

**COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN J. M. COETZEE'S EARLY FICTION:
TWO TROPES OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

**(GYARMATI TALÁLKOZÁSOK J. M. COETZEE KORAI REGÉNYEIBEN:
AZ INTERSZUBJEKTIVITÁS KÉT TRÓPUSA)**

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Én, Veres Ottilia, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés önálló munka, a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült, a benne található irodalmi hivatkozások egyértelműek és teljesek. Nem állok doktori fokozat visszavonására irányuló eljárás alatt, illetve 5 éven belül nem vontak vissza tőlem odaítélt doktori fokozatot. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

Veres Ottilia

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„az én létezésem a te léted lehetőségeként szemlélve”²

Kertész Imre

“The human relation (...) is terrible.”³

Maurice Blanchot

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² *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (50).

³ *The Infinite Conversation* (59).

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Chapter One

Introduction

“The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself.”⁴

J. M. Coetzee

J. M. Coetzee’s reputation is steadily increasing even more than ten years after he received the Nobel Prize for literature. This is obvious not only from the fact that his work, translated into twenty-five languages, is widely taught internationally on all levels, but also from the plethora of awards his novels have been lavished with. He won the Booker Prize first in 1983 for *Life and Times of Michael K* (before Graham Swift’s *Waterland* and Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*) and then for a second time in 1999 for *Disgrace*, becoming the first author to win the Booker twice. The Nobel Prize followed in 2003 (after Imre Kertész)—making him the second South African writer to win, after Nadine Gordimer—though Coetzee had been nominated for it as early as 1996 and then again in 2000 and 2001.⁵

There is perhaps no contemporary writer whose oeuvre has given rise to more book-length studies, let alone the proliferation of essays and articles in Europe, the US, and South

⁴ *Dusklands* (79).

⁵ Considering the plethora of prizes (and the number of honorary doctorates) that he kept receiving, it may strike one as ironical that he had serious difficulties with publishing his first novel (*Dusklands* [1974]), joining the illustrious and long list of famous writers who struggled to have their first book published (Kannemayer 236). Other prestigious awards his novels have received include the CNA Prize (the most prestigious literary prize in South Africa, which he won three times) and the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society (for *Foe* in 1986) (joining writers such as Borges, Ionesco, Simone de Beauvoir, Graham Greene, Naipaul, and Kundera). In Hungary, although quite a number of his novels have been translated, apart from three well-translated novels (*Dusklands/Alkonyvidék*, trans. Béneyi Tamás, *Waiting for the Barbarians/A barbárokra várva*, trans. Sebestyén Éva, and his latest novel *The Childhood of Jesus/Jézus gyermekkor*, trans. Kada Júlia), his books, unfortunately, appeared in very poor translations (published by the Art Nouveau publishing house from Pécs). (In reference to the poor Hungarian translations of *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Michael K*, see Tamás Béneyi’s article „Az elveszett történet (J. M. Coetzee: *Foe*)” in *Élet és Irodalom* [2005. március 25].) The responsibility of a publisher translating first-rate literature with second-rate translators cannot be overemphasized. Hungary basically does not know Coetzee; apart from the few books properly translated, the Hungarian audience does *not* read Coetzee in Hungarian.

Africa. Despite the relative shortage of time, the critical response to Coetzee's fiction is already varied and might be said to have gone through identifiable stages. The first wave of critical response (from the end of the '80s and the first half of the '90s), inspired by his early novels, emphasized the embeddedness of Coetzee's fiction in the context of his native South Africa.⁶ Dick Penner's (1989), Susan Gallagher's (1991) and David Attwell's (1993) studies primarily examine the "variety of social, cultural, and rhetorical contexts from which his novels emerge and in which they participate" (Gallagher x) and describe his oeuvre as "situational metafiction" (Atwell 3) and as pertaining to "apartheid literature." At the same time, however, others (like Sue Kossew, Peter Knox-Shaw or Gordimer) criticized Coetzee for not attending closely enough to the struggle and oppression in South Africa in the apartheid years, claiming that his novels lacked the political urgency of the age and failed to confront the political condition of oppression.⁷ The main argument behind this criticism was that in the years of struggle in South Africa many writers were banned or they emigrated and those who stayed were duty-bound to express themselves against apartheid (Kannemayer 257).

Coetzee has always distanced himself from being labeled a South African writer and refused to be branded as a writer coming from the geographically restrained provincialism of the colonies, claiming that his intellectual allegiances have always been clearly European, not African (Kannemayer 565), admitting at the same time his awareness of the complex historical position from which he writes and his strong "attachment to the ground" (Kannemayer 214, 234). Averse to being labeled a South African novelist on the back cover of his books, he wanted to avoid the danger that any writing from South Africa be read only as a reflection of or resistance to a particular political situation (Attridge 71). Gallagher, however, claims that, besides the obvious European roots of Coetzee's fiction (Beckett, Kafka, Nabokov, Pound), his South African heritage is "more than he admits" (45). Although he preferred to be published as a

⁶ Teresa Dovey's monograph (written in 1988) forms an exception. Reading Coetzee's fiction in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is part of the "universal" readings of Coetzee, despite its early publication date. Though taking a clearly poststructuralist (specifically Lacanian) stance, the problem about Dovey's book, as López argues, is that it "reduces Coetzee's complex engagement with different discursive modes and theoretical currents to a mere appropriation of the Lacanian paradigm" (11).

⁷ As a reaction to Gordimer's essay "The Idea of Gardening," in which she attacks Coetzee for not taking political action in his works ("Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it" [142]), Coetzee speaks against South African writers as "cultural workers" (Kannemayer 392).

novelist “pure and simple” (as Secker and Warburg, the highly regarded British publisher had him appear on the back covers of his books, rather than a South African novelist, as he featured for Ravan Press) (Kannemayer 290), the publication of *Doubling the Point*, one of his most important collections of interviews (published in 1992 by David Attwell), eradicated the misconception that Coetzee was apathetic in the face of South African politics. Nowadays there is little disagreement among attentive readers of Coetzee—they are united in rejecting the notion of his allegedly irresponsible politics. The consensus is that Coetzee is in fact “deeply involved in South Africa’s violent history” (Kannemayer 494). (Besides the novels that are clearly set in South Africa [like *Dusklands*, *Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, or *Disgrace*] or other novels the setting of which only alludes to South Africa [like *In the Heart of the Country*], he wrote a whole book on censorship⁸).

In his lecture entitled “What is a classic?” (delivered in 1991 in Graz, Austria) Coetzee related one of his most intense and illuminating experiences from his childhood when “one Sunday afternoon in 1955, when he was fifteen, loitering in the backyard of their home in Rondebosch, [. . .] he heard music coming from the house next door. He was transfixed and listened breathlessly, feeling the music speak to him as never before” (Kannemayer 73). What he was listening to was Bach’s *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*. The Bach afternoon was a revelation to Coetzee—for the first time he experienced the impact of a classic which spoke to him “across the ages, across the seas” (Coetzee, *Stranger Shores* 10)—which unconsciously made him take a symbolic choice for himself, as he was to admit: “I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and ultimately out of what I must have felt [. . .] as a historical dead end—a road that would culminate (again symbolically) with me on a platform in Europe addressing a cosmopolitan audience [. . .]” (10). The Bach experience made Coetzee align himself with a European canon and tradition, willing to enter the greater world of the metropolis. He became determined to “escape from the periphery to the epicenter; to escape colonial restrictions and become part of the mainstream of Western culture” (Kannemayer 74-5). Saturated as the country was by the right-wing politics of the National Party (the 50s and the 60s were the darkest period in South Africa of discriminatory laws and white supremacy rule), after

⁸ J. M. Coetzee. *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

graduation at the University of Cape Town he left behind South Africa and settled overseas, first in London (1962-65) and then in the United States, in Austin, Texas (1965-71).⁹

Today there is no longer any question that Coetzee's work is heavily grounded in Western thought. As critic-editors Huggan and Watson observe, Coetzee has become South-African literature's "elsewhere" (4), and they are not the only ones to stress what they call his work's "at-homeness in currents of contemporary thought world-wide" (6, Pippin n.p.). Some critics dismissed Coetzee for his "elitism," accusing him of writing for a limited audience of literary scholars (Huggan and Watson 6).¹⁰ As Huggan and Watson inspiredly observe: "Academe would have invented J. M. Coetzee had he not existed already, so sympathetic do his concerns seem to be to critical theory" (6).

While the first wave of critical response to his fiction dealt with the extent to which Coetzee's fiction is South-African, the second wave, conversely, emphasized the more abstract, more allegorical and more universal political and ethical dimensions of his fiction.¹¹ This critical wave was predicated on the claim that the merit of Coetzee's oeuvre (besides the fact that its relevance grows beyond the immediate context of his native country) lies not in its critique of colonialism (Attridge 30) but in its artistry, in the "near-magical," lyrical quality of his prose

⁹ London and America had been a refreshing change to Coetzee where he could finally live as a citizen of the world. The atmosphere at Austin was a particularly motivating environment for him where he miraculously came across Beckett's manuscripts of *Watt*, which finally led to a doctoral dissertation on the stylistic analysis of Beckett.

¹⁰ Among early hostile responses to Coetzee's oeuvre, Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan (1980) find fault with *Dusklands* because "the reader is confronted with mind rather than character and situations rather than action" in a novel which is more a "speculative essay" and a "ghostly linguistic masturbation" (181). Heywood (2004) also disapproves of the experimental quality of *Dusklands*, finding the two worlds "incoherent, messy, and uncontrolled" (220). Z. N.'s significantly entitled "Much Ado About Nobody" published in the *African Communist* (1984) criticizes *Michael K* for "the absence of any meaningful relationship between Michael K and anybody else" (103), thus missing the point of the novel. Further hostile responses include Josephine Dodd's criticism on *Foe* (1998, from a feminist perspective). A more recent, highly provocative criticism against Coetzee was written by Colin Bower in 2003 (entitled "J. M. Coetzee: literary con artist and poseur") a summary of which appeared in the *Sunday Times*. Lionel Abrahams replied to Bower that his assault on Coetzee was "unsuccessful and unjustifiable" characterized by a "prescriptive style of criticism" (104) (López 2, 8).

¹¹ According to María J. López, it was Attwell's 1993 monograph that succeeded in bridging the gap between historicist and textualist approaches, its main claim being that in Coetzee's narratives legacies of European modernism enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid (López 12).

(Kannemayer 283). Attridge claims that Coetzee's work seems expressly designed to escape the danger of being restricted as the reflection of the South African political situation, choosing to address the "permanent human condition" (Attridge 71); his "domain is humanity" (Attridge qtd in Kannemayer 415). It is not for portraying the brutal dehumanizing effects of colonialism that his novels are powerful: it is their "form" that makes them singular: "It is what they do, how they happen, that matters: how otherness is engaged" (Attridge 30).

The shifting of accent in the critical response to his fiction might also be explained by the fact that with the end of Apartheid in 1994 the pressing urge of political activism had lost ground. From then on he could more easily be read as a "universal" writer and this mode of reading his fiction was legitimized by the mere fact of the Nobel Prize. The official report of the Swedish Academy praised Coetzee for portraying "in innumerable guises, [. . .] the surprising involvement of the outsider" (Kannemayer 555). His novels are characterized, the judges continue, "by their well-crafted composition, pregnant dialogue, and analytical brilliance. But at the same time he is a scrupulous doubter, ruthless in his criticism of the cruel rationalism and cosmetic morality of Western civilization" (Kannemayer 555). He portrays in a manner "at once pleasurable and disturbing" the "freighted responsibility to and for the other, a responsibility denied for so long in South Africa's history" (Attridge 31).

Studies in the second half of the 90's (Huggan and Watson [eds., 1996], Dominic Head [1997], and Kossew [ed., 1998]) as well as those written after 2000, focus primarily on Coetzee's textual innovations and exert themselves to render his novels as postmodernist writing, emphasizing the postmodernist quality and experimentalism of his fiction and his thorough engagement in contemporary literary theory and philosophy. To the question why Coetzee has been so rapidly canonized, Attridge's answer is twofold. Coetzee is located within the established "high" European culture (his intertexts [Hegel, Beckett, Kafka, Dostoevsky] and literary influences [Kafka, Beckett, Joyce, Nabokov, Borges, Rilke, Musil, Pound, Ford] are clearly Western [Coetzee, *Doubling*, Glenn 93, Yeoh 117]), his stylistic affinities too belong to the Western tradition, and the thematic focus of his novels are posthumanist-existentialist (he tells stories of the marginal and the oppressed) (Spencer 104).

After 2000, also encouraged by the Nobel Prize, a flourishing critical industry has developed around Coetzee's work, with more than fifteen critical studies and more than ten collections of essays (edited books) in English, besides the countless articles in literary journals.

The most influential of these studies are probably those by Attridge (2004), who stresses the ethical demands of Coetzee's oeuvre, and Michela Canepari-Labib (2005), which primarily draws on poststructuralist theories.¹² Indeed, if the studies written after 2000 can be designated as a third wave of critical response to Coetzee's oeuvre, their unifying tendency would be that they approach Coetzee's novels through European theories.

Lately, critical focus has tended to shift to Coetzee's later fiction (starting from *Disgrace* on to his "Australian novels"¹³), his early (and in my judgement, his best) novels receiving less critical attention. My dissertation focuses on his early novels, my reading of Coetzee's early fiction partly joining the ethical critical tradition of reading highlighted and represented by Attridge in his landmark study on Coetzee (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* [U of Chicago P, 2004]).¹⁴ The relevance of Attridge's study lies also in the fact that it

¹² Some of the most recent and useful contributions to the Coetzee criticism are the monographs written (or edited) by Boehmer, Iddiols, Eaglestone (eds., 2009), Clarkson (2009), Poyner (2009), Leist and Singer (eds., 2010), López (2011), Mehigan (2011), Kannemayer's massive, 700-page (very good) authorized biography (2012), and Attwell's (2015) new, freshly published study.

¹³ Most critics agree that with his "Australian novels"—also referred to as his "novels of ideas" (written after the Nobel Prize and after he moved to Australia, starting with *Elisabeth Costello*, through *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Summertime*, on to his latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*)—the quality of Coetzee's writing slackened, lacking the density and originality that make his first novels so powerful. However, it is with these novels that Coetzee challenges the widespread image of himself as a closed and withdrawn writer refusing to show his face. In his latest monograph on Coetzee, Attwell, however, argues that the idea of making himself heard and present in his narrative is of central significance in Coetzee's early fiction as well, as it becomes clear from his manuscripts. This is especially true of the novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, in which, Attwell argues, the protagonist K might in some respect be seen as a version or extension of Coetzee himself, of his temperament and inclinations (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 120).

¹⁴ I first read Coetzee as an undergraduate student for Tamás Bényei's Contemporary British Fiction (Contemporary Fiction in English) course in 2002 (at the University of Debrecen) and grew distinctly interested in his novels two years later, in 2004, on Tamás Bényei's Postcolonial literature PhD course. It was the Hegelian master-slave encounter (in Kojève's reading) that raised my interest in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*. The seminar paper written on this novel ("Unsayings Origins in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*") was published in *BAS*, 2006 (see bibliography). Two years later another essay followed on Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*, written for the PhD Programme's closing chapter defense. The article ("On Mourning: The Trope of Looking Backwards in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*") was published in *HJEAS*. Consecutive essays on Coetzee's oeuvre: "On Looking and the Gaze in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" (2007); "The Rhetoric of Mourning in J. M.

contributed in an influential way to the canonization of Coetzee's fiction. (Like Neil Lazarus, Attridge situated Coetzee's fiction within the modernist tradition [López 25]). Attridge's ethical approach draws upon Levinasian and Derridian perspectives and it was in the wake of his study that the concepts of the other and otherness—his “figures of otherness/alterity” (Attridge 12)—have become prominent in Coetzee criticism (López 25). As the most significant representative of ethical criticism today, Attridge advocates an “ethics of reading” (by which he does *not* understand a set of values or moral guidelines to be applied to the literary work). He upholds that literature should be read “in the event,” the crucial element of this idea being the reader's response to the text's “otherness.” Thus, reading becomes an “ethically charged event” (xi) in which our responsibility as readers is to be responsive to the singularity of the text—to give a “responsible” response to the text and thus allow the literary work to “take place” (9). Attridge's ethics-based idea of reading imagines an “intimate and highly formative relationship between the literary text and reader” (Koto 374).¹⁵

Attridge argues that the idea of literature as the ethical instance par excellence is particularly applicable to Coetzee's novels. Attridge considers reading/literature as the ideal place/space for developing one's faculty of attention toward the self *and* toward the other, toward the *voice* of the other, as well as one's sensitivity to and responsibility for the other person. Important representatives of this understanding of literature include Robert Eaglestone (with his *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* [1997]) and Jill Robbins (with her *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* [1999]). These early attempts to show how Levinas's

Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*” (2007); “J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a Colonial Oedipus” (2013); “Remembering Beckett: J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*” (2014); „Gyarmati találkozások az *Alkonyvidékben*” (2014); (see bibliography).

¹⁵ Attridge's related book is *The Singularity of Literature* which was published in 2004, the same year as his book on Coetzee. Attridge refers to these two books as accompanying volumes (in how they read and understand literature), both books' major argument being that the singularity of literature stands in our sensation of an “irruption of otherness into our experience” (Simon Critchley on the book's cover). Attridge's most recent *The Work of Literature* (2015) (which starts with a reading of a passage of Coetzee's *Elisabeth Costello*) complements his earlier book (*The Singularity of Literature*) advocating a mode of reading that is an “opening-up, (...) a readiness to be surprised and changed” (2), a response of “exposure” in Chaouli's term to the literary work: “Exposure means that way of being in which I put myself into a position such that I can be affected in ways I cannot fathom” (Chaouli qtd in Attridge, *The Work* 3).

philosophy can be seen as central to criticism and literary theory argue that the aim of criticism is to be “sensitive to the way language reveals the other and our responsibilities to the other” (Eagleton 7-8). Taking as my premise Attridge’s idea that Coetzee’s fiction is particularly relevant in its engagement with the theme of otherness and that in it one encounters the “singular demands of the other” (xii), I also share his view according to which Coetzee’s work has a capacity to “stage,” “distance,” and “embrace” otherness, or, to put it differently, his novels pose the question of our responsibility toward the other (Attridge 30, xii, Marais xiv).

Mike Marais also reads Coetzee’s work as an engagement with otherness, understood in terms provided by Levinas and Blanchot.¹⁶ Coetzee’s sense of responsibility, Marais contends, is visible in his assumption that the writer’s task is to make of the text a home for the other, while admitting that a “writer’s task is never done” as “the other exceeds and constantly interrupts what has been written, thereby signaling the work’s incompleteness [. . .]” (xiv). Understanding Coetzee’s figure as a “secretary of the invisible”—of the irreducible alterity of the other in Blanchot’s terms—, Marais argues that Coetzee’s fiction does become a home for the other, adding that one of the most prominent metaphors for such otherness are the lost, abandoned, deformed, dead or unborn children, manifestations of “the invisible,” a power that is beyond us (xiv, xvi). Referring to Levinas’s understanding of otherness, Marais raises the question how the idea of the stranger as stranger is present in Coetzee’s fiction. Relying on Levinas’s idea of unconditional hospitality (saying “yes” to who and what turns up before any determination and anticipation), Marais asks how Coetzee’s fiction presents an ability to respond to what “turns up” (Marais 1).

In their 2010 collection of essays (*J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*), Anton Leist and Peter Singer also claim that “ethics lies at the bottom of most of Coetzee’s writings,” his concern in his novels being a “phenomenological ethics of the other” (8). Leist and Singer pose the question of the ethics of intersubjective relationships that is the focus of most of Coetzee’s narratives concerned with the social and psychological mechanisms structuring relationships (8).

¹⁶ Marais’ relevant essays are the following: Mike Marais, “‘Little Enough, Less than Nothing:’ Ethics, Engagement and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 159-82.; “The Possibility of Ethical Action: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *Scrutiny* 2 5.1 (2000): 52-63.; “Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee’s Life and Times of Michael K.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36.1 (2001): 107-125.

In 1987, eleven years after the publication of his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee started his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech with a question: how come that “in an unfree country like mine, in a society of masters and slaves, someone is honored with a prize for freedom?” (*Doubling* 96). Coetzee goes on to discuss a 1950s act of parliament from apartheid-ridden South Africa that forbade sexual intercourse between the whites and the colored. Coetzee sees this as a deeply symbolic law, the origin of which, he claims, was the denial of “an acknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa [. . .] and a fear of being embraced in return by Africa” (*Doubling* 97). Claiming that “at the heart of the unfreedom of the masters of South Africa lies a failure of love,” Coetzee adds that the deformed and stunted relations created under colonialism and apartheid find their psychic representations in a “literature of bondage, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power,” a literature of “pathological attachments, of anger and violence” (*Doubling* 98). The masters of South Africa, Coetzee goes on, directed their love toward the land, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love (*Doubling* 97).

