susan Barton and Elizabeth Costello in that her ‘standing outside herself’ is a long-term commitment. Costello and Barton have quasi-mystical experiences after which they return to their former understanding of themselves, but Lucy’s negation of her ‘self-consciousness,’ of her ego, is much more radical. She is setting out to live her life this way, to inhabit this state of *ekstasis* permanently. And in so doing she opens up the possibility of an end to Lurie’s state of “disgrace without term” (172).

In the penultimate scene of the novel, Lurie drops by Lucy’s farm and sees her working in the flower beds. He is deeply touched by the beauty of the scene and, in particular, by Lucy’s presence: “at the center of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sun hat” (218). Rita Barnard persuasively argues that while the idea of the “eternal feminine” draws attention, once again, to Lurie’s masculine, European gaze, it also does a great deal more. Barnard reminds her readers that this line is drawn from the final scene of Goethe’s *Faust*, and she argues, relying on Cyrus Hamlin’s reading of *Faust*, that in this final scene the central

character, a womanizing sinner, achieves salvation through the love of his ruined mistress. The 'eternal feminine,' then, is not about feminine sexual allure (with its connection to eros) but about the redemptive potential of the feminine. As Barnard puts it: "It is possible to discover in Coetzee's beautiful scenic moment...the possibility of sudden transfiguration –a passage into a different state of being" (219). When Lucy notices her father's presence she offers him tea and he thinks: "She makes the offer as if he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start" (218). Following through on her interpretation, Barnard explains that: "With its religious overtones, "visitation" expresses the hope of some new annunciation or intervention – the arrival, perhaps, of an unexpected grace" (219).

It is important, however, not to get carried away with this imagery of redemption and with the comparison to *Faust*. Faust ascends into heaven accompanied by a choir of angels, he transcends his earthly existence. But as we have seen this is the opposite of the movement Coetzee has been tracing, which is one not of transcendence but of 'descendence.' For Coetzee there is no heaven with choirs of angels, but there is nonetheless the possibility of an earthly grace. The possibility of standing outside oneself, of touching others, of experiencing the being of others, and, in this way, of improving the future, if only ever so slightly. In an interview entitled "South African Writers" Coetzee tells Attwell: "I understand the Crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any reinterpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or whatever, that we can give to it" (337). In Lucy's Christ-like death and rebirth, she, too, enacts a powerful "refusal of retributive violence" which opens up new ways of being in the

world for herself, her father, her child, her ‘protector,’ and the men who raped her.³⁰ As Barnard puts it: “*Disgrace*’s penultimate scene may invite us to imagine the farm in the Eastern Cape as...a place where the difficulties of cultural translation may be overcome, wordlessly, by bodily experiences: pregnancy, field labour, the materiality of dwelling on the land” (220).

Lucy’s act of what I have been calling *caritas* is not meant to be prescriptive in terms of solving the problems of South African multi-racial democracy. Coetzee is not arguing that all South African whites, if they wish to remain in the country, will have to pay for the crimes of the past by submitting passively to violence against them, but rather that they will have to overcome their own “failure of love” in whatever way they can.³¹ If there is a ‘lesson’ about the role of literature in this process it is that literature is not (or should not be) prescriptive. Its power is not in dictating universals but in demonstrating particulars. The author isn’t writing ideas, he or she is writing beings. And readers should try to experience them as beings. As Elizabeth Costello explains to her son (in a discussion about Kafka’s “Red Peter”):

Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you.

That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or

³⁰ Cornwell also links this quote about the crucifixion to Lucy’s behavior, but he attributes her motives to a desire for the “expiation of white guilt,” which I think is an unhelpful oversimplification.

³¹ Many in South Africa felt that Coetzee was propagating racist stereotypes and supporting a particular political agenda in this novel. Shortly after the release of *Disgrace*, the ANC’s report to the Human Rights Commission’s investigation on racism in the media expressed the following view of the novel: “J.M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can, the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man.... It is suggested that in these circumstances, it might be better that our white compatriots should emigrate because to be in post-apartheid South Africa is to be in ‘their territory,’ as a consequence of which the whites will lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity. The white women will have to sleep with the barbaric black men.” (qtd. In Jolly).

not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps, when we are sleeping. (32)

This is how Coetzee is successful where Lurie is not. Coetzee has created, in this novel, beings who are ‘embedded in life.’ They are not voices or philosophies. They are not political allegories or mouth-pieces for ideologies. It is perhaps in order to make this clear that Coetzee ends his book in the bewildering way he does.