My chief concern throughout this dissertation is how this “failure of love” manifests itself in Coetzee’s novels. I am interested in the scenarios of intersubjectivity staged in Coetzee’s early novels, particularly in the encounter between colonizer and colonized. The theoretical assumption behind the argument of my dissertation is that the colonial encounter (the encounter of or between the colonizer and the colonized) demonstrates in a radical way that the basis of all subjectivity is the traumatic logic of intersubjectivity. In other words, subjectivity always exists and occurs as intersubjectivity because the subject can only recognize itself in and through the other and it can come into existence only as a response given to the other (Bényei 13-14, 21). Here and in my overall assumptions about the colonizer-colonized encounter I am following Tamás Bényei’s argument about the traumatic nature of this encounter as outlined in his monograph *Traumatic Encounters*.¹⁷ The starting point of my dissertation is that the above understanding of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity gains a particularly complex and acute manifestation in the way Coetzee’s novels combine philosophical and theoretical insights with the colonial context.

¹⁷ Bényei, Tamás. *Traumatikus találkozások: Elméleti és gyarmati variációk a szubjektivitás témájára* (Debrecen: Debrecen UP, 2011).

The reason why the traumatic nature of intersubjectivity is particularly obvious in the colonial context is that in the encounter between colonizer and colonized there is an inherent and inevitable threat which necessarily entails the potential crisis of the identity of both participants, a question that, as Bényei claims following Kojève, is at the same time inseparable from the crisis of the idea of man (of what man is) (Bényei 62). The key factor of this encounter is the assumption that the identity of the colonizer and the colonized is never pregiven before the encounter as something stable and homogeneous, but is in fact always coming into being during and as a result of these encounters (Young, *Colonial* 2, Bényei 10). The theoretical background behind these assumptions is provided partly by the Hegelian dynamic of intersubjectivity as dramatized in the master-slave encounter in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807; English trans. A. V. Miller, 1977) and partly by the varied and various interpretations and rethinkings of the Hegelian dialectic: Kojève's broadly anthropological reading of the encounter, Fanon and Bhabha's postcolonial revision of the Hegelian dynamics, Levinas's and Blanchot's ethical-phenomenological consideration, and Sartre's existentialist reading of Hegelian intersubjectivity.

The novels I propose to read inquire into the ethics of the shocking and painful encounter with the other, which, in Coetzee, is invariably both a Hegelian scenario and a Levinasian scene. My hypothesis is that the exploration of this aspect of Coetzee's fiction is possible only through a close reading of the rhetorical structures of the novels, concentrating on the rhetorics of the texts, their web of motifs, their intra- and intertextuality, including their web of mythological references. In my exploration of how Coetzee's novels stage the colonial encounter, I shall attend to the presence and significance of two metaphors in Coetzee's early fiction: the trope of carrying another on one's back and its inversion or "inside-out," the trope of embracing, two motifs that are multivalent in their implications. The act of carrying another on one's back is partly the visual representation of the master-slave relationship, also evoking the iconic colonial scene of the "white man's burden," but, at the same time, it is also an inverted, inside-out embrace or a "backward embrace," like the embrace between Susan and Friday in *Foe*, or the one between Magda and Hendrik in *In the Heart of the Country*. The "content" and motivation of both acts is an aspiration or striving towards the other, while their stake in the novels is no less than the responsibility toward the other human being.

Hegel formulates his basic tenet as follows: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it exists only in being acknowledged" (recognized) by another (Hegel

§ 178.).¹⁸ Hegel defines self-consciousness at the point of an encounter with another equally independent and self-contained self-consciousness (§ 182), and claims that the subject can be(come) a subject only if s/he “receives himself back” from another (and this is what constitutes the key of the anti-Cartesian nature of the Hegelian narrative) (Kojève 7, Bényei 67). Thus, the “permanent irony” of the Hegelian subject lies in the fact that s/he is unable to transform subjective certainty into what seems like objective truth and therefore know/recognize him/herself without the mediation of another (Butler 7, Bényei 67). For the other to recognize me, I first need to recognize him/her as worthy of recognizing me, but this would amount to submission, which leads to a paradoxical impasse: this is the first paradox of recognition in Hegel. The encounter of the two self-consciousnesses can therefore only be a confrontation, a fight.

Man’s humanity, Kojève argues after Hegel, comes to light only if s/he is ready to risk his/her (animal) life for the sake of his/her human desire. The origin of self-consciousness therefore can only be the risk of life which occurs as a fight to death for recognition, for pure prestige (Kojève 7). In order that they be recognized, both adversaries must remain alive after the fight, but this is only possible on condition that they behave differently in the fight. One must fear for his physical life too much, and consequently give up his desire and satisfy the desire of the other. S/he must recognize the other without being recognized by him/her. To recognize means to recognize the other as one’s master, and oneself as the master’s slave (Kojève 9). So one of the two self-consciousnesses ends up “only recognized, the other only recognizing” (Hegel § 185), but not mutually recognizing each other. One must “overcome the other dialectically:” leave him/her alive and destroy only his/her autonomy, that is enslave the other. One becomes the autonomous consciousness (Being-for-itself)—the master or lord, the other one the dependent consciousness (being for another)—the slave or bondsman (Hegel § 187, Kojève 15-16). The principle of the master is to conquer or to die. The paradox of Hegel’s scenario is that the master/lord can become “for itself” or *pour-soi* only through the mediation (recognition) of another, the bondsman, therefore s/he is not an independent but a dependent consciousness; the truth of the independent consciousness is the servile consciousness (Hegel § 190-193). What is tragic—an existential impasse—in the master’s situation is that s/he is recognized by someone s/he does not recognize. S/he can be recognized only by making the other his/her slave; s/he ends

¹⁸ For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to the number of passages in Hegel, rather than the page numbers.

up being recognized by a slave or a thing, and therefore his/her desire is also directed towards a thing and not, as it first seemed, toward another human desire. Thus, after the fight s/he is not what s/he wanted to be: a man recognized by another man (Kojève 19). In fact, both consciousnesses turn into their opposites: “just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude (...) will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is;” (Hegel § 193). As the master turns out to be no autonomous consciousness, only the slave will be left with the possibility to become a satisfied and free individual: through his physical labour upon the material world (where work is defined as repressed desire, “desire held in check” [Hegel § 174]), s/he is ready for change and progress. Unlike the master who is fixed and cannot change, the slave is the source of all human, social, historical progress, Hegel argues (§ 194-5). For the slave it was necessary to experience fear of death, to pay for his cowardice “by work performed in the service of another” and to live in terms of terror (tremble): this is how s/he esteems the value of human freedom.

The novels I examine in my dissertation will be read as stagings of colonial identity, colonial intersubjectivity and colonial desire as conceived by Young and Bhabha. In *White Mythologies* (1990), Young examines how Western history is “unnervingly” weaved together with “capitalist economic exploitation, racism, colonialism, sexism” (1). Young quotes Cixous’s argument about French Algeria’s “white (French), superior, civilized world” in which the other (“what was ‘strange’”)—“not the right ‘color’”—becomes invisible (Young 1). Thanks to the “annihilating dialectical magic,” Cixous argues, “there have to be two races—the masters and the slaves” (qtd in Young 1). Examining how Hegel’s dialectic was misinterpreted and simplified in the forms of political oppression in what has become known as Eurocentrism (Young 2), Young and Cixous argue that in the dialectical circle of the hierarchically organized relationship “the same is what rules, names, defines” and “what menaces my-own-good ... is the ‘other,’” a setup that generates inexorable, reductionist racist plots (Young 2). It is this menacing encounter (equally menacing for both parties, colonized and colonizer alike), discussed by Bhabha and Fanon, that is relevant in my readings of Coetzee’s novels, which without exception stage the complex affective dynamics of the colonial encounter and its inevitable traumatic effect upon both participants.

The master-slave scenario of the Hegelian narrative opens the possibility of an allegorical colonial “usage”—its application in a colonial context—(already) by the mere fact of its central

metaphors master and slave (Bényei, *Traumatic* 65).¹⁹ The first encounter of the two consciousnesses, the life-and-death struggle and the master-slave relationship are elements from Hegel that are relevant and can be of help in our understanding of colonial intersubjectivity (Bényei 66). It has to be noted, however, that, as Gibson argues, one should not see the African or Caribbean native behind Hegel's slave (21-22) and that the Hegelian master-slave scenario should by no means be seen and understood as a representation of any historically existing colonial situation (Bényei, *Traumatic* 65). Instead, following Bényei, I argue that the encounter between colonizer and colonized can be read as a variation of Hegel's master-slave scene the paradoxes of which are repeated in a specific manner in the colonial scenario. Though it should not be understood as referring to the colonial situation in any concrete way, Bényei claims that the Hegelian paradigm may be seen as one of the basic fantasy scenarios informing the colonizers' (masters') imagination (Bényei 65). While Fanon's basic tenet according to which "the real other for the white man is and will continue to be black man. And conversely" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 161) serves as a starting point for any colonial application of Hegel's scenario, the problem of the encounter is given by the fact that in the encounter of the white man and the black man the color of skin overwrites everything, as Fanon observes in his reading of Hegel ("The Black Man and Hegel") (*Black Skin* 220). In the colonial hierarchy, the native (the black man) is continuously dehumanized, invariably "treated as inferior" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 118), as not fully human, and therefore he has no chance to be a real Hegelian subject, a real other for the colonizer (the white man), for he never had the chance to fight for his freedom, "to feel the shudder of death" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 119). For Fanon, independence meant that the white master eventually recognized the black slave, but did so *without a struggle*; the native was set free by the master instead of fighting for his freedom (Fanon, *Black Skin* 118-9). Thus, the outcome of the life-and-death struggle is already decided (given the native's native status) and therefore the slave is not a slave because he was afraid to risk his physical existence, but because he is a slave (an "animal/machine" [*Black Skin* 220]) and therefore destined to be defeated (Bényei 60). Thus, the intriguing question of the Hegelian scenario is posed as an ethnical question in the concrete

¹⁹ In his Foreword written to Fanon's *Black Skin*, Bhabha writes: "The body of his [Fanon's] works splits between a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, a phenomenological affirmation of self and other, and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the unconscious [. . .]" ("Foreword" x). Fanon starts his book with the phenomenological affirmation that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (17).

historical colonial situation: is the black man a slave *prior* to the confrontation or has he become a slave *as a result* of the confrontation? Fanon claims that if one reads the Hegelian encounter as an allegory of the colonial encounter, in the concrete colonial situations one finds that there are two different types/species of man, given the fact that the native/the black man is not given the chance to act freely and to freely construct himself by his own choice. The other point of view is that the black man becomes/is a slave because he lacks the capacity of subduing and enslaving the other (the white man) (Gibson 37-8).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon identifies two primal scenes in the black man - white man encounter (Bhabha 75). One is exemplified by the white child's first encounter with the black man: "'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! [. . .] The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger [. . .] Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up" (*Black Skin* 112-13). The other primal scene Fanon identifies is the example of children's magazines featuring a white hero and a black demon:

The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem. In the Antilles—and there is every reason to think that the situation is the same in the other colonies—these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.'" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 146)

Both scenes exemplify the deeply fantasy-ridden nature of the colonial primal scene as Fanon sees it and the fantasy-defined identities participating in the scene. The fantasy is generated by the mutual fear and desire of both participants: "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (*Black Skin* 60).

The "deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation" (Bhabha 44) is best visible in the exchange of looks between native and settler: "To exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. [. . .] It is always in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated" (Bhabha 44). "[. . .] when their glances meet, he [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive: 'They want to take our place.' It is true for there is no native

who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 30). The native, as it were, "splits" the colonizer's "presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being" as a result of which their identities are (always already) blurred and ambiguous and therefore it is impossible to talk about the Self and Other separately but about "the otherness of the Self [which is] inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity," Bhabha argues (44).

The fact that Coetzee's novels want to transcend the immediate colonial condition is indicated by the conscious references to European philosophical ideas, including those of Hegel.²⁰ That is why Hegel's dialectic and Bhabha's analysis of the interdependence at the core of the colonizer-colonized relationship offer an appropriate background for an understanding of the multi-layered and ambiguous relationship that is the intersubjective colonial encounter in Coetzee. In the present dissertation, I shall be drawing upon Western theories in order to highlight those aspects of the master-slave encounter which can help in understanding the complex colonial intersubjectivity in Coetzee's early novels.

Coetzee's Hegelian credentials are clear already in his first two novels, *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). In agreement with Marais, I argue that while Coetzee clearly evokes Hegel's dialectic of recognition in his novels, he evokes the master-slave relationship in order to foreground the breakdown or absence of its dialectical structure from the colonial relationships he depicts (Marais 7). *In the Heart of the Country* suggests a link between the Hegelian master-slave scenario and the colonial status quo, quoting and potentially interrogating passages from *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, while *Dusklands* places the Hegelian encounter in the "colonial" context of the Vietnam War. Dawn's rhetoric is openly Hegelian: "All that we asked for in Vietnam was that they acknowledge us," he claims (17). In a Hegelian fashion, what is at stake in this encounter of the civilizing mission is a fight to death for recognition.²¹ What makes Coetzee's colonial scenarios particularly acute rereadings of Hegel is that in Coetzee, too, the stake—explored here through Dawn's Vietnam inquiry and Jacobus's

²⁰ This is a question Coetzee himself raises in *Dusklands* in Dawn's Vietnam essay; one of the subchapters of Dawn's essay is entitled "Western Theory and Vietnamese Practice" (20).

²¹ Among the critics analyzing *Dusklands* along Hegel's master-slave dialectic the most significant ones are Dovey, Attwell, Jolly, Zamora, Pippin and Marais. Coetzee's Hegelianism in *Dusklands* is reflected through how the "'ontological shock' produced by the presence of the Other under colonial conditions is registered" (Attwell 38).

encounter with the Namaqua Hottentots—is no less than the nature of man (as we have seen, the major question in the Kojévian and the postcolonial rethinking of the Hegelian encounter). This is once again clearly seen by Dawn: “[. . .] in Vietnam [. . .] [is] all truth about man’s nature” (14).

In my understanding, what makes Coetzee’s rendition of colonial intersubjectivity unique is that besides the ambiguous evocation of Hegel, Coetzee’s novels also evoke Levinasian ethics, which plays a contrapuntal or supplementary role, as if the Hegelian scenario inevitably entailed Levinasian ethics. I shall argue that in his novels the colonial encounter is always enacted between the Hegelian and Levinasian scenarios. If Stephen Watson is right to discover in Coetzee’s work a “failed dialectic” (Watson 28), one could argue that it is precisely the failure of the Hegelian dialectic that makes way for Levinasian ethics. This failed Hegelian dialectic manifests itself most clearly, perhaps, in Coetzee’s second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, written in 1977, three years after *Dusklands*. In a clear reference to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, Magda, the female protagonist, cries out at one point: “The medium, the median—that is what I wanted to be! Neither master, nor servant, neither parent, nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!” (145). Throughout the novel, Magda’s desire is to establish a human, reciprocal relationship with the servants instead of the hierarchical master-servant relationship “inherited” from her all-powerful patriarchal father. Excluded by and from the dominant discourses of her father, she plays the role of the stranger who builds around herself a Levinasian-Blanchotian ethical structure. Magda firmly resists all relationships based on enslavement and oppression, yearning to create relationships in which she is listened to and responded to by the other. Halfway through her effort to dispose of the corpse of her father she makes the following crucial (Levinasian) comment about the servant Hendrik: Hendrik is “not only servant but stranger” (15). Magda’s desire for the stranger (in) Hendrik reveals what Levinas termed “metaphysical desire,” a desire directed towards the absolutely other—the other person (*Totality* 33).²²

²² In strictly Levinasian terms, however, the (absolutely) other is precisely that which cannot be integrated into the order of knowledge; the other is unknowable, always slipping knowledge, never (to be) named or classified into categories, so in this sense Magda’s naming of Hendrik as stranger—the very fact of describing/defining him somehow, as somebody/something is part of the ontological violence Levinas’s ethics goes against—cannot be rendered as ethical: Levinas’s other “is not under a category” (*Totality* 69).

One objective of my dissertation is to attend to and follow the meaning of the encounter between colonizer and colonized as it appears in Coetzee's early fiction. My assumption is that this encounter is both a Hegelian and a Levinasian scene. I shall locate and read those places in Coetzee's early fiction where the Hegelian scenario is exposed as inadequate. Such places already occur in *Dusklands*, where, despite Jacobus's exertions to establish and fix himself as master in relation to the Hottentots, the presence of the fragments of the Sinbad and Herakles²³ myths suggests a more complex and ambiguous relationship and power set-up in the encounter between colonizer master and colonized servant.

I argue that the manner in which Coetzee subverts Hegel is most fruitfully read as Levinasian. Like Hegel and Kojève, Levinas conceives human desire as directed toward another human being.²⁴ But unlike Hegel, who conceives the encounter between the two self-consciousnesses as a fight for recognition, a will to power, Levinas's "metaphysical desire" for the "absolutely other" (*Totality* 33) does *not* start a fight; it is a "desire for the invisible" (*Totality* 33).²⁵ In Levinas, desire is a moral exigency (Paperzak 129); Levinas's desire for the "veritably other" is a desire for a "land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature" (*Totality* 33). In contrast to Hegel's opposed forces, in Levinas the other is my interlocutor who regards me and speaks to me (Paperzak 64), but with whom I am never on equal terms: the other is "not on the same plane as myself" (Blanchot 56). Levinas speaks about the other's dimension of height in relation to me (Robbins 5). "There is an impassable distance between myself and the other, who belongs to the other shore, who has no country in common with me" (Blanchot 52). For the Blanchot who is interpreting Levinas "the human relation is terrible" (59), because it is tempered by no intermediary, it is a naked relationship, and between *autrui* and myself the distance is infinite (59). It is this aspect of the thought of Levinas and Blanchot that is relevant to Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, a text that through its female protagonist's helpless yearning invocation to the other (both to her father and to the servant Hendrik) reads like a prayer spoken to the other, a prayer that is performatively trying to bring the invoked other into existence.

²³ In Herakles' name I am following Coetzee's spelling in the novel (spelling it with a *k* rather than a *c*).

²⁴ Together with Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Lacan, Aron and Raymond Queneau, Levinas was one of Kojève's students at his series of lectures held between 1933-39, on the basis of which Raymond Queneau put together Kojève's book (based on notes taken on his lectures) (Bényei 62).

²⁵ See Mike Marais' *Secretary of the Invisible* (New York: Rodopi, 2009).

I do not wish to set an equation mark between reciprocity and Levinasian ethics, which—though very differently from Hegel—traces an unequal and asymmetrical relationship with the other: “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. [. . .] It is precisely insofar as the relation between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am ‘subject’ essentially in this sense” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 98). However, a sense of reciprocity seems to be hidden in Levinas’s thought—and this idea further extends and shades the meaning of the word “encounter” in my argument. Written by Blanchot in response to the thought of Levinas (as a reading of *Totality and Infinity*), *The Infinite Conversation* asserts that *autrui* is the stranger, the unknown, the absolutely foreign, as well as the guest, the one who “cites” and “calls up” (Hanson xxx): “Seized by the infinite distance that I am from what I can neither ‘think’ nor ‘recognize,’ my ‘self’ is disarmed, infinitely vulnerable and *claimed* by an otherness that absolutely exceeds my power” (Hanson xxxi, emphasis added). A Levinasian encounter is not successful in the sense of an achieved harmony and reciprocity: it is a disturbing, even traumatic—and in this sense ethical—encounter with an otherness that will not be reduced to my terms of understanding. Though it traces an asymmetrical relation, a sense of reciprocity and a latent wish/aspiration for a communion with the other seems to be hidden in Levinas’s idea of encounter with the other: “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation” (*Totality* 198). Primarily, the term “encounter” in Levinas refers to the relationship with the always unattainable, infinitely other human being, but Levinas’s thought also hides a yearning (even if never accomplished) for a response from the other human being.

The latent intersubjectivity in Levinas’s thought resides in his understanding of language. Levinas conceives of the relationship with the other as a “language relation to the other” (Robbins 3): “[. . .] the relation between the same and the other [. . .] is language. [It is] primordially enacted as conversation” (Levinas, *Totality* 39). It could be argued that the driving force of Susan Barton’s narrative in *Foe* is this intersubjective and ethical aspect of language in a Levinasian sense. Levinas’s “face-to-face relation,” despite what the phrase suggests, is not a relation of perception or vision but always a linguistic relation. For him the other is a human being to whom I speak. The face is not something I see but something I speak or respond to (Critchley and Bernasconi 10, Waldenfels 69). For Levinas, speech, seen as essentially vocative, is the embodiment and place of the pure ethical relation (Bényei, Z. Kovács 484). The face is “that discourse that obliges the entering into discourse, [. . .] a force that convinces even ‘the

people who do not wish to listen” (*Totality* 201). Levinasian ethics takes place in words, in the act of speaking. “When I speak to the other, I call out to him. Before all else, speech is this address, this invocation” (Blanchot 55). The Levinasian subject comes into being by means of the encounter with the other, as the effect of the other’s call (Critchley 15-16 in Bényei, Z. Kovács 484), an idea that is central in *In the Heart of the Country*: “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” (137).²⁶ Simon Critchley draws attention to the similarity between the Levinasian and psychoanalytic conception of the subject, both of which come into being wounded by the encounter with the other, traumatized, their first act being the response given to the other’s call, the “Here I am!” spoken to the other (Critchley, “The Original Traumatism” 183, Bényei, Z. Kovács 484).

Thus, for Levinas, an encounter would refer to a relationship which is necessarily traumatic inasmuch as it is never attainable (given the other’s infinitely other nature) but which, at the same time, entails a necessary calling (out) for the other. Magda’s exaggerated “we-rhetoric” in passages 153-156 of *In the Heart of the Country* expresses her yearning for a “we-relation” with Hendrik, for the ability to say “we two” (*In the Heart* 38), for something that, according to her, had been impeded and destroyed by her father. This is why she blames her father for corrupting and abusing language (the possibility of a love talk). This “we two” relation comprises a further signification/meaning of the phrase “encounter,” referring to one’s wish for a unity or a communion with the other human being. In Coetzee’s early fiction, the breakdown of the Hegelian structure of intersubjectivity gives rise to a Levinasian encounter in the above sense, and it is the constant colonial see-sawing between Hegel and Levinas that I wish to trace especially in *Foe* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework outlined above, the chapters of the dissertation will trace the variations of colonial intersubjectivity in Coetzee’s early fiction through two recurrent tropes of his early fiction: the trope of carrying another one one’s back and the trope of embracing, two tropes which might be seen as each other’s inversions. I shall read these tropes of

²⁶ Magda’s lament reverberates in the closing passage of the novel: “I have never felt myself to be another man’s creature” (150). Despite all her desperate efforts to create a genuine relationship with another, Magda’s narrative describes a short-circuit, ending in the “silence” (monologue) where it started. Magda’s aspirations for reciprocity cannot but fail in a world of stunted, hierarchical relations. Her ambitions prove incompatible in colonial Agterplaas.

intersubjectivity by unravelling some threads of the largely hidden mythological web of references in the novels: the tropes are situated in a never conspicuous or fully coherent but ubiquitous network of references to certain mythical narratives. The chapters on *Dusklands* and *Foe* will focus on the myth of Herakles and the legend of Sinbad. In *Barbarians*, the tropes are read in the context provided by seeing the novel as a colonial version of the Oedipus myth, while the comparative analysis of *Michael K* and Beckett's *Molloy* shall follow the relevant traces of the Sisyphus myth and the legend of St. Roch. Whenever they are relevant to my argument, I shall also refer to the more sporadic traces of other legends and myths (St. Christopher, Philoctetes, Theseus and Ariadne, Penelope, and Eros and Psyche). The use and presence of myth and myth-making remains a largely unexplored area in Coetzee criticism, although my sustained interest in these novels has persuaded me that the novels' treatment of myth is relevant to their workings.²⁷ Here, my interest in Coetzee's treatment of myth will be limited to the role these fragments of myths play in his scenarios of intersubjectivity, the ways they can be understood and read as "parables" of the colonial scenario or "illustrations" of the colonizer-colonized relationship.

Featuring the word in its title, Michela Canepari-Labis's 2005 monograph (*Old Myths, Modern Empires*) examines Coetzee's oeuvre in the context of what she calls "great" European myths, one of her theses being that Coetzee's narratives break down the myths of the Western world. In her reading, for example, *Dusklands* is a criticism of the myth of war and colonialism (15, 35, 20-22, 147, 261), while *In the Heart of the Country* is seen by her to deconstruct the myths of patriarchal order, the father, and colonialism (262, 266). In her book however, myth rather than meaning specific archaic narratives, is used more in the sense of cultural myths. Jane Poyner reads *In the Heart of the Country* in a similar vein (*J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox* 21), also reading *Michael K* as a narrative structured around the Oedipal myth: in her reading, Michael's Oedipal relation to the Father (the law, the state, the police, the war) is manifested in his "suspicion and avoidance" (77).

²⁷ The reason why *In the Heart of the Country* has not been allocated a separate chapter in this dissertation is that in this novel there are no mythical allusions that have not been discussed by criticism: the latent Oedipal narrative behind the novel has been pointed out by several critics (ex. Huggan and Wattson 133, Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee* 60, Canepari-Labib 262, Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox* 40, Concilio 45). I shall refer to *In the Heart of the Country* occasionally whenever it is relevant to my discussion of the other novels.

An extensive theoretical and/or historical enquiry into mythopoiesis is clearly beyond the scope of and not immediately relevant for the purposes of the present dissertation. However, since Coetzee's treatment of myth is an important aspect of his variations of intersubjective scenarios, I feel it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks concerning the mythopoetic dimension of Coetzee's novels, particularly the way his treatment of myth relates to the major paradigms of mythologizing in 20th-century fiction. Given the role of myths in his fiction, one could suggest that Coetzee's novels could be seen as what Yeliazar Meletinsky calls "mythic novels" or "mythological novels" (386), which would align him with the tradition of great modernist myth-makers like Joyce, Faulkner, Kafka, or Thomas Mann. These novelists however—in novels like *Ulysses* (1922), *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), *The Magic Mountain* (1924), *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933-43), *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926) or the short-story "The Metamorphosis" (1915)—sustain a mythical structure (and mythical parallels) throughout their works, using myth as an organizing and structuring device (Hutcheon 50). For some, like Faulkner, the recourse to myth is "serious," reinforcing the mythological conditioning of literature theorised by Frye and serving to confer on the narrative some metaphysical and cosmic prestige, while others (Joyce especially) "use" myth with a deliberate artificiality and an intentional ironic or parodistic edge (Meletyinszkij 397-8, Coupe 46, Rickword 43-48). In comparison to the mythologizing practice of modernism, Coetzee's mythologizing seems much more fragmentary and erratic. Myths seem to be present in his novels more as instantaneous flashes, momentary impressions, fragmented or sudden associations.

The fragments of myths in Coetzee's novels might be seen as carrying a self-understanding function, the novels trying to—through a self-reading, self-understanding gesture—bring meaning, embed and "tame" the painful narratives into known stories through myths' innate-archaic universalizing nature. However, the novels elude the rendering of such a universal meaning, continually dislocating the closed archetypal (Jungian), structuralist (Fryean) reading of myths (Meletyinszkij 204, Coupe 151, Doty 202, Reichmann 19, 22). As Michael Bell claims, especially in postmodern thinkers "the notion that there is a transcendent, timeless truth somewhere has mostly vanished," and myth is mostly a "way of making meanings" (7). Coetzee's mythopoetics might be said to conform to Eric Gould's poststructuralist, anti-realist understanding of myth, offering no fixed interpretations that would reduce the open-ended quality of myth (Gould 45). Gould avoids the (diachronic, universalizing) snares of formalist or

functionalist definitions and concentrates on the way “language is implicated in human expression, as it attempts to span that perennial gap between event/s and assigned meaning/s” (Doty 256-7), defining myth as a “function of the open-endedness of discourse” (Gould 55). In Coetzee, myth functions like Gould claims it does in modern literature (by which he does not mean modernist literature), in a “dissipated” form, “it is abstracted to a sophistication only literature can handle” (Gould 134). It is a “way or pattern of signifying, something semiotic in nature,” the question it poses being the “way myth utters its message” (Bell 18).

What is the work of myth in Coetzee’s novels then? Shall we claim that the myths and mythical fragments alluded to in Coetzee’s novels serve to set Coetzee’s colonial stories outside of their historical time or shall we rather look for additional layers of meaning to these myths provided precisely by their context? Some of the questions related to Coetzee’s strategies of mythologizing are thematized in the novels themselves. The protagonist of his first novel, *Dusklands*, is a mythographer, concerned with “how myths operate in human society” (4). In a later passage, Dawn makes a comment relevant to Coetzee’s mythologizing: “There are significances in these stories that pour out of me, but I am tired. They may be clues, I put them down” (32). This suggests a possible connection between the individual imagination (and experience) and a collective storehouse of stories. This is reinforced by the more traditional remark of another mythographer character, the fictional Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*: “One by one, in fact, the old stories are coming back, stories he heard from his grandmother and did not know the meaning of, but stored up unwittingly like bones for the future. A great ossuary of stories from before history began, built up and tended by the people” (126). Dostoevsky’s bone metaphor may even recall Northrop Frye’s view on the mythological conditioning of all literature:

[. . .] the goal of historical criticism, as our metaphors about it often indicate, is a kind of self-resurrection, the vision of a valley of dry bones that takes on the flesh and blood of our own vision. The culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life. It is not only the poet but his reader who is subject to the obligation to “make it new.” (Frye 345-6)

Frye’s bone metaphor conveys the idea that myth (a mythical skeleton) is there behind every story, even if it seems invisible or one does not recognise it. Myth is not only something

belonging to the past, apart from us (the memory of mankind, our past lives), it also relates to our present life; it is our buried life. Myth is (the buried part of) me that, if unburied, leads to a recognition scene, so it functions as a means of self-knowledge or self-completion or self-resurrection and it is one's obligation to attend it and "make it new." The fictional Dostoevsky's specific metaphor is, however, more ambiguous in its implications: these bones do not make up full skeletons, as they do in modernist mythologizing: they are more like mysterious remains (after death, after the dead), something "clean" and enduring, almost like a stone, but something that has irretrievably lost its original context. The question is what happens to these mythical fragments in the postcolonial context of Coetzee's fiction, how Coetzee "makes it new." In Coetzee's early novels, these fragments are built into scenarios of intersubjectivity. The closing chapter of my dissertation addresses the mythopoetic dimension of Coetzee's early fiction. Referring to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice alluded to in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*, I read the unaccomplished encounter between Orpheus and Eurydice as an ur-myth of Coetzee's oeuvre, as a story that portrays the failed intersubjectivity plot of Coetzee's novels and as a story that sums up the mythical narratives discussed in the novels.

Chapter Two

Colonial Intersubjectivity in *Dusklands* and *Foe*

“We have nothing [. . .] but what we carry on our own backs.”²⁸

J. M. Coetzee

“He hath bore me on his back a thousand times,
and now—how abhorred in my imagination it is!”²⁹

William Shakespeare

Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), consists of four separate texts. The first two do not seem to be related, the second and the two subsequent ones, however, tell the same story, although from different points of view. The first story, “The Vietnam Project,” relates the gradual falling apart of Eugene Dawn, who works for the U.S. government, writing a report on psychological warfare in the Vietnam War. Disillusioned by the imperialist mentality of the war and sick of being a puppet in his boss’s hands, Dawn gradually breaks down, his decline tragically culminating in his stabbing his son. The second story, Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative, is set in the 18th century and gives a first-person account of a Boer frontiersman’s hunting expedition to the land of the Namaqua Hottentots in the interior of South Africa.³⁰ Jacobus’s

²⁸ “We have nothing, no wagon, no oxen, no horses, no guns, nothing but what we carry on our own backs” (*Dusklands* 91).

²⁹ *Hamlet* V.1.179-183.

³⁰ Although recognized as a “radically innovative novel” and hailed as an “extraordinary breakthrough in South-African writing in English” (Kannemayer 217, 241) or perhaps precisely *because* it was too radically innovative, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* (without the *Vietnam Project* as it was later published) was rejected by “all the normal South African publishers” and was turned down without comment by many American and British publishers as well (Kannemayer 234-5, 241). The novel was finally published in 1974 by Raven Press, a publisher that dared to publish oppositional writing or writing that was risky (Raven also published protest poetry much of which was banned) (Kannemayer 242). Though it was seen as too experimental (Gallagher), the first serious discussion of the

megalomania and his irrational racist hatred of the Hottentots culminate in his final massacre of the Hottentot tribe. The second text—as we learn from the “Translator’s Preface”—comprises J. M. Coetzee’s “translation” of a text published in 1951 by his fictional father, S. J. Coetzee, an Afrikaner historian. Jacobus’ story is followed by an “Afterword,” written by the academic S. J. Coetzee, “originally” serving as an introduction to Jacobus’ story, drawn from a fictitious course of lectures delivered at the University of Stellenbosch on the early explorers of South Africa. The last text, an appendix, claims to reproduce the traveler Jacobus Coetzee’s “original” deposition written in 1760 to the Governor of Cape Colony after his return from the journey. The question arises: what is it that links the first narrative to the following three, how are the two seemingly very different blocks of stories bound to make a single novel?³¹ Through reading the hidden mythical allusions of the text I attempt to respond to this question, too.

In *The Arabian Nights*, Sinbad’s story of the Old Man of the Sea relates the sailor’s fifth voyage during which he encounters the monstrous Old Man who fastens on his back, clinging to Sinbad who cannot shake him off, riding him day and night until Sinbad would prefer even death. The persistent, though sporadic presence of the story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea in Coetzee’s fiction can be traced from *Dusklands*, through *Foe* and *Michael K* to later novels like *Slow Man*. In *Foe* and *Slow Man* the story allegorises the author-character relationship (in reference to the Foe-Susan, Susan-Friday, and Costello-Rayment couples), while in *Michael K* it serves to illustrate the burdensome mother-son relationship. Perhaps due to the muted presence of the story in *Dusklands*, the significance of the Sinbad motif in this text

novel (by Jonathan Crewe) claimed that “in *Dusklands* the modern novel in English arrives in South Africa for the first time” (Kannemayer 250).

³¹ The most comprehensive discussion of the relation between the separate texts of *Dusklands* and their sources is David Attwell’s early article. Dominic Head observed that many critics read *Dusklands* as (only) two separate narratives and criticism has tended to focus on the “obliquity of the book’s method” (Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 29), some early critics (like Knox-Shaw or W. J. B. Wood) even condemning the novel for its complicity for the very project it seeks to challenge, the “excitement of colonial self-aggrandizement” (Head 29). Head and Hamilton, however, suggest that reading the novel as a single piece composed of two corresponding parts rather than self-contained stories is more fruitful. Poyner and Pippin discuss *Dusklands* as made up of four different texts (Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox* 15, 17, Pippin n.p.).

remains unexamined,³² although, in my view, it is in this first novel that the story has the most intriguing significance in Coetzee's exploration of colonial intersubjectivity. While it can be argued that in some of the later novels the function of the tale is somewhat didactic, its extremely brief appearance in *Dusklands* is particularly effective, establishing its crucial significance in Coetzee's fiction as a motif and trope of intersubjectivity. The passage is also significant for it raises the question of intersubjectivity through suggesting that the figure of Jacobus might be read as an alter ego of Dawn's and that Jacobus's story in a certain respect reads as a (wish-fulfillment) fantasy of Dawn's. These are Dawn's words:

I have an exploring temperament. Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization. In that vertiginous freedom I might have expanded my true potential. If I feel cramped nowadays it is because I have no space to beat my wings. That is a good explanation for the trouble I have with my back, and a mythic one too. My spirit should soar into the endless interior distances, but dragging it back, alas, is this tyrant body. Sinbad's story of the old man of the sea is also apposite. [. . .] He [Coetzee, his boss] cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body parts together while inside it he burns and burns. [. . .] I am now become Herakles roasting in his poisoned shirt. (32)

The first novel is also crucial in Coetzee's deployment of the Sinbad and the Old Man motif in that in *Dusklands* this allegory of intersubjectivity is used in conjunction with an apparently similar though in fact much more complex narrative predicated on the motif of carrying another on one's back. Right after his reference to the Sinbad tale, Dawn mentions "Herakles roasting in his poisoned shirt," alluding to yet another mythical narrative of carrying someone on one's back. Herakles' death is caused by the shirt soaked in the the poisonous blood of the centaur Nessus, who offered to carry Herakles's wife Deianeira upon his back across a river, only to try to ravish her on the other side. Rather than simply repeating or confirming the implications of the Sinbad narrative, the motif of carrying in the Herakles myth complicates it; in

³² Terasa Dovey, for example, claims that the tale functions as an allegory of the relationship between Susan and Friday in *Foe* (386), but the tale itself is not commented upon by her. In his monograph Mike Marais mentions that the tale serves as an analogy of Susan's "sense of oppression" (82), but he does not discuss the story further (he does discuss the role of the story in *Slow Man*, though). Mariá López too makes a short comment about the tale only with reference to *Slow Man* (255), leaving its role in *Dusklands* unexamined.

conjunction, the two mythical narratives suggest complex patterns of (colonial) intersubjectivity in the novel. Only David Attwell observes the presence of the Herakles-myth in *Dusklands* (in his 1993 monograph) as an example of the analogy between Dawn and Jacobus (“Like Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee thus becomes Herakles roasting in the poisoned shirt of Western heroic individualism” [*South Africa* 50]), but apart of this sentence he does not examine the role of the myth in the novel.

According to the myth, the centaur Nessus offered to carry Deianeira, Herakles’ wife, upon his back across a fast-flowing river while Herakles swam across it. However, Nessus deviously abducted Deianeira and tried to ravish her. In his fury, Herakles shoots Nessus with his poisoned arrow (in some versions the arrow was dipped in the poisonous blood of the Lernaean Hydra to whom a reference is made in Dawn’s mythography). Like the flooded river (the place itself is abundant, transgressive), Nessus’s body overflows, spills over, discharging his sperm on the woman. Nessus instructed Deianeira that if she gathered his sperm and the blood pouring out of his wound, and greased Herakles’ shirt with the mixture, it would enhance the love of her husband and Herakles would always be faithful to her. In another version of the myth, Nessus gave a thread soaked in his blood (which contained the poisoned blood of the Lernaean Hydra) to Deianeira to work it in her husband’s shirt. In a third version, the woman has to mix Herakles’s sperm with Nessus’s blood (Kerényi 314, Graves 279-280). The prophecy according to which Herakles cannot be harmed by any living man is fulfilled: he dies by the hand of his dead (half human, half beast) enemy. After Nessus dies, his putrefying body is left there unburied. It is Herakles, who—after murdering the intruder—finally carries his woman through the river. Years later, Herakles abducts the beautiful Iole. Remembering Nessus’ words, Deianeira weaves a new sacrificial shirt for Herakles dipped in Nessus’ poisoned blood. In unbearable pain, Herakles is trying to rip his shirt off, but it scorches his flesh, exposing his bones. His blood fizzles and bubbles. Throwing himself into the water, his pain becomes even more unbearable. Out of his mind, he uproots trees and builds a funeral pyre for himself. As his body burns, only his immortal aspect is left; Zeus glorifies him, raising him to Olympus as he dies, while Deianeira commits suicide (Graves 290-292).

In the first subchapter I am going to discuss the implications of the act of carrying another on one’s back in the Sinbad tale (with occasional references to the Herakles myth), while the second subchapter addresses the question how the Herakles myth (further) complicates and

shades the meaning of the act of carrying (and of intersubjectivity in general) in the novel. I argue that the motif of carrying another on one's back functions as the founding myth or primal scene of Coetzee's novel—of *Dusklands* and of Coetzee's other early novels—in that it functions as a key to Coetzeean intersubjectivity. The various novels—*Dusklands*, *Foe*, *Michael K*—unravel various aspects of colonial intersubjectivity precisely by relating the act of carrying (and embracing) to various mythical narratives. The act of carrying another on one's back (intertwined with the act of embracing) tells the story of the traumatic nature of one's encounter with another and of the psychic dynamics of the colonial encounter.

Although the speculations in the the passage quoted above belong to Eugene Dawn—the protagonist-narrator of “The Vietnam Project,” the first novella of the novel—they could as well be attributed to Jacobus, the protagonist-narrator of the second novella, “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee.” Jacobus's story can be seen as a realization of Dawn's fantasy. The exploring temperament Dawn refers to (as his) is manifested in Jacobus, who is an explorer, a colonizer (which Dawn is not). It is the “vertiginous freedom” that Dawn only aspires for that makes Jacobus a mad megalomaniac. The crampedness that Dawn refers to in relation to himself gains physical manifestation in Jacobus's narrative when he suffers from his fistula. Dawn aspires for wings, Jacobus has them. Dawn is broken-winged, Jacobus is soaring. Dawn complains about a pain in the back, which is sarcastically attributed to the lack of (space for) the wings which he aspires for. Jacobus suffers from a pain in the “back part,” a purulent fester in his buttocks. The unbearable pain caused by the wound makes Jacobus (as much as or even more than Dawn) experience his body as a “tyrant body” that makes his days and hours insufferable, similarly to Herakles who suffers from the burning of his putrifying flesh.