If he had ended the book with the moment in Lucy’s garden, a moment of beauty and of hope for the future, a moment of grace, the reader might have been tempted toward transcendence. But the book closes off this reading by resolutely pointing, at the end, toward ‘descendence.’ This last scene, although deeply sad, is also hopeful, because in it we can see that Lurie is learning from Lucy. On this last Sunday of the book, Lurie goes to the clinic to do what he can for the dogs there. Although he fears that what he does for them is “little enough, less than little: nothing” (220), in fact he is giving them “what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). Lurie has moved from a disembodied self-consciousness unable to reach out to other beings (human and animal), toward an understanding of his own “being in the world” which allows him an understanding of the being of others. This understanding, this ‘standing outside himself’ allows him to feel selfless love, to perform acts of *caritas*. And this, Coetzee seems to be saying, is the only thing this world offers in the way of grace.

Conclusion

In *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Curren, another of Coetzee's forlorn academic protagonists, tells herself: "I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable" (125). This, it seems to me, is the struggle at the heart of all three of the texts I have discussed in this thesis. The protagonists in these texts have many things in common –the Magistrate, Susan Barton, and David Lurie are all cerebral types who have trouble finding their way out of their own heads – and they are all longing for some form of salvation. They all, also, long to truly be with certain people in their lives –the Magistrate with the barbarian girl, Barton with Friday, and Lurie with Lucy –but find themselves unable to do so. These characters are alienated from the people they long to be close to because they cannot understand them; they cannot imagine their lives, their motivations, their behaviours. Ultimately they cannot turn these people into appropriate narratives; they cannot verbalize them. This inability, on the part of the protagonists, to formulate words and sentences to explain, describe, know these 'other' people makes them feel as if these people are impossibly distant, impossibly different, blank, repellent, unlovable.

What I hope I have demonstrated in this thesis is that the attempt to know another person this way is based on a dualistic vision in which only conscious thoughts, words, ideas can be trusted and followed and people are defined by the invisible, immutable essence that is their soul or consciousness. Because it is impossible to access the 'essence' or 'soul' of another person, this dualistic vision makes genuine contact with others a lost cause. When the Magistrate, Barton, and Lurie attempt to

understand the people in their lives, they are forced inward to their own consciousnesses and they move farther and farther away from the people they want to be getting closer to. But this attempt to 'know' is not only futile; it is also damaging, violent. For, "as Foucault has exhaustively demonstrated, knowledge is inextricably linked to the will to power" (Durrant 120). In attempting to know other people, then, these central characters are also attempting to control them, to own them. Only by giving up this quest for conscious understanding and learning to accept a certain ignorance can these characters move in a more positive direction. As Durrant points out:

While ignorance may simply indicate a profound indifference to other lives, it can also indicate the wisdom of "knowing not to know," a state of humility or self-doubt that undoes the logic of self-certainty that founds the Cartesian tradition and underwrites the enterprise of colonialism. (120-1)

This 'knowing not to know' is the first step toward overcoming a state of isolation, but our protagonists must move beyond this. They must then learn to experience their own being; and in turn to be attentive to other beings. Elsewhere I have referred to this as the move from the realm of the Word to the realm of the flesh or the Incarnation since Coetzee uses Catholic philosophy to demonstrate this transition. In Catholic theology the law is superseded by the life of Jesus Christ. So instead of following the law, a believer must attempt to imitate the life of Christ. The protagonists in my study make a similar move when they shift, willingly or unwillingly, from attempting to read the people around them, toward, following them, watching them, imitating them. Through these acts, these characters, are able to stand outside themselves, to be "not disembodied but 'dis-served'" (Durrant 128) in moments of