While Western readers would perhaps associate the mythological figures of Atlas and Sisyphus with the “mythic explanations” of Dawn's back troubles,³³ Dawn's train of thought refers to the painful-cramped act of carrying someone on one's back from Sinbad's story with the Old Man of the Sea and then to the story of Herakles. Atlas and Sisyphus struggle on their own, Sinbad, however, struggles with and receives pain from the other. Likewise, Herakles

³³ Both Atlas and Sisyphus are associated with never-ending and vain physical effort and the accompanying back pain, Atlas being the Titan who was condemned by Zeus to hold the sky (the celestial sphere) on his shoulders, while Sisyphus was sentenced to rolling a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this action neverendingly.

suffers and dies by the hand of another, in a symbolic sense: strange matter, Nessus's and/or the Hydra's poisonous blood, is part of what kills him. Sinbad's story, like that of Herakles, is both a scenario of subjectivity and one of intersubjectivity. On one hand, the Sinbad story is referred to by Dawn as a metaphor for the split within the subject: the Old Man is associated with the tyrant body drawing back the spirit. In the second narrative, however, the story reappears as an allegory of the intersubjective relationship between the colonizer Jacobus and his servant Klawer. Similarly, Herakles's death might be seen as caused by strange matter (he is killed by Nessus's blood or sperm), but his death can also be considered as caused by himself: he shoots Nessus with his own poisonous arrow, and the poison causes his death when he receives the shirt from his wife. Both mythical narratives referred to by Dawn portray scenarios of subjectivity as well as intersubjectivity.

When I read *Dusklands* as a novel that is concerned with the enormous difficulties of intersubjective relationships, I follow in the steps of Grant Hamilton, who reads it as a "novel of relations" which explores the failed relationships between subject and object, self and other, as a novel which is about the "failure of such fundamental relationships" (296). For Hamilton, the novel stages imperial/colonial encounters that "take shape in order to act as a means of self-determination" (296), as Dawn himself realizes: "Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist" (17). The novel combines the (post)colonial-political issue of intersubjectivity, to which the above quote refers, with Dawn's private life and intersubjective relationships. It is in the context of the latter that Dawn mentions the mythical significance of his plight, after reaching the point of no return, having left behind his former life and stealing his son: "It is not, I see, after all difficult to cut ties" [. . .] Thirty-three is the mythologically correct age for cutting ties" (36); "I have cut my ties" (38). The most intriguing question the novel raises is exactly this "mythical" aspect of "ties"—the relationship to another human being. The metaphor of the tie/ties appears and is thematised in various scenes of the novel in both Dawn's and Jacobus's narratives (Dawn considers breaking his ties throughout, both from his family and from his employer). For the purposes of my reading, the key scenes from the novel are the ones in which Jacobus and his servant Klawer, in a joint effort, are crossing the river, and the bond or tie—the rope—between the two of them breaks, as well as the episodes in which they are carrying each other on their back, and the story of Jacobus's contamination with the Hottentot sickness. These motifs—carrying on the back, the

crossing through a river—are elements of both the Sinbad tale and the Herakles myth. The stories of Sinbad and Herakles are part of an economy of infiltration: the seeds of these stories are sown in Dawn’s narrative but they grow into full-fledged stories in Jacobus’s narrative.

Sinbad (and Nessus)

“On the march, if they came to a stream, he would carry Flory across on his back.”

(George Orwell, *Burmese Days* 51)

The motif of carrying another on one’s back is a multivalent motif with obvious implications for the colonial context, as it clearly evokes the ambiguous colonial scene of the white man’s burden. The ambiguity of the phrase “the white man’s burden” is due to its two contrasting and conflicting semantic possibilities, making it unclear which of the two colonial participants (colonizer and colonized, white man and black man) plays which part, who is the carrier and who the carried. Partly, the motif of carrying another on one’s back alludes to the civilizing mission of the West, the imperial idea of “the white man’s burden,” as famously formulated in Kipling’s 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden” (subtitled “The United States and the Philippine Islands”):

Take up the White Man’s burden,
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile,
to serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child. (334)

Kipling’s poem was written on the occasion of the U.S. conquest of the Philippines, urging the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire. The title phrase of the poem has been used to justify the imperialist policy of the U.S. as a noble enterprise, commanding white men to colonize and rule people of other nations for their own benefit. Because of its theme and title, the poem has

become emblematic both of Eurocentric racism and of Western aspirations to dominate the developing world. The poem formulates a belief in the “virtues of empire,” in the beneficent role the introduction of Western ideas could play in lifting non-Western peoples out of poverty and ignorance: “those moralistic and normative ideologies of amelioration recognized as the Civilizing Mission or the White Man’s Burden” (Bhabha 83). The “Afterword” of *Dusklands*, written by the scientist S. J. Coetzee, embraces this savior-imperialist attitude, as Philip John argues: “S. J. Coetzee’s ‘authoritative’ treatise is clearly colored by its author’s need to justify his forbearers’ colonization of South-Africa. Consequently, he presents Jacobus’s activities as part of the process of bringing indigenous inhabitants of Africa out of ‘innocence’ and closer to the ‘citizenship of the world’” (272). On the other hand, although the relationship between the mother country and its colonies was thought of as that of a mother feeding her “little ones,” the colonial reality, was the opposite: it was the mother country that—like a parasite or a vampire—sucked the blood of the colonies, destroying their economic-cultural structures. In *Headhunting and Colonialism* (2010), Ricardo Roque discusses the question of parasitism in colonial interactions, drawing upon Michel Serres’s *The Parasite* (1982). Serres discusses parasitism as a one-way or unidirectional relationship of abuse (a form of exchange without reciprocity, an “unequal exchange”) in which one party makes use of the other giving nothing in return (Serres 9-12, 182): “Serres’s basic view of parasitic interactions is of an abusive and unilateral relationship in which exchange, as such, does not occur” (Roque 36). In contrast, Roque discusses colonial interactions as a form of relationship characterized by mutual parasitism (17-18). Roque examines “the symbiotic dynamics that underlie the exercise of European rule in indigenous societies.”

In what regards the study of colonial power, this perspective calls for an understanding of power as grounded on vulnerabilities. It is typically assumed, for example, that European domination is reinforced uniquely with more and better knowledge; financial and military resources; administrative efficiency of the state apparatus; and control, surveillance, or discipline of the populations. Yet, the trope of colonialism’s dynamics of weakness and vulnerability needs to be taken seriously [. . .]. Parasitism in colonial interactions [. . .] invites us to understand power as an instance of weakness, immobility [. . .]. (36-37)

Coetzee’s scenarios of intersubjectivity might be interpreted in terms of the various forms of mutual parasitism identified and analysed by Roque. In interaction, Roque writes, “hosts can

frequently transit from hospitable to hostile”—the case of the Sinbad tale—or they can “passively or actively welcome parasitic interference, but also struggle to eliminate or exclude undesirable parasites from the circuits” (36)—the case of *Michael K*, as will be discussed later. “In its political implications,” Roque goes on,

this perspective allows one to address the strength of weak forms of colonial rule. If parasitism is a space of power struggles, hostility, and asymmetry, so it is the mutual parasitism emergent in colonial interactions. It should already be clear that this symbiosis does not discount colonial violence, indigenous hostility towards the colonizers’ interferences, or attempts by colonizers themselves to put an end to parasitism. (36)

A real-life example of the colonial trope of parasitism and an emblematic image of the exploitation of the natives is the image of those European/Western explorers and travelers who employed native “bearers” (instead of pack animals) to be carried on their backs, making the white man the actual physical burden of the native. The crucial difference between the two metaphors is that while Kipling’s “white man’s burden” remains a metaphor—it was a fantasy scenario of the white man—the example of native bearers was the actual reality, documented by a multitude of photographs and accounts about colonial life.

Discussing the possible origins for the figure of Old Man in Sinbad’s story in the *Arabian Nights* (the orangutan, the Tritons and the figure of Nereus from Greek mythology), Richard F. Burton—the 19th century English translator of the *Arabian Nights* and himself an explorer of Asia and Africa—favors the African custom of riding on slaves’ backs in this way: “The ‘Old Man’ is not an ourang-outang [. . .], but a jocose exaggeration of a custom prevailing in parts of Asia and especially in the African interior where the Tsetse-fly prevents the breeding of burden-beasts. Ibn Batútah tells us that in Malabar everything was borne upon men’s backs” (Burton n.p., fn 62). Burton relates how he himself experienced this way of transportation once on a journey when he was unable to walk and so was carried by the bearers. He speaks slightly of his experience: “I have often been reduced to this style of conveyance and found man the worst imaginable riding: there is no hold and the sharpness of the shoulder-ridge soon makes the legs ache intolerably” (Burton n.p., fn 62).³⁴ In the novel, Jacobus, taken ill, has

³⁴ Burton provides telling annotations to the tales, some of which serve as effective examples of 19th-century British imperialism. Like Jacobus Coetzee, Burton was an English traveler, who was known for his travels and explorations

recourse to this custom, making use of his servant Klawer as a burden-beast and having himself carried by him.³⁵

The motif of carrying a burden appears in *The Arabian Nights* even earlier than the story of Sinbad the Sailor (who encounters the Old Man of the Sea), namely in relation to a man named Sinbad the Porter or Sindbád the Hammál,³⁶ “who bore burdens on his head for hire” (Burton n.p.), to whom it happened one day “whilst he was carrying a heavy load” and “he became exceeding weary and sweated profusely” that he was passing the gate of a rich merchant’s house, set his load on the bench near the gate and started reciting a poem which was overheard by the merchant (the would-be Sinbad the Sailor), who told him:

‘Know, O Porter that thy name is even as mine, for I am Sindbad the Seaman; and now, O Porter, I would have thee let me hear the couplets thou recitedst at the gate anon.’ [. . .] [T]he merchant [...] said to him, ‘Know, O Hammal, that my story is a wonderful one, and thou shalt hear all that befel me and all I underwent ere I rose to this state of prosperity and became the lord of this place wherein thou seest me; for I came not to this high estate save after travail sore and perils galore, and how much toil and trouble have I not suffered in days of yore! I have made seven voyages, by each of which hangeth a marvellous tale, such as confoundeth the reason [. . .].’ (Burton n.p.)

It is at this point that Sinbad the Sailor starts relating the stories of his seven voyages (of which his encounter with the frightful Old Man of the Sea is the fifth one). So, as we learn from the Sailor Sinbad, he had also been Porter Sinbad before he became Sailor Sinbad and it is only by first experiencing great pain and suffering that he could reach the state of prosperity. It is as if the two Sinbads represented two levels or states of knowledge or experience, suggesting that in order to reach the higher state of happiness and prosperity one needs to undergo and experience suffering and pain, as the Sailor explains:

“By means of toil man shall scale the height;

in Asia and Africa and his comments, like those of Jacobus, display gross political incorrectness, let alone his highly imaginative, sexually-laden interpretations of the natives (Burton, “The Fifth” fn 6).

³⁵ Possibly, the origin of the English verb *to tote* (meaning to haul, lug; to have on one’s person, pack [ex. toting guns] and of the noun “toter” (meaning carrier, bearer, porter) comes from Black West African English of Bantu origin akin to Kongo -tota, to pick up, and Swahili -tuta, to pile up, carry. As a noun *tote* (informal) means load, burden (ex. a tote bag) (“Toter”).

³⁶ The Arabic word “hammal” means porter, carrier.

Who seeketh pearl in the deep must dive” (Burton n.p)³⁷

One must first be servant—hamal, porter—in order to be(come) master.³⁸ Sailor Sinbad decides to go on sea (after having lived an easy life on his father’s money) in order to gain experience and (self-)knowledge. On the sea he is alone, on his voyages he is a stranger. One could say that on his fifth voyage he meets the Old Man of the Sea precisely because his lesson then is to learn something about the nature of masterdom and slavery: before setting out on his voyage he buys black slaves for his ship. His fifth voyage could be read as a lesson in intersubjectivity, a didactic edifying story of intersubjectivity through which he has to experience

³⁷ Another story of Porter Sinbad from the Arabian Nights is the one that tells about his encounter with the three beautiful girls. Waiting lonely on the streets of Bagdad, Sinbad is approached by a beautiful woman and asked to carry all sorts of (excessive) food and drink and fruits and sweets to her home (“You should have told me to come with a draught horse [a beast of burden] to be able to carry all these earthly goods” [Prileszky 95, my translation]) where another two beautiful girls wait on them. While drinking gobletfuls of wine, Sinbad offers to be the girls’ “servant, captive, and thrall” (Prileszky 101, my translation) and they fall into a drunken rapture and lascivious lust. In a naked play the girls start asking Sinbad what he calls their genitals and on never giving the answer they expect, the girls strike and beat him heavily on his nape, neck and shoulders (his burden-carrier body-parts). Learning the girls’ metaphors for their genitals, Sinbad replies that his genital part is a dilapidated-crooked mule (burden-carrier) which eats and grazes on the basil of the fearless, tramples down the unhusked sesame, and sleeps in Abu Mansur’s caravan seraglio (Prileszky 105, my translation). Though the girls’ beatings on the shoulder recall Sinbad’s story with the old man, his lustful encounter with the girls stands as a counterpart of the painful-suffering encounter with the old man, this tale offering an episode about the pleasures of burden-carrying. Under the “pressure” of answering the girls’ sexual riddles, Sinbad is mounted on by the naked women who sit on his lap (“carrying” “all the earthly goods”), an image that appears in *Foe* when Susan Barton mounts and straddles Foe in a “bracing ride” (*Foe* 139).

³⁸ Another narrative of a symbolic carrying on one’s back is the Indian/Sanskrit story of the corpse demon, known as the *Vetala Tales* (translated into English also by the same Richard F. Burton who translated the *Arabian Nights*. The English title is *Vikram and the Vampire or Tales of Hindu Devilry* [1893]; in Hungarian: *A hulladémon* [1963], trans. Vekerdi József). The collection consists of a series of unrelated tales told within a frame story that tells about king Vikramaditya who is tried by a yogi with being given the task of carrying a dead corpse on his back in a cemetery. The dead body is possessed by a demon (the vetala) who, every time the corpse is picked up and carried by the king, tells him a story to pass the time and thus aiding the king in thwarting the yogi’s nefarious scheme of subdueing him. After every tale, the demon-possessed corpse dismounts from the king’s back and runs back to the cemetery so that the king has to turn back after it time after time. He returns for him and carries him 25 times in one night (enduring the burden with the tales), fatiguing himself exceedingly. The story reads as a tale about Vikramaditya proving enduring, strenuous and indefatigable enough to be the king.

servanthood and put his life at stake—he falls like a dead man from the Old Man’s grip—in order to learn not to think in terms of hierarchy and to respect the alterity of the other man.

Although in Coetzee’s novel Sinbad’s story of the Old Man of the Sea is only laconically mentioned—apart from the above-quoted half sentence (*Dusklands* 32) there is no other reference to the story—I will quote the whole episode from *The Arabian Nights* because the story of Sinbad’s encounter with the Old Man of the Sea is a succinct portrayal of the inevitable ambiguity inherent in the encounter between the colonizer and colonized, representing and defining both participants of the colonial scenario in their mutual dependence on the other. Here is the episode of Sinbad’s encounter with the Old Man of the Sea from *The Arabian Nights*:

‘Take me on thy shoulders and carry me to the other side of the well-channel.’ And quoth I [Sinbad] in my mind, ‘I will deal kindly with him and do what he desireth; it may be I shall win me a reward in Heaven for he may be a paralytic.’ So I took him on my back and carrying him to the place whereat he pointed, said to him, ‘Dismount at thy leisure.’ But he would not get off my back and wound his legs about my neck. I looked at them and seeing that they were like a buffalo’s hide for blackness and roughness, was affrighted and would have cast him off; but he clung to me and gripped my neck with his legs, till I was well-nigh choked, the world grew black in my sight and I fell senseless to the ground like one dead. But he still kept his seat and raising his legs drummed with his heels and beat harder than palm-rods my back and shoulders, till he forced me to rise for excess of pain. Then he signed to me with his hand to carry him hither and thither among the trees which bore the best fruits; and if ever I refused to do his bidding or loitered or took my leisure he beat me with his feet more grievously than if I had been beaten with whips. He ceased not to signal with his hand wherever he was minded to go; so I carried him about the island, like a captive slave, and he bepissed and conskited my shoulders and back, dismounting not night nor day; and whenas he wished to sleep he wound his legs about my neck and leaned back and slept awhile, then arose and beat me; whereupon I sprang up in haste, unable to gainsay him because of the pain he inflicted on me. And indeed I blamed myself and sore repented me of having taken compassion on him and continued in this condition, suffering fatigue not to be described, till I said to myself, “I wrought him a weal and he requited me with my ill; by Allah, never more will I do any

man a service so long as I live!" And again and again I besought the Most High that I might die, for stress of weariness and misery; (Burton n.p.)

It is worth looking at the nature of this encounter, how it comes about, how the two parties enter into it, and what they presume about the other. Sinbad beholds the "old man of venerable aspect" at a "spring of running water" (n.p.). The place of the encounter as well as the other person is related to the origin ("spring"). Origin and end (old age) are combined in this alterity. The old man, however, is not only the absolute opposite of Sinbad ("a lovely old man"³⁹) but also his double: Sinbad presumes him to be like himself: a shipwrecked castaway. The encounter is a scene of origin also in the sense that only the two of them meet on a presumably desert island, they are dependent on each other; it needs to be settled if there will be a relationship between them, whether one will address the other or not. They depend on each other also in the sense that they are castaways who need to be "picked up" (and carried) by the other, as the word suggests. Thus, their encounter seems to be inevitable. Sinbad is driven towards the old man by a devout desire to do something "in all good faith," "for he may be a paralytic," that's why he addresses him. The old man, however, does not reply to him but communicates with signs ("he returned my salam by signs, but spoke not" [Burton n.p.]), a detail that once again suggests something originary: we are before the appearance of speech, at least on the old man's part (and thus the encounter is "prehistoric"). The fact that he is not speaking makes his identity ambiguous as his figure is somewhere on the border between man/human and beast. The old man's figure (as well as that of Nessus) recalls the familiar European representation of natives as half human, half beast: he does not speak, but communicates with signs, and his legs are "like a buffalo's hide for blackness and roughness" (Burton n.p.). On the other hand, he covers his loins, so he must feel shame or embarrassment upon walking naked (so he is "civilized"); on the whole, he is neither fully human, nor fully beast, but somewhere in between or a hybrid creature. It is the sight of the buffalo-like legs that frightens Sinbad first, and not the fact that he climbs and fastens on his back—the Old Man's liminality, his not-fully-human nature.

When they first meet it is Sinbad who wants to connect with the Old Man, but later, when Sinbad wants to escape from the other's grasp, it is the Old Man who will not let go. The Old Man asks for Sinbad's help, he depends on Sinbad, he seems to be doomed to immobility

³⁹ „szép ábrázatú öregember” (Prileszky 213).

without him. Even though Sinbad is responsible for their movement in space he is not in command. He functions as the Old Man's "prosthesis" or his "extension" as his limbs or as his host in a parasitic relationship; the Old Man, who seems to be only seemingly passive (sitting), has control over him. Their clinging together turns into a strangling clinch as a result of which Sinbad falls to the ground "well-nigh choked [...] like one dead" (Burton n.p.). In Ricardo Roque's words, the relationship ends in a "hierarchy of power in which the weaker governs the stronger:" "the weak parasites are able to govern the actions of strong hosts from a position of energy deprivation, immobility, and passivity" (36). In explanation, Roque refers to Michel Serres's allegory (Serres 71-74, 56, 252), a story that could be read as the synopsis of the Sinbad tale (even the allegorical characters are the same):

the ruler is like the paralytic who, by the simple emission of words, derives mobility and energy by commanding the physical strength of the blind, to whom he nevertheless becomes attached and from whom his force is dependent. In this parasitic symbiosis, the voice of the parasite is the source of government. Weakness, in short, given that it is grounded on an unequal exchange of immaterial for material, enables parasitic domination. (Roque 36)

Sinbad and the Old Man's encounter is, at the same time, a version of Hegel's fight-to-death: as in the master-slave encounter, life is at stake. It is the pain caused by the other that awakens Sinbad (the Old Man keeps on beating him) and makes him rise from his prostrate position. It is as if the Old Man "resurrected" or forced him to stand up, realizing that if he lets him die, he will lose the fight. Therefore he slaps Sinbad to life to be able to dialectically overcome him. He makes him his captive slave day and night, turning him into a "slave of dialectics" in the sense that he does not let him be alone but wants him in this continuous togetherness. In contrast to the renowned Platonic myth where clinging together is a happy state of primal togetherness—an embrace, a return to the original oneness, a communion—here, the Old Man's fastening on his back is experienced by Sinbad as an infernal embrace compared to which even death is better.

Although at first Sinbad is driven by an ethical impulse and a (pseudo)altruistic desire to do good (help a paralytic), he will not become a saintly hero sacrificing himself for the other. The story concludes with Sinbad getting rid of the Old Man by making him drunk, but he is not content with this, killing the Old Man in revenge: "fearing lest he should shake off his

drunkenness and do me a mischief [...] I took up a great stone from among the trees and coming up to him smote him therewith on the head with all my might and crushed in his skull as he lay dead drunk. Thereupon his flesh and fat and blood being in a pulp, he died” (Burton n.p.). From the sailors coming to the island he learns that “He who rode on thy shoulder is called the ‘Shaykh al-Bahr’ [Sheik of the Sea] or Old Man of the Sea, and none ever felt his legs on neck and came off alive but thou; and those who die under him he eateth” (Burton n.p.). The Old Man’s flesh mixed with his blood is the sign and place of Sinbad’s bleeding to death, who—unlike the Old Man who realizes that he has to keep his adversary alive in the fight—terminates the fight, kills his adversary and thus deprives himself of the possibility of gaining the master’s position, remaining alone without another to recognize him. The significance of the story’s presence in Coetzee’s novel consists in the fact that it—like the novel as a whole—wants us to consider an interdependent relationship that inevitably becomes a strangling, mortal embrace which turns into parasitism, and the story’s presence in the novel suggests that this perverse, paradoxical logic is part of any close intersubjective relationship that is based on power.

The Sinbad story is significant in the context of Coetzee’s novel because Sinbad’s encounter with the Old Man—similarly to the encounter between colonizer and colonized—contains the contrary acts of carrying on the back and embracing (clinging to) the other. The Old Man’s suffocating adherence and Nessus’s attempted rape of Deianeira are no real acts of embracing but acts of violating the other. In *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), Miroslav Volf discusses the phenomenology of embrace, pointing out four structural elements of the act of embracing:

The four structural elements in the movement of embrace are opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again. For embrace to happen, all four must be there and they must follow one another on an unbroken timeline; stopping with the first two (opening the arms and waiting) would abort the embrace, and stopping with the third (closing the arms) would pervert it from an act of love to an act of oppression and, paradoxically, exclusion. (n.p.)

The Old Man’s and Nessus’s “embrace” are examples of the colonial condition in which power is always involved in intersubjectivity. (As pointed out earlier, the half human-half animal Old Man as well as the half human-half animal centaur [Nessus] could be identified with the “beastly” native.) Both mythical subtexts contain a sinister ambivalence in that the act of

carrying the other on one's back as an act of offering help is transformed into a violent (even lethal) embrace, a humanitarian act into its opposite, an act of violating the other. In accordance with Fanonian theory, in Coetzee's novel the ambiguity of the mythical subtexts is reinforced by the colonial context.

In *Dusklands*, the act of carrying another on one's back functions as an arch-motif or ur-act in the sense that in both Dawn's and Jacobus's narratives all relationships feature a subject fatally depending on the other in a bind that entails pain. In Jacobus's narrative, all through his illness Jacobus's life depends on the Hottentots. Whether he is washed out of his own filth, whether he gets food or water depends on the Hottentots. After he quarrels with them and has to leave the village, and because he is sick, he has to be carried on Klawer's back. Were it not for Klawer, Jacobus would die. This scene, an actual repetition of Sinbad's tale, featuring a master carried by his servant, reenacts the iconic colonial scene: "Where the going was particularly hard I asked Klawer to carry me, and he did so a stretch at a time without murmur" (94). Ironically, this episode has its grotesque inverse mirror image in the novel, when, after Klawer falls sick and Jacobus finds him paralyzed one morning, Jacobus looks after him like a servant. The text seems to imply that—given the lack of Hottentot carriers—Jacobus has to carry Klawer on his back:⁴⁰ "I dragged him up, he collapsed. 'Klawer, old friend', I said, 'things are going badly with you. But never fear, I will not desert you.' [. . .] 'Let us go, master, I can walk.' Alas, no friendly Hottentots appeared with a litter. We ascended slowly through the hot afternoon" (*Dusklands* 94-95). Beside the laborious and burdensome nature of carrying another on one's back, given the excessive physical proximity, the act carries a markedly intimate overtone both in Sinbad's tale and in Jacobus and Klawer's story. In *Dusklands*, the motif of carrying does not only stem from the parasitical act of strangling of the Sinbad tale, but it incorporates a wide range of the implications of the phenomenology of carrying and embracing. Such acts of carrying another on one's back include the act of carrying another as an act of love and care and/or symbiosis

⁴⁰ In another, similar scene we find Jacobus trying to shake one of the Hottentots off his head. Once again Jacobus occupies Sinbad's role of the sufferer/carrier; the scene is an exact repetition of the Sinbad tale: "Someone was sitting on my head, I could move not even my jaw. The pain became trivial. It occurred to me that I could suffocate and die and these people would not care. They were tormenting me excessively" (*Dusklands* 91). In yet another scene Jacobus is attacked and bullied by the Hottentot children: they were "clinging on my back, dragging at my arms and legs, they bore me to the ground" (*Dusklands* 90).

(communion)—like a parent carries his/her child, or an animal its baby/offspring—or the act of carrying another on one's back as an act of altruism—like soldiers carrying the bodies of their wounded comrades out of humanism on the battlefield (a frequent element in war memorials), as a benign act of helping the other (service) in a human way, like in the scene between Jacobus and Klawer.

The biblical parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is a similar story of humanism and compassion towards another human being, also featuring an act of carrying another. Jesus tells the story as an illustration for the idea “love thy neighbor as thyself.” While a priest and a Levite (a representative of one of the Jewish tribes) pass by a man who was beaten and wounded by robbers, a Samaritan (despite the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans) stops and helps him, bandaging his wounds and lifting him on his own donkey. Such a compassionate act of carrying recalls the scene referred to above when Jacobus carries his now comrade Klawer to help him or the opening scene of *Foe* when Friday probably takes pity on the wounded woman he finds on the coast and carries her to his master. Similarly, Susan Barton's compassion for Friday can be seen as a similar symbolic act of carrying the other. The act of carrying another on one's back might also refer to the game of riding piggyback, played by children or parents and children (something similar is described in the passage Jacobus recalls about the Hottentot children mounting him or in the game Hamlet recalls about how he enjoyed riding on Yorick's back as a child, quoted as a motto at the beginning of this chapter). The meanings of the act of carrying cover a wide range from acts of communion or compassion (responsibility) through aid, assistance, to service and play, on to acts of parasitism and outright violence. Like the act of carrying, an embrace might occur as an act of greeting, comforting caring for the other, an act of love and protection (a lover's or a mother's embrace), or its opposite: embracing as arresting, holding down another, taking hold and not letting go, as a threat or violation. In Coetzee's fiction, which abounds in ambiguous acts of carrying and embrace, the implications of each specific act are suggested by the mythical story they evoke.

In the scene discussed above, Jacobus needs Klawer not only as a servant but also as human company. They will end up very intimate both rhetorically (Jacobus calls Klawer “companion” and “old friend” [94-95]) and physically, in the intimate moment of a bodily embrace: “We slept together for the cold. [. . .] We were living Bushman lives. [. . .] [He] pressed himself against me in fits of shivering” (93-94). The contradictions of Jacobus's rhetoric

are telling. His phrases start slipping precisely when the question at stake is whether he is capable of existing alone or not. Heading towards the river with Klawer—and almost repeating Dawn’s metaphor: “I have cut my ties” (38)—Jacobus says: “I was casting off attachments. / We arrived at the ford of the Great River. The river was in spate after the first spring rains. [. . .] I determined to try the crossing. / We tied ourselves together as best we could” (93). Within three sentences, from his desire to cast off his attachments, Jacobus, ironically and contradicting himself, ends up being forced to tie himself up with Klawer. The scene recalls the major motifs of the Herakles myth: it is when the river is in spate that Herakles and Deianeira separate and their dyadic intersubjectivity splits into an intersubje triangle, with Nessus intervening as a third party. Only at the price of killing the third party can husband and wife reunite and leave the place as a dyad, this time the husband carrying the wife over the river, as an act of (rescue and) love. Much later, again, when husband and wife’s dyad is endangered by the intrusion of a third party, in the person of Iole, Herakles’s lover, Deianeira has to resort to the thread received from Nessus to bind back the tie and chain her husband back to herself. Here is the scene involving Jacobus and Klawer:

The ford was quarter of a mile wide and the water ran swiftly over the shallows, though nowhere deeper than our chests. We made slow progress, step by step. Then Klawer, who was in front feeling out the bottom with a stick, unaccountably missed a hippopotamus hole and lost his footing. The violence of the current at once snapped the knots that bound us and swept Klawer over the shallows into deep water. With horror I watched my faithful servant and companion drawn struggling downstream, shouting broken pleas for help which I was powerless to render him, him whose voice I had never in all my days heard raised, until he disappeared from sight around a bend and went to his death bearing the blanket roll and all the food. (*Dusklands* 94-95)

Jacobus is terrified when the rope tying them together is snapped. The reason for his terror might be the sight of Klawer’s struggle for his life but also the fear of remaining without a companion. At this point, the binding back of the rope—and of the bond—between the two of them is as vital for him as for Klawer. He feels that it is his duty to help him. His delirium might account for the fact that this episode is related by him in two different, contradictory versions (Attridge 19-21). In the passage quoted above Klawer dies, but in the following sentence—as if he had *not* died—Jacobus continues talking about the two of them. Having recourse to his

storytelling authority, he brings back what the tide took away: “But sodden and shivering we finally reached the south bank and lit a discreet fire to dry our clothes and blankets. [. . .] Klawer [. . .] squatted dismally before the flames clutching his nakedness and toasting his skin. [. . .] He could not keep warm that night but pressed himself against me in fits of shivering” (94). Following the symbolic crossing of the river, Jacobus and Klawer swap roles. It is not simply that master and servant change roles but also that their relationship changes its nature. Jacobus nurses Klawer, takes care of him, covers him with a blanket in the night, builds a windbreak, gathers firewood and makes a fire to keep the ailing Klawer warm in the cave, gathers edible roots for him not to leave him without food until he goes to bring help, he addresses him by his Christian name (Jan) and on their farewell both of them cry: “I trudged off” (95), says Jacobus after they separate, but as soon as he sets out on his journey, he is once again exulted by the sense of freedom in being alone:

I was alone. I had no Klawer to record. I exulted like a young man whose mother has just died. Here I was, free to initiate myself into the desert. I yodelled, I growled, I hissed, I roared, I screamed, I clucked, I whistled; I danced, I stamped, I groveled, I spun; I sat on the earth, I spat on the earth, I kicked it, I hugged it, I clawed it. Every possible copula was enacted that could link the world to an elephant hunter armed with a bow and crazed with freedom [. . .]. (95)

The last verb he uses is “claw,” a word repeating the lost companion Klawer’s name (the Afrikaans word “klawer” means “clover”) as if, on a phonetic level, he were craving for him. The “every [other] possible copula” seems to appear as the alternative for the human relationship for Jacobus. The unusual (probably even anachronistic) word choice (“copula”) adds a metaphysical perspective to the phrase. Jacobus tries every possible means of connection and contact with what is other than him: the ground, the earth, the air. His actions are desperate movements to connect, to feel and put himself in connection and to “link” (the word he himself uses) to the world.⁴¹ Jacobus is happy to be alone and merge with nature, but he seems to hesitate all through, as if the stake of his euphoria was to test if he needed the other or not. It is after experiencing this ecstatic state of freedom that he writes his ditty, defining himself against the Hottentots: “Hottentot, Hottentot, I am not a Hottentot” (*Dusklands* 95). His contamination with

⁴¹ The scene reminds of Robinson’s desperate attempts to connect and merge with the earth in Tournier’s *Friday or the Other Island*.

the “Hottentot sickness” (*Dusklands* 82) contains the threat of *not* being *unlike* the Hottentots, and his ditty is a magic incantation, a rune and a prayer to maintain his differing identity.

The question, then, is the nature and fate of Jacobus and Klawer’s relationship. Their initial, seemingly firm master-servant relationship (iconically represented when Klawer carries Jacobus on his back) turns inside out and into its opposite: an embrace between two companions. It is this ambiguity of the nature of intersubjective relationships that causes Jacobus’s madness, and this is what brings about the highly strung tension in his narrative. This fundamentally different kind of relationship is exemplified by the scene when the two of them get into a close bodily embrace facing each other (as opposed to the act of carrying on the back in which one cannot see the face of the other).

Another example of an act of carrying—this time not on the back but on the lap—appears in one of the photographs for Dawn’s Vietnam essay, representing Colonel Loman copulating with a Vietnamese woman, a graphic example of the Western exploitation of the natives:

Only one of my pictures is openly sexual. It shows Clifford Loman, 6’ 2”, 220 lb., onetime linebacker for the University of Houston, now a sergeant in the 1st Air Cavalry, copulating with a Vietnamese woman. The woman is tiny and slim, possibly even a child, though one is usually wrong about the ages of Vietnamese. Loman shows off his strength: arching backwards with his hands on his buttocks he lifts the woman on his erect penis. Perhaps he even walks with her, for her hands are thrown out as if she is trying to keep her balance. He smiles broadly; she turns a sleepy, foolish face on the unknown photographer. Behind them a blank television screen winks back the flash of the bulb. I have given the picture the provisional title “Father Makes Merry with Children” and assigned it a place in Section 7. (13)

Loman’s lifting and carrying of the Vietnamese woman on his lap (on his erect penis) functions as an inverted and grotesque repetition or mirror scene of the act of carrying another on one’s back and as a grotesque allegory of colonization. The scene is constructed in the conviction that it is filmed, so it is self-conscious play-acting, while it is also, at the same time, the unyielding reality. The Vietnamese woman’s embarrassed, confused, foolish gaze into the camera recalls Marilyn’s embarrassment in her nude photograph from Dawn’s narrative. The figurativity of Dawn’s cynical comment “Meat for your Master” (*Dusklands* 13) becomes literal in “master”

Loman's copulation scene.⁴² The scene recalls Nessus's rape of Deianeira in that the myth also portrays an act of power and violence. Miroslav Volf talks about the lack of the phase of letting go of the other in an embrace as a characteristic of totalitarian regimes (like the one portrayed and represented by Loman):

if the embrace is not to cancel itself, the arms must open again (Gurevitch 1990, 194). Were this to happen, embrace would signal the final "disappearance of the 'I' into the 'we'" that is characteristic of totalitarian regimes, embrace ended in a rape (as with those women who were liberated at the end of World War Two just to be raped by their liberators). The other must be let go so that her alterity—her genuine dynamic identity—may be preserved. (n.p.)

While the scene depicts an inverse act of carrying, it is no act of embracing. Holding his hands on his buttocks, Loman does not embrace the woman, and neither does the Vietnamese woman embrace him, her hands being thrown out to keep her balance while he walks with her. The image suggests that in a colonial context the personal (intersubjective) is always necessarily political, that because of the power-based colonial context no encounter can occur in a neutral space or vacuum.⁴³

⁴² See "meat" entry in *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*. The rich gendered connotations of the words "meat" and "master" are noticeable ("meat" for woman, whore, vagina, while "master" refers to man, male, the male privates) (869-870). Jane Poyner discusses the Loman episode asking is the woman figure "drugged, a prostitute, being raped?" adding that being caught between two screens she is dehumanized by the "consumer" of the photograph, at best, "more positively, (with her empty look) she figures a resisting text" (28).

⁴³ The rape scene(s) in *In the Heart of the Country* is another depiction of abuse of power but this time with inverted roles: the abuser is Hendrik, the black slave, and the abused Magda, the white woman. The scene is proof of the various levels on which violence is part of intersubjective relations in a colonial context, irrespective of who occupies which role. Shown through Magda's point of view, the scene is depicted as an act (not of carrying but) of holding the other's weight as freight on her: "his whole weight upon me," "I am faint with freight, there is no pleasure in this" [passage 205]; "his whole weight upon me" [206]. The description of the rape in passages [208-210] might be read as yet another grotesque act of holding the other on one's back, with Hendrik having sex with Magda from behind: "I turn my back on him and find my way gracelessly out of my dress and petticoat. This is my fate [. . .] I lie down on the bed with my back to him" [208]; "he presses down on me" [209]; "a body lies on top of a body pushing and pushing" [210].

The parasitism involved in the tale of the Old Man strangling Sinbad is prefigured in an early passage of Dawn's narrative. Dawn recounts the image of the starfish ingesting and suffocating him:

The ropes of muscle that spread from the spine curl in suckers around my neck, over my clavicles, under my armpits, across my chest. Tendrils creep down legs and arms. Clamped round my body this parasite starfish dies in rictus. Its tentacles grow brittle. I straighten my back and hear bands creak. Behind my temples too, behind my cheekbones, behind my lips the glacier creeps inward toward its epicenter behind my eyes. My eyeballs ache, my mouth constricts. If this inner face of my, this vizor of muscle, had features, they would be the monstrous troglodyte features of a man who bunches his sleeping eyes and mouth as a totally unacceptable dream forces itself into him. From head to foot I am the subject of a revolting body. (7)

The image of the starfish embracing and clasping Dawn calls forth the parasitic figure of the Old Man clenching Sinbad's neck and unwilling or unable to let go. Dawn's description of his fitful rigors contains the image of the monstrous troglodyte, also recalling one of Burton's possible interpretations of the figure of the Old Man, namely the figure of the orangutan. Etymologically the word *troglodyte* means cave-dweller in ancient Greek, but it also denotes a species of an ape, the Common Chimpanzee or *Pan troglodytes*. In the passage cited above, Dawn speaks of himself as a troglodytic figure, but in Jacobus's narrative Jacobus and Klawer actually become troglodytes, dwelling in a cave for a few days. Dawn's words "From head to foot I am the subject of a revolting body" (7) evoke the Sinbad tale as a condition of subjectivity, as representing the struggle between body and soul, suggesting that he is forced under the subjection of a body (his own) that revolts. The sentence, however, could just as well describe Jacobus. In order to better understand this link, I shall explore how the presence of the Herakles myth further expands the meanings of intersubjectivity and of the motif of carrying in *Dusklands* by looking at how Jacobus's body behaves on his encounter with the "wild Hottentots" (65).

Herakles

Jacobus's narrative is based on a contrast between the past, when there was a clear-cut boundary between slaves and masters, and the present, a world of chaos, where the old boundaries no longer stand, a world in which "our children play with servants' children" (57). This condition gives rise to a question asked by Jacobus, a question that haunts the entire novel: in such a chaotic world "who is to say who copies whom? In hard times how can differences be maintained?" (57) Jacobus's main concern is that he painfully tries to identify the difference between himself and the Hottentots with an intensity that borders on obsession. He constructs his identity in relation to the Hottentots, defining his relation to them as a determinative stage on his "journey," as he refers to it (61),⁴⁴ trying to "find a place for the Hottentots in my history" (97). Jacobus's tragedy might be said to reside in his realization that, however hard he tries to pinpoint any essential difference between himself and the Hottentots, he is at a loss. In *White Writing*, Coetzee remarks that the Hottentot is "*under-developed*" (original emphasis 22) but also scandalously not so different from the European (22): "Failing to correspond to the anthropological grid of differences drawn up by these early travelers brings about the potential self-annihilating realization that they share more equivalences than differences" (*White Writing* 23). Jacobus is foiled in his obsession, at one point lamenting that they even smell the same: "We pick up their way of life, following beasts around, as they pick up ours. They throw their sheepskins away and dress *like people*. If they still smell like Hottentots, so do some of us [. . .]" (57, emphasis added). Nevertheless, he continues his quest to find out what it is that differentiates "them" from "us."⁴⁵

Like the black man (behaving as a black man), he is anxious (a sort of "racial anxiety") to grasp an unequivocal mark of visibility that would guarantee his privileged status. It is in this context that his illness—his contamination with the "Hottentot sickness"—has to be seen: "What was wrong with me? I asked. Did I have the Hottentot sickness? He [Klawer] was sure I did not.

⁴⁴ The text brings associations of the *Odyssey* when at the end of his first journey to the land of the Namaqua, getting home, "reaching the markers of my own land," seeing a "warm domestic light" shining from the kitchen window (100), Jacobus comments: "No faithful hound came to greet me" (100).