ekstasis. And in this *ekstasis* a communion can be achieved, even sometimes, mysteriously, direct ontological contact with the being of another. It is only through this *ekstatic* communion that ‘the unlovable’ can be loved. This love, based as it is on standing outside the self, is not eros, which is essentially selfish, it is not even agape, which is based on equal exchange, it is *caritas*, a love which is given without the expectation of anything in return, a selfless, ‘dis-served’ love.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate experiences a ‘fall’ into the dualistic understanding of human life. While he longs to reach out to the barbarian girl, to protect her, to nurse her back to health, perhaps, to love her, he cannot help but see her as a text upon which Empire has written its tale; he doesn’t conceive of her as a being with a life beyond and beneath her experience of torture. The more he longs to make sense of her, the more alienated he becomes. It is only through his own experience of torture, which mirrors, in some ways, the torture of the barbarian girl, that he “rediscover[s] himself as...an immediate presence to the past, to the world, to the body and to others” (Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology* 96-7). He is forced to acknowledge that he is not an immutable essence, but in fact a visible being in the world, who is composed of flesh, reflexes, perceptions, and experiences. By acknowledging that his thoughts and ideas, his very self-consciousness, are not separate from this, he ceases to place all his trust in the intellect. He begins to accept that he cannot ‘know’ people cognitively; he must attempt to do so with his whole being. It is hopeful, indeed, then, that at the end he “presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” despite “feeling stupid” (156), since this is a sign that he is now willing to follow a guide other than the

intellect, one that he doesn't comprehend but he is learning to be attentive to nonetheless.

On one level a similar trajectory takes place in *Foe*, although Susan Barton is able to get further along this path than the Magistrate. The metaphor of a path, however, is somewhat misleading since Barton does not move steadily from one side to the other, but rather oscillates considerably back and forth between the two. Frustrated at her inability to communicate with Friday verbally, and consequently to have him tell her the story of his life with Crusoe on the island before her arrival, Susan Barton attempts to teach him to write. She does want to read him, in other words, to know him. But Barton also watches Friday closely, and she occasionally imitates his behaviour. In the physical act of imitating his dance she accesses a bodily understanding, bodily self-consciousness and through this she experiences *ekstasis*; she stands outside of herself, "outside the borders of subjectivity" (Durrant 128). She becomes a follower of the Christ-like Friday despite the continuing confusion that reigns in her conscious mind about why she is following him and what he offers.

On a wider level, however, there is a great deal more going on in this work of fiction. Coetzee implicates both himself and his readers in this movement away from verbal, intellectual knowledge/ownership toward surrender and awareness of being. In writing back to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* Coetzee seeks to transform the ethos of these texts which is defined by moral absolutes (the realm of the Word or the law) into one of life, of change (the realm of the flesh or the Incarnation). But since this shift is all contained within a text and written out in words, in order to bring it off Coetzee is forced to create another world beyond the world of his text. This, paradoxically, is truly

the world of the flesh “a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157). Here the reader interacts directly with Friday without the intermediary of the text. This reader, as a being, accesses the being that is Friday in a mystical communion or baptism. And we as other readers are called upon to follow this example.

David Lurie, in *Disgrace*, is perhaps the most obdurately intellectualizing and unloving protagonist in any of these texts. But he is balanced out by Lucy who is just the opposite. Lurie dislikes his job and the university where he works. He seems to have nothing but scorn for South Africa and the large majority of its inhabitants. He is unable to love Melanie because he thinks of her as a beautiful object rather than as a living being. And while he claims to love Lucy deeply, he alienates her the minute he tries to reach out to her. Like the Magistrate, Lurie only truly becomes aware of himself as a presence, a ‘being-in-the-world’ when he is physically attacked on Lucy’s farm and his vulnerability is made plain. The realization of his vulnerability immediately turns him out into the world and he becomes terrified for Lucy’s safety. After the attack he longs to reach out to Lucy, to support her, to help her, and to understand what she has been through. He attempts to do this intellectually and textually and fails. But at the same time, following Lucy’s example, he reaches out to the world more broadly, to Bev Shaw and to the animals at the clinic. And here he is more successful because he is following not his mind but a deep, obscure longing, a longing which comprehends what it means to be and wants to help others with the suffering that being inevitably entails. We are left with the hope that he may eventually be able to love Lucy this way, not as a

father who wants to protect, or control, or own her, but as a “visitor,” simply, in other words, as another human being.

Lucy is at the center of this text. She is also the focal point of this thesis, because she truly manages to love the ‘unlovable.’ She is aware from the beginning that she is a ‘being-in-the-world,’ and she never seeks to transcend her earthly body or existence. She embraces her embeddedness. Even after she is raped she does not seek to escape. Her willingness to pare herself down, to live with “no cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (205) demonstrates her understanding that there is something greater than these things. And in this act she demonstrates her capacity for *caritas*, her selfless self-emptying love. Indeed, she turns this *caritas* into a whole life, into a whole way of being in the world. This life is one of grace, the grace Elizabeth Curren was seeking in the quotation I gave at the beginning of this Conclusion, and the grace that the Magistrate, Susan Barton, and David Lurie are all struggling to achieve.

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