⁴⁵ Once Jacobus speaks about boredom as a "sentiment not available to the Hottentot: it is a sign of higher humanity" (*Dusklands* 85). Idleness is one of the major qualities of Hegel's master.

The Hottentot sickness was for the Hottentots. I would be up and about in a few days” (82). Contamination—the fear that the colonizer’s body gets infected on the colonized land, in the proximity of the colonized—is a basic trope in colonial-imperial rhetoric, a basic anxiety of the colonizer, often thematized in Kipling’s short stories. The excessive proximity of the Hottentots—Jacobus sleeps with the Hottentot women (he knows about the “noxious smell of their women’s clefts” [82])—hides the inherent threat of miscegenation which is always related to the loss of one’s symbolic status (Seshadri-Crooks 43).

One possibility is to read his falling ill as a strategy of resistance on the part of his body to the other culture and his sickened body as the literal site on which this resistance (and failure) is inscribed. His sickened body becomes a representative example of what Bhabha refers to as “the colonialist foreign body” (111): “The ‘part’ (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the ‘whole’ (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its radical difference” (111). Grant Hamilton also suggests that in *Dusklands* “the Other cannot be located outside of the individual;” the self experiences himself, his own body, as other, as “uncontrollably oscillating between the ontological states of the known-subject and the incomprehensible-Other” (297). On the other hand, the opposite is also true, and it is possible to read his contamination with the Hottentot disease as his (organism’s) inability to resist the other. Through this illness, Jacobus is swallowed by the other, devoured and consumed by the Hottentot disease.

It is in this context that I consider the Herakles references mentioned earlier of further significance. The references to the story of Sinbad and the Old Man as well as to that of the dying (burning) Herakles appear in a passage where Dawn defines himself against (in opposition to) others, especially against his boss; he contrasts and defines his own self-perception against his manager’s utilitarian self-perception. He states that his manager “cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body parts together while inside it he burns and burns” (32). It is in the context of this passage that Jacobus’s contamination with the Hottentot sickness acquires ironical significance. Similarly to Sinbad’s story, only one reference is made to it in the first episode of the novel, and, once again, it is Dawn who alludes to it:

I was brought up on comic books (I was brought up on books of all kinds). Enthralled once to monsters bound into the boots, belts, masks, and costumes of their heroic individualism, I am now become Herakles roasting in his poisoned shirt. For the

American monster-hero there is relief: every sixteen pages the earthly paradise returns and its masked savior can revert to pale-faced citizen. Whereas Herakles, it would seem, burns forever. There are significances in these stories that *pour out of me*, but I am tired. They may be clues, I put them down. (32, emphasis added)

Dawn's metaphor of flowing/pouring might be read as a reference to the overall rhetoric of the whole novel, the overflowing of one text/narrative or character into another, but it also evokes the figure of Herakles. Although he is primarily known for his heroic deeds—he was the greatest of the Greek heroes, a paragon of masculinity—in this passage Dawn alludes to his downfall, evoking Herakles roasting in Nessus's poisoned shirt as in some unspecified and inscrutable manner comparable to his own suffering. The hint turns out to be prophetic, for Dawn becomes a Herakleian figure through the motif of madness and child-murder.⁴⁶ Like Herakles, Dawn stabs his son with a knife in a fit of madness. As Canepari-Labib suggests, the stabbing marks a symbolic creative gesture for Dawn, who with this act symbolically kills the two “parasites” battenning on him (his wife and his son)—“he [his son] is nothing but a burden to me” (38)—and thus creating a new chance for a new life for himself (Canepari-Labib 166).

The figure of Jacobus tortured by the burning pain of his putrefying fistula evokes the image of Herakles suffering from the unbearable pain of his burning flesh. Unbearable pain is one of the common motifs that connect the stories of Sinbad and Herakles with another archetypal story of suffering that Dawn refers to—that of the Fisher King or Wounded king in the Celtic Arthurian legend: “I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding” (*Dusklands* 32).⁴⁷ Jacobus's festering wound, however, recalls yet another character of

⁴⁶ As a revenge for her husband's, Zeus', infidelity, Hera drove Herakles into a fit of madness during which he killed six of his sons throwing their bodies into the fire. In other versions of the myth, he is said to have killed his wife Megara, mother of his sons, as well (Graves, “Herakles' Madness” II., 142). The true revenge of Hera comes about when she clears Herakles' mind after his madness to make him see what he did. Upon realizing his deed, he flees to the Oracle of Delphi. The Oracle was guided by Hera and Herakles was directed to serve King Eurystheus for twelve years and perform any task which he required, resulting in the Twelve Labors of Herakles.

⁴⁷ The Fisher king or Wounded king or Maimed king (Annis n.p.) is the last in the long line charged with keeping the Holy Grail and who is, like Jacobus, wounded in the legs or groin and incapable of moving on his own. His kingdom suffers as he does, finally his land being reduced to a barren wasteland. All he is able to do is fish in the river near his castle and wait for someone to heal him (as Jacobus expects Klawer to heal him). The Fisher King first

the Herakles myth. Before dying on the funeral pyre built by himself, Herakles offers his bow and poisoned arrows to Philoctetes, him being the only one daring to light the pyre for him. Philoctetes's arrows received from Herakles feature in another mythical tale. In different versions of the tale, Philoctetes was bitten by a snake, which gave him a festering wound on his leg. Because of the terrible smell of his wound, the Greeks (led by Odysseus) decided to expel him from the ship on its way to Troy and stranded him on the island of Lemnos. However, upon learning that the Greeks can win the war in Troy only on condition that they have Herakles's arrows with them, they went back to recover them from Philoctetes (Graves 293, 427-8, 477). The figure of Philoctetes is also related to Jacobus's figure who is also expelled on the other side of the river (like menstruating women) because of his festering wound on the leg. Like Philoctetes, who needs an operation before being able to go and fight in Troy, Jacobus needs to lance the carbuncle to be able to walk. Grotesquely and sacrilegiously—in a Beckettian profanation—Jacobus caresses his fistula as his dolorous wound; his putrefying anus is compared with Christ's holy wounds.

Jacobus's illness starts when he leaves the Namaquas' village. As if literally performing Dawn's words ("these stories pour out of me"), Jacobus's body starts leaking, deteriorating. Running a high fever, he starts hallucinating. Helpless, he fouls his bed. He no longer understands what is going on around him: "There was talk going on [. . .] but everything had three meanings" (75). Here starts the story of Jacobus's falling apart. First, he becomes ill and loses all his strength, his body refusing to do its tasks, then he loses all his property, first his wagon and his oxen, then his men as well. Finally, he loses his dignity and his sense of reality. After his infection, Jacobus goes through a feverish delirium. He becomes a passive object that needs to be lifted, carried, laid down, and taken up again. Seeing himself from the outside, he

appears in Chretien de Troyes' *Percival* (12th century), and later in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. The Fisher King's thigh injury was interpreted as a genital wound and thus it was subject to erotic interpretations referring to his emasculation and castration ("Fisher King"). Roberts suggested that the treatment for this wound is repeated contact with male servants (54), a reading that recalls the image of Jacobus's close embrace with Klawer in *Dusklands*. Matthew Annis suggests that in some modern texts, the Fisher King is embodied in a Vietnam War veteran (Annis n.p.), which holds relevance to Coetzee's character, Dawn. Another king with a wounded leg is of course Oedipus, also reigning over a cursed land. The act of carrying a burden is central in Christ's passion as well, who, carrying the cross, falls and cannot walk any longer. Like Christ, Jacobus is unable to walk due to his festering wound.

experiences his body as a dead corpse. Due to his continuous horizontality and the lack of any movement, a fistula erupts on his buttocks, the envelope of his self splits up and falls apart:

An eruption was forming on my left buttock an inch or so from my anus. Could this be a cancer? Did cancers grow in the buttocks? Or was it simply a gigantic pimple, an aftereffect of the unsavory yellow soup that dribbled out of me. [. . .] Hourly I fingered the bubble in my flesh. I did not mind dying but I did not wish to die of a putrefying backside. [. . .] I imagined the swelling in my buttock as a bulb shooting pustular roots into my fertile flesh. It had grown sensitive to pressure, but to gentle finger-stroking it still yielded a pleasant itch. Thus I was not quite alone. (82-83)

Jacobus's pained body becomes an autonomous structure, acting independently of his mind (Hamilton 296). He becomes what Dawn claimed about himself: "subject to a revolting body" (7). Jacobus understands his putrefying fistula as a foreign body within his body—the word "bulb" suggests a parasitic relationship—that moved into him on his arrival to the Namaquas: "They had violated my privacy, all my privacies, from the privacy of my property to the privacy of my body. They had introduced poison into me" (97). Like in the Herakles myth, in Jacobus's mind the idea of contamination by poison comes up as possibilities of his illness. Like Herakles, who is killed by the foreign matter within his body—the Hydra's poisonous blood (through Nessus's blood that ends up in his shirt)—Jacobus is contaminated with their disease. The accompanying intermingling of the two foreign matters can be read as a material manifestation of what Sara Suleri calls the "peculiar intimacy" between colonizer and colonized (Suleri 94). In this context, Jacobus's ditty reads as a desperate cry or a prayer to maintain his identity, to be able to differ, to stay white, not to surrender: "Hottentot, Hottentot, I am not a Hottentot" (95). The poison and the fistula start eating up his flesh. His identity is leaking like the fester running through his body.

Like Herakles and Philoctetes who, in some versions of the myth, both die because of being wounded by the poison from their own arrows (directly or indirectly) (Graves 483), the sick Jacobus is not only excluded and eliminated from the Hottentot community like menstruating women, across the stream, but he also encounters the stranger in himself when he is confronted with what he abhors in his own abject body: pus and excrement. Due to the continuous, uncontrollable burstings of his bowels, Jacobus experiences his body as burden, as a container of excrement: "My gut would dazzle if I pierced myself" (78), he observes. In this

context, Jacobus's caressing metaphors of his putrefying fistula function as attempts to recover his body as his, to recapture his sick body from the enemy. He caressingly hugs his "baby fistula" to himself calling it "my offspring" (89), "my flaming jewel" (91), "my weeping rose" (91) and "my tender anus" (91). Jacobus's metaphors suggest attempts of (self-)embracing, endeavors to try to contain and possess and embrace his own stranger body, to transform the unhomeliness of his body into home(liness).

"Strange backward embrace:" Colonial Intersubjectivity in Foe

"Speaking wearies him, it is visible. However,
he would not speak (to me) were he not weary."⁴⁸

Maurice Blanchot

"(...) the desire for answering speech is like the desire
for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being."⁴⁹

J. M. Coetzee

"Man is [. . .] a movement of love, a gift of self."⁵⁰

Franz Fanon

Both the Sinbad tale and the motif of carrying another on one's back recur in *Foe*. As in *Dusklands*, in this novel again the act of carrying is intertwined with the act of embracing. In *Foe*, however, it is a radically different aspect of Coetzeean intersubjectivity that is explored through this multivalent metaphor. In what follows, I shall focus on the Levinasian/Blanchotian aspect of Susan's narrative, arguing that the driving force of Susan's narrative is a desire for the other. Her narrative has an aspect of "saying to the Other" ("saying as exposure to the Other" [Levinas, *Otherwise* 50]) in Levinas's sense, the aim of which is to address the other (to say

⁴⁸ *The Infinite Conversation* (xvii).

⁴⁹ *Foe* (80).

⁵⁰ *Black Skin* (24).

“you”) and to get a response from the other.⁵¹ Her eagerness for stories and secrets makes her tell her story again and again, conferring on her story(telling) the status of a twice-(thrice-)told tale. As Susan Gallagher notes, Susan starts telling her story to Cruso “without prompting after her arrival on the island” (173)—““Let me tell you my story”” (*Foe* 10)—then, for a second time, she tells it to the captain who rescues them (“and told him my story, as I have told it to you” [40]) and then again, for a third time, she tells it to Foe in her letters to him (Gallagher 173). It is in this context that I will examine the recurrent tropes of carrying and embracing in the novel, starting with the opening scene of the novel, the first encounter between Susan and Friday, focusing on what Levinas calls the “shock of the encounter” with the Other (*Totality* 42).

Carrying another on one’s back appears as the actual opening scene of the novel—arriving exhausted to the island, the protagonist-narrator Susan Barton is carried by Friday on his back to the lord of the island, Cruso. Throughout the narrative, the act gradually becomes a metaphor invoked by Susan Barton as referring to and representing her relationship with Friday (and indirectly, with Foe). The significance of the Sinbad tale has been marked in the relationship between Susan and Foe and Susan and Friday (which is made explicit in the novel) (Dovey 386; Marais, *Secretary* 82), but not in the opening scene of the novel, although its relevance is perhaps even more marked here. When the story is recalled by Susan to Foe, it has a somewhat didactic edge, reflecting on the reversibility of the master-slave roles in the “colonial situations”—Cruso’s island and Foe’s house. It is after one of their writing lessons that the story comes into Susan’s mind. After drawing the walking eyes, Friday forbids Susan to show the drawing to Foe, wetting his fingers with spittle and rubbing the slate clean. Susan cries out, complaining to Foe:

‘Mr Foe, I must have my freedom!’ I cried. ‘It is becoming more than I can bear! It is worse than the island! He is like the old man of the river!’ [. . .]

⁵¹ In *In the Heart of the Country*, the protagonist Magda’s effort throughout is to obtain a vocative quality to her speech. The driving force of her narrative (like that of Susan Barton) is (likewise) this intersubjective aspect of language: “Listen to me when I speak to you! (72), she cries out to Hendrik. Her tragedy is that finally all her Levinasian “ambitions” must fail. The Levinasian subject comes into being by means of the encounter with the other, as the effect of the other’s call (Critchley 15-16 in Bényei, Z. Kovács 484). Magda’s language philosophy resonates with Levinas’s idea of a primordial language, a language without words or any content (Robbins 8) the objective of which, like that of a baby’s aaa, is pure vocativus and a pure expression of need (not yet articulated into symbolic language). It is a pure call to the other, saying “you” or “come to me” or “here I am.”

‘It is a story, nothing but a story,’ I replied. “There was once a fellow who took pity on an old man waiting at the riverside, and offered to carry him across. Having borne him safely through the flood, he knelt to set him down on the other side. But the old man would not leave his shoulders: no, he tightened his knees about his deliverer’s neck and beat him on his flanks and, to be short, turned him into a beast of burden. He took the very food from his mouth, and would have ridden him to his death had he not saved himself by a ruse.

[. . .] ‘So be it: I am Sinbad of Persia and Friday is the tyrant riding on my shoulders. I walk with him, I eat with him, he watches me while I sleep. If I cannot be free of him, I will stifle!’ (147-8)

The tyrant metaphor (and the word “tyrant”) used by Susan to describe Friday becomes not only an echo of Dawn’s “tyrant body” metaphor in *Dusklands*, but also a bridge/gate between the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of the Sinbad tale in Coetzee’s fiction and a bridge/gate between the worlds of the two novels.⁵² Sinbad’s story, at least as it is told by Susan, might be read as referring to her first encounter with Friday on the shore, when he takes her on his back and carries her to Cruso, but with the roles reversed—as in Kipling’s fantasy of the white man’s burden. Although his motives remain obscure, Friday could have felt pity for the exhausted woman on the “riverside,” offering to carry her. The reversibility of the two roles (that of Sinbad the carrier and “sufferer” and that of the old man, the rider and “aggressor”) is recognized by Foe: “Sweet Susan, do not fly into a passion. Though you say you are the ass and Friday the rider, you may be sure that if Friday had his tongue back he would claim the contrary” (148). Foe’s reference to the ass recalls the story of the good Samaritan, whose figure Susan recalls, despite her pleas and despite her position that is analogous to that of the old man in the Sinbad tale, when she (symbolically) takes up (the wounded) Friday with the unabashed aim to reclaim him from Cruso. The scene evoked here by Foe is the opening scene of the novel: after her arrival on the island, Susan encounters Friday who, as a beast of burden, after seeing she is injured, carries her.

Though the scene itself—the black man carrying the white woman on his back—is strongly reminiscent of the colonial icon of the servant (Klawer) carrying the master (Jacobus) invoked in *Dusklands*, this initial act is perceived by Susan as a “strange backward embrace” (6).

⁵² I am grateful to Marianna Gula for this observation.

The difference between the ways the two novels treat this central image might be seen as the difference of woman: the motif of carrying another on one's back intertwined with the act of embracing is complicated and enriched in *Foe* by the presence of the woman. Like the initial embrace on the shore between Susan and Friday, her embraces with Cruso and Foe can also be seen as unusual, grotesque backward embraces, and in this sense they tell stories about the failure of love Coetzee talked about in his Jerusalem address (Coetzee, *Doubling* 97). In *Foe*, as well as in *Dusklands*, love disturbs and disrupts the master-slave relationship. Susan's presence and role in the narrative seems to affirm Levinas's idea: "I would say quite plainly: what is truly human is—and don't be afraid of this word—love" (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 143). Deeming Cruso's planting of stones a completely useless escapist work, she laments that Cruso had better "plant[ed] his seed in the only womb there was" (83). However, despite all, all of the intersubjective relationships *will* finally be articulated as love relations of some kind. Indeed, the question that arises with intriguing acuteness in *Foe* is the following: is it possible to read the colonial encounter as a love story?⁵³ Is love possible (can we talk of love) in subjection? Does a love relation necessarily mean a contract between two equal, sovereign parties (a symmetrical relation) or is a master-servant love relation possible/viable/conceivable?

Exhausted after an extraordinary (manly) physical performance, Susan Barton arrives on the island with an aching body.

At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard. With slow strokes, my long hair floating about me, like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil, I swam towards the strange island, for a while swimming as I had rowed, against the current, then all at once free of its grip, carried by the waves into the bay and on to the beach. (5)

⁵³ Sara Suleri discusses the question of "romance" as a necessary aspect of colonial narratives because, she asserts, desire is always there in the colonial relationship (*The Rhetoric* 10-12, 181-2). In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock provides a fine discussion of the problem, suggesting an intriguing interpretation of the Hannah Cullwick-Arthur Munby love affair including "master-slave fetish rituals on the borders of social limits" (see McClintock 130-151). Discussing the "(infantile) desire to shape another being's life according to the dictates of one's own desires" (146), McClintock raises the question what kind of agency is possible in situations of extreme inequality (140), a question Susan Barton raises repeatedly in reference to her relationships with Cruso, Friday and Foe, all of these relations manifesting as hierarchical ones for one reason or another.

The opening sentences implicitly suggest the importance of sex (or gender) in our relationship to the narrative. With their masculine motifs of physical exertion and bodily suffering, the brief opening sentences recall the world of a traditional adventure story.⁵⁴ The dynamics of the narrated action are supplied by an alternation of culturally gendered activity and passivity, physical exertion and passive submission. The first act of the still unsexed narrator is that of surrendering to the sea (slipping overboard), which, however, is followed by strong, active strokes. What first disturbs the logic of the adventure narrative is the narrator's long hair, which—given the evoked historical period—could still be a man's hair, but here the subversion starts on a textual level, too: the hair floating about the narrator (vaguely evoking Ophelia as a literary reminiscence) becomes the source of a series of similes, which results in a slackening of the pace, the halting of the narrative for the sake of decorative, “feminine” textual surplus. The narrative resumes with yet another upsurge of activity, swimming against the current, only to end with submission to the waves. The image of “my long hair floating” intimates what becomes clear by the second paragraph with the appearance of the petticoat: a woman is speaking. “There I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun, my petticoat (which was all I had escaped with) baking dry upon me, tired, grateful, like all the saved” (5).

The very first contact between Susan and Friday—her first impression and first sight of him, her first words and gestures toward him—is devoid of any colonial undercurrents. The account and the imagery of Susan's first encounter with Friday suggest the encounter of two suns. Susan's head is “filled with the orange blaze of the sun” (5) while she perceives Friday with a “dazzling halo about him” (5). Dumbfounded by the image of Friday as a haloed god, Susan is not only blinded by the glare of the dazzling halo but she also finds it difficult to speak to him, her “thick dry tongue” blocking her speech for a moment. What she tells him is equivocal: “‘Castaway,’ I said with my thick dry tongue. ‘I am cast away. I am all alone.’ And I held out my sore hands’ (5). The verb form of the noun “castaway” is suggestive in its ambiguity and multiple meanings. Like in the story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea (when they first meet), it is as if Susan suggested to Friday that she is cast away (in the sense of thrown away), so

⁵⁴ In its motifs, the opening passage of the novel is also reminiscent of Sinbad's landing on an unknown island: “[. . .] the winds and waves [. . .] cast me up on the shore of the island, at the last gasp for toil and distress and half dead with hunger and thirst. So I landed more like a corpse than a live man and throwing myself down on the beach, lay there awhile, till I began to revive and recover spirits [. . .].” (Burton, Vol. 6. 133)

she needs to be taken up.”⁵⁵ The word and the scene at the same time also recall the biblical story of Jonah, which gains relevance in Susan’s character. Jonah, like Susan for all the male characters of the story (Cruso, Foe, Friday, the mutineers), is the troublemaker who is cast away, literally thrown overboard, out into the sea. Susan herself realizes the connection (antithesis) between being cast away (abandoned) by the other and/or being embraced by the other: “Chance had cast me on his island, chance had thrown me in his arms. [. . .] We yield to a stranger’s embrace or give ourselves to the waves” (30). Susan’s first use of the word “castaway,” however, can be read not only as an introduction of herself (referring to her person) but it can also be read as a vocative, an invocation to the other, referring to Friday: the one she speaks to is a castaway. Very much like the encounter of the two castaways Sinbad and the Old Man on the supposedly uninhabited island, their encounter might as well be seen as an “originary” encounter, this time, however, between man and woman. Her words “I am all alone” (5) speak to the other, formulating her desire for a “togetherness,” a communion with the other.

Susan’s first encounter with Friday might also be looked at as an encounter between “two weary men” in Blanchot’s understanding (*The Infinite* xvi-xvii). In the first instant of their encounter both of them are weary—silent, distant, indifferent (Blanchot xvi-xvii)—and “their weariness does not bring them together” (xiii). However, “from the instant that a word, a phrase slips between them, something changed” (Blanchot xiv). Susan’s vocative—“Castaway. . . . I am cast away. I am all alone” (5)—transforms their weariness into an intersubjectivity that—weren’t it for the (talking) woman addressing her adversary (Friday)—hides the threat of murder that Susan senses in her fantasy: Friday “gave no reply” (6) but “regarded me as he would a seal or a porpoise thrown up by the waves, that would shortly expire and might then be cut up for food” (6). For Blanchot, the human relationship is “most terrible” because “it is tempered by no intermediary, it is a naked relationship” (59). Facing the other, Blanchot says, man has two choices: s/he either speaks or kills (61): “Cain killing Abel is the self that, coming up against the transcendence of *autrui* [. . .] attempts to confront it by resorting to the transcendence of murder” (61). Barton’s calling out to Friday “before all else, (...) is this address, this invocation” (Blanchot 55) that saves their encounter from transforming into a murder. After her appeal, Susan’s solitude is replaced by intersubjectivity, but an asymmetrical one in which the other is a

⁵⁵ “Take me on thy shoulders and carry me to the other side of the well-channel,” the Old Man implores Sinbad (Burton, Vol. 6, 1.).

silent body: like the Old Man in Sinbad's tale, Friday does not speak. Instead of answering ("he gave no reply" [6]), Friday touches her: "he reached out and with the back of his hand touched my arm" (6). This, his first response to Susan's appeal is thoroughly misunderstood by her—she morbidly believes that the man is a cannibal, testing her flesh for subsequent consumption, a reading of Friday that conveys the colonial dimension of the scene: in the fantasy of the European mind the native is a cannibal. Then Friday signals to her, wanting her to follow him, but she is immediately wounded in the first physical contact with the island, a thorn piercing her heel. Seeing this, Friday "offered me his back, indicating he would carry me" (6). In the "strange backward embrace" that follows, he is in fact offering to function as her body, the physical-animal part of her self, with Susan "part-way riding on his back" (6). As in the master-servant scenario, the work of the servant is to deal with the physical world instead of the master: "He took no heed where he set his feet, I noted, but crushed under his soles whole clusters of the thorns that had pierced my skin" (6-7). In Judith Butler's words, Friday obeys Susan's unsaid appeal: "you be my body for me" (35).⁵⁶

"Brought by death," as death's companion or death's lover—the Portuguese captain's with whose dead body she is rowing at sea—Barton sets foot on the island as a mourning woman, mourning not only her lost lover, but her abducted daughter as well. Injured by a thorn in her heel right after her arrival on the island, Susan cannot walk and needs Friday's help. Susan's foot injury might be seen as carrying echoes of two mythical intersubjective scenarios. Her wound recalls the wound of Oedipus (the "swollen-legged"), while the heel injury also suggests Achilles' vulnerable body part. Both mythical allusions are relevant in Susan Barton's narrative with regard to the intersubjective and ethical aspects of the novel. She starts her life on the strange island as a wounded female Achilles. For some time, the wounded heel (the thorn, as

⁵⁶ In her excellent Hegel chapter in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler explains how the master disavows his body and replaces it with the slave, but in such a way that the servant has to disavow the disavowal itself: "you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body" (35). So the master has to disavow even the contract made with the slave, the relationship of dependence. The task of the slave is therefore to deny his dependence, the fact that he is the master's body, part, prosthesis (Bényei, *Traumatikus* 72). Over time, the slave starts to regard his pretended autonomy as his essence. This means that the more autonomous he is, the more he is a slave, but he does not even know about his slavehood given the double disavowal (Bényei 72). The ultimate form of slavehood, therefore, is when the slave does not consider himself a slave, but considers his position freely chosen (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 258).

a sign of her incompatibility with the island) takes away something from her: her independence, her freedom of motion; however, it also ensures the presence and ministrations of Friday in return. It is because of being wounded in her weakest body part that she ends up in Friday's strange backward embrace:

[. . .] the heel quickly swelled till I could not so much as hobble for the pain. The Negro offered me his back, indicating he would carry me. I hesitated to accept, for he was a slight fellow, shorter than I. But there was no help for it. So part-way skipping on one leg, part-way riding on his back, with my petticoat gathered up and my chin brushing his springy hair, I ascended the hillside, my fear of him abating in this strange backward embrace. (6)

Though the scene is strongly reminiscent of the episode of carrying involving Jacobus and Klawer in *Dusklands*, the racial set-up of the evoked Hegelian scene is complicated by various elements. Partly, the scene does not (yet) read as an act of carriage by the slave, as the relationship between Susan and Friday will become a master-slave relationship only *after* they meet Cruso, because he behaves as Friday's master and as the master of the island. At this point, Susan does not know about Cruso yet and it is not she who orders Friday to carry her. Her carriage might be (said to be) construed as a master-slave relation in Friday's head, if one presumes that he offered his help as a slave (as the all-time slave of the island, as this is what he learns from Cruso). The other major difference from the Jacobus-Klawer (master-servant) carrying-on-the-back is that one of the participants is a woman: the scene is read and understood by Susan as an embrace; she is the storyteller, focalizer and interpreter of the act of carrying as an embrace.⁵⁷

Friday's gesture of offering Susan his back to carry her reads as a similar Levinasian gesture of readiness, being at the other's service, as Susan's gesture of disclosing her wounded hands to Fridays when they first meet. Both of them display a submissive gesture to the other, denoting readiness: I am here, at your service, echoing Moses' words spoken to God (from Exodus 3): "here I am." This aspect of offering oneself in the service of another is the primal aspect of St. Christopher's legend, a Christian story of carrying another on one's back which highlights the Levinasian aspect of the act of carrying. St. Christopher, the patron saint of

⁵⁷ The word "embrace" is of Middle English origin (as a verb meaning "clasp, fasten tightly") coming from the Old French *bracier* 'to embrace,' from *brace* "two arms," originating from the Latin *braccia*, meaning "arm."

travelers, was known for his height and great strength and he took it into his mind to find and serve the greatest king there was. When he found out that the greatest king whom he served so far feared the devil, he decided to serve the devil henceforth. But then he saw that the devil feared the cross, and, learning that Christ is an even greater lord than his master, he decided to find him. A hermit suggested that he could serve Christ by assisting people to cross a dangerous river, where many have perished. Once a little child asked to be taken across the river. Christopher took the child on his shoulders, but during the crossing the river became swollen and the child seemed as heavy as lead and after St. Christopher escaped with great pain he said to the child: “‘Child, thou hast put me in great peril; thou weighest almost as I had all the world upon me, I might bear no greater burden.’ And the child answered: ‘Christopher, marvel thee nothing, for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne him that created and made all the world, upon thy shoulders. I am Jesu Christ the king, to whom thou servest in this work’” (“The Golden Legend, The Life of Saint Christopher”). In Greek the word *Christophoros* translates as “Christ-bearer.”⁵⁸ The motifs of carrying an unendurable burden on your back and that of crossing a river make it a precise, almost mirroring repetition of the Sinbad tale.

⁵⁸ Michel Tournier’s 1970 novel, *The Erl-King* (*Le Roi des Aulnes*, English trans. Barbara Bray, 1972), is an astonishing, complex, and unsettling rewriting of Saint Christopher’s legend. Alluding to the leitmotif of Goethe’s ballad, “Der Erlkönig,” the novel plays with the child-robber motif but is also built around the Christ/child-bearer Saint Christopher legend. The protagonist Abel Tiffauges (whose name partly alludes to the Biblical victim of the brother-murder and partly to the child-torturer, child-murderer Bluebeard [Barta 447]), who runs a garage in the suburbs of Paris, starts writing his diary-notes (“Sinister Writings of Abel Tiffauges”) with the aim of gathering and recording all the events, incidents, and signs that led to his recognition of his monster-existence (which he presumes to be his vocation). After an accident in his garage he has to carry a little, wounded boy to the hospital, and he discovers that he finds an almost perverse pleasure (ecstasy) in carrying, “phoria.” He is led to realize that in carrying the child he experienced euphoria literally: he is happy to carry, he is happy carrying. Tiffauges derives the meaning of the word from its etymology; euphoria, he says, is when one carries oneself happily, or more simply, when one carries happily (Tournier 1983, 98). Tournier was a philosopher himself, influenced by Bachelard and Sartre, who studied philosophy at the University of Tübingen, where Hegel studied before, and who claimed that he ended up as a novelist because he failed the final examination in philosophy (wrote his thesis on Plato) (Barta 441). He clearly brings into play Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in his portrayal of Tiffauges’ fascination with “slavery” which finally leads to his death as a “phoric hero.” He meets his mythical fate in the collapsing ruins of Nazi Germany, the closing episode of the novel showing him saving and carrying a Jewish boy, Efraim, finally both of them sinking in the swamps. Throughout, Tiffauges is a controversial figure—and this provides the painful-compelling intensity of the novel—like Goethe’s Erlkönig, a child-saving, benign giant and a child-predator

St. Christopher's legend emphasizes the intersubjective-ethical aspect of the act of carrying. The different variations of the Sinbad tale in *Foe* seem always to be infiltrated with the legend of St. Christopher and the idea of readiness, being at the other's service inherent in it, on both female and male sides of the participants. In Friday's backward embrace, Susan herself embraces Friday, clinging to him in order not to fall. It is as if the island (the thorn) found Susan's weak spot—her Achilles' heel—in her craving for another human being and this is what sends her literally into the arms of Friday. Susan's first embrace on the island with Friday is emphatically not necessarily a colonial embrace but the manifestation of a different kind of craving for another human being. The act of embracing has an emphatic mythological-philosophical antecedent in Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*:

After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one, they began to die from hunger and self-neglect, because they did not like to do anything apart; [. . .] Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the tally-half of a man, and he is always looking for his other half. (524)

Foe experimentally introduces a woman's presence into a traditionally womanless fictional world. By interpreting the act of carrying as an embrace, Susan decolonizes the hierarchical act of carrying on the back and sets up a new footing for an intersubjective relationship. A repetition of the initial embrace with Friday would be the love-making scene between Susan and Foe—at least figuratively, being called “a *bracing* ride” and “a *hard* ride”

monster-“bogy man” at the same time, as Tournier himself put it: “The one who serves and carries a child also carries it away” (Tournier qtd in Barta 449, my translation). Thus, Tiffauges becomes the child-bearer-saver Christopher's dark shadow, the king of the alders—the erl-king. His double identity is reflected through the doubling of his (lethal) embracing gesture: an embrace *and* an act of murder at the same time, like the grotesque act of [erl-king-like] fatherly “love turned inside out” Dostoevsky recalls repeatedly in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* or the disavowing embrace Susan Barton offers to her “daughter” in the woods in *Foe*. Similarly, *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda's murdering of her father amounts to an act of love turned inside out: “Wake up and embrace me! Show me your heart just once [. . .]. Do you not see that it is only despair, love and despair, that makes me talk this way?” (78) “Daddy, forgive me, I didn't mean it, I loved you, that was why I did it” (87). Goethe's “Der Erlkönig” poem turns up in Coetzee's latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), when at one point, the child David starts singing the opening stanza of the poem in/as a “potential *liebestod* of love between father and son” (Craven n.p.).

(*Foe* 139-40), with Susan once again “riding” a man but with the active-passive roles shifted, for, in Friday’s strange backward embrace, Susan is partly deprived of her powers (half immobilized, depending on the other’s help), while here she is in the active (riding) role and Foe beneath her, sustaining, suffering the ride.⁵⁹ Foe, in fact, repeats the role of Friday, bearing the burden of Susan, while Susan, riding Foe, literally becomes “the white man’s burden,” a role or position that she already held in relation to Cruso (symbolically she is a burden for all the three men, for various reasons).

Female Oedipus

In the initial carriage-scene with Friday, Susan, though partly crippled, is “half limping” (5) on her sound leg as if insisting on supporting herself at least on one leg. The scene visually evokes the image of a horse and its rider, an image that reappears in connection with Susan’s disobedient figure refusing to surrender to Cruso’s rule, finding it difficult to “keep a tighter rein on my tongue” (*Foe* 25). Susan’s (feminine) chatter, her often transgressive verbosity—she talks too much and asks too much—here appears as a positive, creative trait. With her constant urge to talk, her unwillingness to stop talking, she resembles Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights* (and Magda from *In the Heart of the Country*), who triumphs over King Shahryar thanks to her rich seam of gripping stories. The story of the island is finally told by Susan in its entirety (and not by Foe). With her ambition to raise the questions that had not been raised on Cruso’s island up to her arrival, she also plays the role of Oedipus. While her Achilles injury sends her into the embrace of Friday, or, figuratively into an intersubjective relationship, her swollen foot also defines her errand on the island: she is also swollen-legged Oedipus whose task is to seek out the silences of the island and try to uncover its fearful secrets, to reread Cruso’s and Friday’s secretive story. Her Oedipal quest for the truth, her epistemological desire for the truth of Friday might be said to carry the status of Levinasian *dire*, as it is/means responsibility for the Other and

⁵⁹ Anne McClintock discusses how the figure of the militant, working or writing woman was considered as degenerate in the Victorian age and how women’s “deviant sexuality” threatened the libidinal economy of the imperial state (55-56). The reversal of gender roles is also apparent in Susan’s calling Foe her “old whore,” her “mistress” and “wife” (*Foe* 152) (first Foe calls himself Susan’s whore “entertaining other people’s stories” [151]).

exposedness or vulnerability towards the other (*Otherwise than Being* 48-51). Susan talks, thinks, deciphers, brings meaning, detects, interprets. With her unquenchable desire to learn the monstrous secret of the island, to unravel the thread of Cruso and Friday's story, she wants to uncover the secret of the monstrous Sphinx—the story of the loss of Friday's tongue. One could read the initial carrying-on-the-back scene between Susan and Friday as representing the riddle of the Sphinx about the three-legged creature, Susan “skipping on one leg” on Friday's back—the two of them moving as one body with three legs.⁶⁰

If love and desire appear as Susan's “content” in this novel, we can say that, unlike Jacobus and Cruso, who suffer to set up the old boundaries between master and servant, striving to have these two roles fundamentally apart *without* any blending or merging, Susan exerts herself to set up a new paradigm, an intersubjective relationship which is fundamentally different from the master/slave relationship. In Susan's figure the act of embracing (as an act of desire for the other) and the Levinasian act of appealing to or addressing the other are inextricably intertwined. The kinship between the two is realized and formulated by Susan herself: “(...) the desire for answering speech is like the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being” (*Foe* 80). Or, as she tells Friday one page earlier: “Oh, Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered! It is like our desire, when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us. Otherwise would we not be content to bestow our kisses on statues [...] carved in postures of desire?” (79).⁶¹

⁶⁰ The Sphinx's riddle goes: Which creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening? Oedipus' answer to the riddle is: Man, who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then walks with a cane in old age.

⁶¹ Embracing is a primal motif in Michel Tournier's 1967 novel *Friday or the Other Island* (*Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*). Coetzee's *Foe* is so much a rewriting of Defoe's novel as it is a rewriting of Tournier's novel. The English title of the novel conjures up the Levinasian idea of the other as a strange, ever unknowable island. The joint scope and effort of both Coetzee's and Tournier's novels is to radically question and rethink (Defoe's) Friday's figure, “the possibility of another Friday,” a “wonderful” one (Tournier 221). Like in Coetzee's novel, in *Vendredi* embracing appears as a primal figure and trope for Robinson's aspiration for the Other, in his loneliness. Tournier's Robinson, as well as Coetzee's Barton, suffers of loneliness and both are fatigued by their monologues („nincs nagyobb átok a magánynál” (Tournier 306); „[hangom] kezdett befáradni a monológba” (Tournier 62). Indeed, to some extent, Barton's passionate figure might be seen as the embodiment of what Speranza, the island, represents and reminds Robinson of; he names it Speranza (hope) because the name reminds him of a passionate Italian woman. Both Barton and Tournier's Robinson suffer of the “constraint virginity” (Tournier 57) they are forced to

One could say that Coetzee's novel *is about* the initial quotation marks “embracing” Susan's narrative. Susan apostrophizes, addresses the other, she talks to another and she calls on the other for an answer. Almost the entire text of Coetzee's novel appears in quotation marks, except for the few-page long closing section. Susan tells her story to the professional writer Foe, and the largest part of the text consists of the collection of letters she writes to Foe out of which he is supposed to construct the story of the islanders' life. Placing the text into quotation marks is related to the ethical aspect of storytelling. Like Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Susan talks and tells her story in order to be able to talk to the other. Her storytelling, a telling/speaking to (and for) the other, is generated by her desire for the other. Her tragedy, like that of Magda, is that, however hard she tries, her storytelling cannot become a dialogue, but remains a monologue all along. In this, her story dramatizes Magda's claim: “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” (137). In Cruso's stuporous lethargy Susan's advances (invocations) are met by deaf ears. Cruso's symbolic deafness gains physical reality in Friday's missing tongue, while the dialogue between Susan and Foe is groundless due to the man's ambition to force his version of Susan's and the island's history on her. Realizing this, Susan takes on the male privilege of storytelling, once more invoking the ever-present metaphor of the burden: “[...] I must assume the burden of our story” (81).⁶² The idea of the burden-carrying storyteller Susan evokes the image of Susan carrying the three men—Cruso, Friday, and Foe, the characters of her story—on her back.

endure on the island. Not having another one to love, Susan embraces herself, while Robinson “embraces” (has his nuptial hours with) the soil—the sexed, female body of Speranza (letting his seed flow into the soil) (152): „Világom alapeleme a másik” (Tournier 62). „Én magam is csak akkor létezem, ha kitörök magamból a másik irányába” (Tournier 155). „Nő hiányában (...) a földbe merülök (...)” (Tournier 160). As well as Coetzee's novel(s), Tournier's novel also conjures up the legend of Saint Christopher when Robinson recalls a very early childhood memory when his mother (the father not being at home) saved her six children from their burning house carrying all of them on her shoulders, in her arms, and on her back (Tournier 131). Tournier's female Christopher portrays the figure of the self-sacrificing, self-giving mother, being for the other, being at the other's (her children's) service. In a later passage, the legend is repeatedly recalled, no longer in reference to the mother-child relationship, but to the relationship to the other human being, in general: „Sokkal jobban van dolga a kettőnek, hogynem az egynek. [. . .] Mert ha elesnek is, az egyik felemeli a társát” (Tournier 204).

⁶² Susan's metaphor recalls the story of King Vikramaditya, a tale in which the story actually, literally becomes the burden, Vikramaditya carrying the story-telling corpse demon on his back.

Her fight for self-expression and self-realization is allegorized in the episode of Susan's sandal fabrication. Starting her life on the island "skipping on one leg" (6), Friday becomes Susan's beast of burden and he acts *as* (he becomes) her body. Considering herself unable to write their history on the island, she appeals for the help of Foe to set right her "sorry limping affair" (47), as she calls her account of their life on the island. Skipping on one leg after the heel injury, she herself *is* the sorry *limping* affair—she is the story, the story is herself. She will flatly refuse Foe's help as the man wants to sell the story of the shipwrecked in an embellished and garbled form, according to the sensationist taste of the age. Susan's decision to fashion her own sandals (rather than wait for Cruso to prepare them for her) is a step in her "evolution" from Cruso's "second subject" (*Foe* 11) into an equal partner and adversary. By fabricating her sandals, Susan expresses her dissatisfaction with Cruso's so far unquestioned reign (20, 24) and, from now on, she becomes "the mistress of my own actions" (*Foe* 24), enabling herself to leave the house and thus abandon the housewife role assigned to her by Cruso. She realizes that "Patience has turned me into a prisoner" (25). Cruso delays the fabrication of Susan's sandals precisely because he knows that the shoes would lend "humanity," equality, even manliness to the woman.

In Exodus 3:2, seeing the burning bush that was not consumed by the fire, Moses is addressed by God: "Draw not near here: put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). The fact that Susan remains shoeless would guarantee that Cruso can remain absolute master over his "holy land." He sends his servant Friday to pick up the newcomer from the shore and carry her, thus preventing her to "take her way" (literally and figuratively). When she arrives on the island she has no shoes to take off to thus honour the holy land of the king, and when she does have shoes she refuses to take them off and thus salute Cruso and his will. After she is able to stand on her own feet, she no longer needs "Cruso's horse," Friday; instead, she will have to beware and keep a rein on her own wild horse—her tongue. Her excessive-transgressive tongue clearly counterpoints Friday's missing, ever-silent tongue.

Susan's story-telling labour is concerned with the painful past, aiming to unbind the knots and figures of the story and trying to fashion an (impossible) plain thread. One could say that she toys with posing in the role of the psychoanalyst, reading the silences of the story as its symptoms that are waiting (for her) to be deciphered in order to give up their "truth," the secret

the revelation of which would put an end to the excessive tension within the text. Susan's "truth," her discovery will be that the wished-for unveiling of the secret is impossible, it cannot take place, as "the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost" (*Foe* 67).⁶³ Susan likens her story-telling, the difficult work (burden) of analysis, to Cruso's hard physical work when building his walls, raising each stone one by one (finding each word, one by one).⁶⁴

Striving to unveil the past and the origins of their story (on the island), Susan also resembles the mythological Ariadne (or perhaps Theseus) as Foe observes: "Are you on the Azores, gazing out to sea, mourning, like Ariadne?" (116). Unlike in the original myth where Ariadne embodies an iconic image of the mourning lover, in the novel her figure is summoned as the figure of the mourning mother (Susan gazing out to sea in vain waiting for her lost daughter). In the myth, Ariadne mourns her lost lover, Theseus (and not her child). After helping Theseus to

⁶³ Susan's never-ending attempts to find out the secret of Friday might be seen as a well-known episode of traditional conqueror stories. In Friday's figure, Susan—a female Columbus—is faced with her failure as the discoverer of the "new land." Friday remains a gap on her map marking a failure in her knowledge. "The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute" (*Foe* 118).

⁶⁴ Cruso's useless, compulsive terrace-building—which makes his figure resemble the mythical figure of Penelope, she, as well as Cruso, working out of an "extremest woe" (*Foe* 45)—appears as a procedure intended to deal (or rather, "undeal") with desire. What Cruso builds in his terraces is a (mourning) castle of his negated-repressed desire. His carriage of stones is a work of covering, a construction of patters, like that of Penelope weaving the burial shroud of Odysseus's elderly father. Cruso "sacrifices" himself for the walls to stand. It is no wonder that this repressive work makes him ill and will eventually kill him. As Susan observes, Cruso is building his burial place: "When I passed the terraces and saw this man, no longer young, labouring in the heat of the day to lift a great stone out of the earth or patiently chopping at the grass, [. . .] I found it a foolish kind of agriculture. It seemed to me he might occupy his time as well as in digging for gold, or digging graves first for himself and Friday and then if he wished for all the castaways of the future history of the island, and then for me too" (34). Like Penelope, who claims that she will choose a suitor when she has finished the shroud but she will never choose one, Cruso claims to work and build his terraces for the future inhabitants of the island but in fact his terrace-building is his own (futile, stuck) work. But while Penelope weaves for the other (her long-awaited lover Odysseus)—and in this sense her weaving is intersubjective (has an intersubjective scope, it is done for [the love of] the other)—Cruso carries his stones for himself. Or perhaps, we could say, Cruso deals with his stones precisely because he cannot deal with another human being. In this sense, his endless carriage of rocks is a declining of intersubjectivity (one similar to Michael K's withdrawal into his solitary garden in the "company" of his plants). In his barren terraces, he in fact builds and buries himself as a desiring being.

find the way out of the labyrinth in Cnossos, Ariadne leaves Crete with her lover who, however, abandons her on the island of Naxos/Dia while she is asleep. On awakening and finding herself alone on the isle, Ariadne feels wretched. Her love towards Theseus proved to be unrequited, moreover, for this love she not only betrayed and abandoned her family but helped in murdering her half-brother, the Minotaur. In this sense, she is mourning not only the departure of her lover Theseus, but also her half-brother, her parents and her lost home. The figure of Ariadne mourning her lover is relevant in Susan's case as well who mourns her lost lover twice: first she mourns her lover the Portuguese captain with whose dead body she is rowing at sea, and then she mourns Cruso after he dies on board ship. Susan's story-telling (her talking) is an act of "past-digging," a search for Cruso's and Friday's origins. In this she resembles Theseus, standing with (Ariadne's) ball of string—the secrets and knots of Cruso's and Friday's story—in her hands, aiming to unravel this ball of string and find the thread that would lead her into the centre of the frightful labyrinth to the monstrous Minotaur—(the monstrous story of) Friday's tongue. Also, Susan occupies Ariadne's place in her willingness to offer the thread to Friday, guiding him through the mazes of his unknown past.

Susan's storytelling is, thus, primarily a vocative saying for and to the other; she talks for another and she talks to find another. Following this line of thought, one could say that the enigmatic, distinctively postmodern text of the last section of the novel (Part 4) can become so very different from the previous three sections precisely as a result of Susan's efforts *before*—her fight to be a "free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (*Foe* 131). Gallagher argues that the closing section of the novel—which is *not* narrated by Susan Barton—echoes Adrienne Rich's poem of female creativity "Diving into the Wreck" (1973); it embodies the "feminine imagination" and it resembles *écriture féminine* (Gallagher 189-91). Also, we could say that it is given to Susan that at least in the final pages the text can become "the home of Friday" (*Foe* 157) and that the closing of the novel finally reveals Friday's narrative (Macaskill and Colleran 448): "His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows [. . .]; it passes [. . .], it runs [. . .], it beats [. . .]" (*Foe* 157). Susan talks for another and she talks to another, building up or at least searching for a kind of intersubjectivity which is no longer colonial but reciprocal.

Chapter Three

On Looking and Blindness in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

“Loops of wire:” Colonial Oedipus

Perhaps the most surprising finding of David Attwell’s latest Coetzee monograph (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 2015) is the disclosure of an uncompleted novel of Coetzee. Attwell discovered that between *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* Coetzee had been working on a manuscript of a novel entitled “The Burning of Books,” only to abandon the project after working on it for a year. Toiling with the drafts of the manuscript of this novel, at one point Coetzee noted: “There must be a myth behind it” (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life* 60). He felt the need of a mythical skeleton behind the story that would structure and shape the narrative. Read outside its original context, this sentence is deeply ambiguous. It may refer to Coetzee’s feeling that, without a coherent mythological skeleton, the proposed story would collapse, but it may also be read as the formulation of the Fryean supposition that there inevitably is a mythical pattern underneath every story even if it eludes even the author. Although, unlike *Dusklands* or *Foe*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) invokes no straightforward or clearly identifiable mythical references, following Coetzee, I suggest that “there must be a myth behind it.” I argue that, although the presence of the myth is not openly acknowledged, the text is pervaded by shreds of the Oedipus myth. Critical response to *Barbarians* has never noted the significance of the Oedipus subplot in the narrative, though, in my view, it is powerfully imbued in the text.

The novel was written in 1979 and published in 1980, at a time when the situation in South Africa appeared to be degenerating towards a general “holocaust” and the level of violence in the country between state security forces and sections of the black townships was unprecedented. Coetzee was struggling with the plans of *Barbarians* until, while writing it, Steve Biko’s death convulsed South Africa. The inquest of the Black Consciousness leader’s death was covered in great detail by the liberal press. This incident of political catastrophe provided the “habitation for desire” for Coetzee’s novel (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 89).

He followed the accounts about Biko's torture and death, keeping press clippings among his manuscripts. At the time, the novel was read as a text allegorically focusing on the South African situation (Canepari-Labib 87). Dominic Head argues that "torture, or the possibility of it, was a fact of daily life for many people in South Africa in 1980, and so the representation of it strikes a chilling and literal chord" ("A Belief in Frogs" 102).⁶⁵ The novel opens with the arrival of Colonel Joll, an interrogation expert and representative of the Third Bureau, to an outpost on the periphery of the Empire, headed by the town's Magistrate, whose easy and peaceful life is disturbed when the Empire orders Joll to keep an eye on the Magistrate's work and the town's life. Joll's presence is explained by alleged rumors that the "barbarians"—supposedly living beyond the frontier land—are preparing for an attack on the Empire, therefore the Empire has ordered Joll to launch an expedition to capture the alleged intruders. The prisoners are then brought to town, tortured and some of them killed by Joll's men. One of the prisoners is a young barbarian woman with whom the Magistrate starts an affair motivated by something he himself is unsure about—not love, not desire, but his obsession with her wounds of the torture inflicted on her.

Waiting for the Barbarians charts the vicissitudes of colonial intersubjectivity by openly ascertaining that in a colonial context the personal level can never be separated from the political. While the act of embracing the other human being seems to be possible even in the colonial universe of *Dusklands* or *Foe* (as an aspect of carrying on the back and not only), *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents an even darker aspect of colonial reality where physical intimacy manifests itself primarily as torture. *Barbarians* suggests that in the world of the Empire in which power pervades everything, "pure" intersubjectivity has no chance. The power-defined world of the (periphery of the) Empire makes "real" embraces—communion—between colonizer and colonized impossible and, instead, torture appears as the only straight (sincere) act of intimacy, for it relinquishes the idea that communion between colonizer and colonized may be possible. It is in this context that I shall look at the acts of embracing between the Magistrate and

⁶⁵ Susan Gallagher, for example, reads the novel in the contemporary context of torture following the Soweto riots of 1976-7 and the death of Steve Biko (an anti-apartheid activist) in 1977. David Attwell similarly argues that Coetzee's Empire is recognizable partly as the fictionalization of the apartheid discourse of the South Africa of the 1980s (74). Dominic Head agrees that, although the parallels are vague, at one level the novel is an "allegory of imperialism" (72), saying that there are obvious echoes of apartheid South Africa in the novel.

the barbarian girl, arguing that precisely for the reasons stated above intersubjectivity in this novel partly occurs as a cover for or an (unconscious, unwitting) repetition of violence—torture—and for this reason, intersubjectivity is partly forced in the realm of looking. As the Magistrate himself admits, his embraces with the barbarian girl are not motivated by his desire for her; he “uses” the embraces for the epistemological goal of learning her “secret,” or, more precisely, the secret of her torture-induced wounds, which makes his embraces necessarily deceitful:

I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever. Except that it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten. Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (88)

The Magistrate’s train of thought and his obsession with the girl’s marks are related to two different epistemologies and two different conceptions and regimes of “truth” that he and Colonel Joll represent. Joll’s epistemology might be described in Foucauldian terms, his strategy representing the refusal or, better, the violation of the possibility of communion with the other. Unlike Joll, the Magistrate gradually becomes aware that he cannot have access to the truth of the Other: “How natural a mistake to believe you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!” (46), he asserts. In contrast to this, Joll (as a true Foucaultian clinician) believes that with “great attention, skill, precision, patience” he is able to “burn things to their furthest truth” (Foucault, “Seeing and Knowing” 149, 147). Their different understanding of truth is apparent in their relation to the barbarian girl, too. While Joll mauls the girl’s body, creating scabs and sores on it, the Magistrate washes her skin, trying to make whole what has been smashed (Durrant 430). The Magistrate is aware that his embraces with the girl and his nursing of her wounds cannot be exempt from being understood otherwise than as the perpetuation of the torture inflicted on her:

There is no limit to the foolishness of men of my age. Our only excuse is that we leave no mark of our own on the girls who pass through our hands: our convoluted desires, our

ritualized lovemaking, our elephantine ecstasies are soon forgotten [. . .] Our loving leaves no mark. Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes [Joll] who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain?⁶⁶ Whose was the last face she saw plainly on this earth but the face behind the glowing iron? Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. However kindly she may be treated by her own people, she will never be courted and married in the normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger, and no one will approach her save in the spirit of lugubrious sensual pity that she detected and rejected in me. No wonder she fell asleep so often, no wonder she was happier peeling vegetables than in my bed! (148)

The barbarian girl's secret that he is so eagerly in search of—the secret of her wounds and of her strange gaze—is in fact the secret of torture, and this way his embraces with the girl and his tendance of her wounds become repetitions of the violence that torture is, as they, like torture, are directed at the squeezing out of the other's "truth." It is in this context that I consider the Oedipus myth of significance in *Barbarians*, arguing that the novel reads as a specific colonial treatment of the myth. In the colonial world of the novel, torture—a motif that makes its appearance in Sophocles's version of the Oedipus myth⁶⁷—appears as the malfunctioning of intersubjectivity related to the motif of the (failed) quest for the truth, an Oedipal obsession Joll and the Magistrate share, even if they represent two different understandings of truth. Joll is like Oedipus: in his investigations, "in his quest for the truth he is tireless" (*Barbarians* 23). He wants to "find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth" (*Barbarians* 3). His strategy to find out the truth also resembles that of Oedipus, who exerts psychical pressure on Tiresias and the shepherd, threatening them if they are unwilling to tell him what they know. Oedipus, like Joll, is ready to torture the shepherd to learn the truth: "twist his arms back, quickly," he orders his guards (Sophocles 87, line 1268) (The word "torture" comes from the Latin *torquere*

⁶⁶ As if with a shade of jealousy, the Magistrate talks about "intimate cruelties for which I abhor him" (Joll) (160).

⁶⁷ Jannifer Ballengee's *The Wound and the Witness* (2009) discusses the rhetoric of torture in Sophocles' plays (*Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*).

meaning “to twist” [Amery 32]). In *Barbarians*, torture manifests as a colonial-political act inflicted on the “colonized”/“barbarians” by the representatives of power/authority (the “colonizer”)—the only characters in the novel who have names (Joll and Mandel, Joll’s henchman). Like King Oedipus, Joll is ready to do anything to ensure and protect his power. Joll’s strategy and the answers he receives are also similar to the ones Oedipus receives: “[. . .] first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth” (*Barbarians* 5). Part of the irony of the novel lies in Joll’s Oedipal conviction that with his method of “finding the truth” he will be victorious.

Another aspect of irony is related to the figure of the Magistrate through the Oedipal motif of one’s involvement in something that seems to be external to him. Though he is at pains to distinguish himself from Joll and his strategies of extracting truth, he is forced to realise and admit his involvement in the political story that he believes himself to be external of. In the colonial or imperial world of the novel, the personal (as separate or distinct from the political) is simply impossible. Oedipus keeps on affirming that he is looking for the truth, trusting and asserting his clear-sightedness, and throughout he proves to be blind to everything that refers to his own involvement. I argue that the Magistrate’s Oedipal realisation that one is always already part of what seems to be external and that the personal is always already also political makes *Barbarians* a colonial rewriting of the myth.

Barbarians allegorizes colonial intersubjectivity by representing the (mal)functioning of intersubjectivity. Since intersubjectivity as communion cannot take place in the power-based world of the Empire, embracing appears as the metaphor of (the lack of) the communion type of intersubjectivity.⁶⁸ Further on, considering the Oedipal theme of vision as blindness and blindness as truth-seeing, I shall argue that the various acts of looking and exchanges of looks in the complex triangular relationship of Colonel Joll, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl stage

⁶⁸ The communion-type of embrace—as an act of love—is also impossible between father and daughter in the colonial world of *In the Heart of the Country*. As much as or even more than for a lover’s embrace Magda (forever) longs for her father’s embrace, an embrace that she will never obtain. Magda’s grotesque-perverse fantasy about a surrogate, fake embrace between her and her father(’s excrement) articulates her longing for a real embrace with him: “somewhere on the farm there is a pit where, looped in each other’s coils, the father’s red snake and the daughter’s black embrace and sleep and dissolve” (35). As well as *Barbarians*, Magda’s words formulate the failure of love in colonial South Africa that Coetzee addressed in his Jerusalem speech.

the colonizer's fear of the Other. Coetzee's novel evokes the Oedipus narrative in its attempt to stage the impossibility of a purely personal intersubjectivity, telling the potentially tragic colonial story of one's confrontation with oneself instead of (one's communion) with another through the novel's problematization of acts of looking between the various characters. Instead of a clear-cut series of identifications of Coetzee's characters with respective characters in Sophocles' drama, the Oedipus myth is to be found in *Barbarians* in a dispersed manner: the figure of Oedipus is present dispersed in the figures of the Magistrate, Colonel Joll, and the barbarian girl, and this dispersive logic of the Oedipal traits of the various characters of the novel provides the possibility to read Coetzee's novel as a colonial version of the myth that sheds light on (and confirms/consolidates my argument about) the workings/dynamics of colonial intersubjectivity.⁶⁹ In Sophocles, Oedipus investigates after another (someone) who finally turns out to be no other/not another; himself is *that*, himself is the other one (Simon 17, my translation).⁷⁰ Like *In the Heart of the Country* or *Foe*, *Barbarians* too is a narrative about the desire for and failure of intersubjectivity.

The opening passage of the novel describes the first confrontation of Colonel Joll and the town Magistrate, described from the point of view of the Magistrate. Already in the opening paragraph, the novel establishes looking and the inhibition of looking as its ur-motif, then tracing the vicissitudes of colonial intersubjectivity through these metaphors. Drawing upon Fanon's, Bhabha's and Sartre's theories of looking and the gaze, I examine how Coetzee's novel dramatizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized through metaphors of looking. The Magistrate is immediately struck by the hidden eyes of his interlocutor. Colonel Joll's initial blindness remains an Oedipal attribute of his throughout the story:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through

⁶⁹ In her *The Name of Oedipus, Songs of a Forbidden Body* (a 1977 libretto-text for an opera) Hélène Cixous likewise conceives of a split or fragmented Oedipus, doubling all the principle roles into singing and talking ones (she has two Oedipuses, two Jokastas, and two Tiresiases) (Miller 249). Also, as I argue about the figure of Oedipus in *Barbarians*, in Cixous's *Oedipus* characters merge and fuse into each other, so that in his final monologue Oedipus incorporates the mother-lover by matching a singular French verb to a plural pronoun: "Nous continue" (we continue/s) (Miller 250).

⁷⁰ „Oidipusz nyomozást folytat valaki más után, akiről végül kiderül, hogy nem más: ő maga – az” (Simon 17).

them. He tells me they are a new invention. ‘They protect against the glare of the sun,’ he says. ‘You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look.’ He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. ‘No wrinkles.’ He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. ‘At home everyone wears them.’ (*Barbarians* 1)

The opening scene paradoxically posits looking as blindness and sharp-sightedness as the impairment of sight. As the representative of authority, Joll needs to protect himself from “truth” and in this sense he is necessarily blind, like Oedipus himself, who keeps on affirming that he is looking for the truth, but proves to be blind to his own involvement (in the end, after blinding himself, arguing that blindness means clearsightedness). Never having seen sunglasses and not knowing what they are for, in the beginning the Magistrate (the narrator-focalizer) (mis)understands Colonel Joll’s glasses as an object the aim of which is to hide his blindness rather than aid his sight by protecting against the sun and sand. Sharp light and sand, in this sense, might be said to play the role of the colonial experience that Sala Suleri calls intransigence (13-14) (that one often meets in Kipling’s short stories set in India), the experience of the otherness of colonial space, its utter strangeness, the sense that this other, unknown space is encountered by the colonizer as an unyielding, incalculable, obstinate body.⁷¹ Even when Joll explains the glasses’ use, the Magistrate is reluctant to understand why Joll is using them in the present situation.

Colonel Joll’s opaque glasses function as a gadget dramatizing the Oedipal theme of failing to meet the other—a failure of intersubjectivity. Despite his persistent efforts to find out the “truth,” Joll’s glasses function as a *stain* that inhibit his sight, distorting his view and preventing him from seeing the “truth.” The sight of authority proves to be blind, as it is the case with King Oedipus who proves blind to everything that would imply the end of his reign. Joll’s glasses represent “the blind eye that Joll turns to his own tortuous treatment of the barbarians” (DelConte 36): “His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth” (3), the Magistrate explains. The irony within the narrative voice gives a crucial twist to the Magistrate’s words. Joll’s words to the Magistrate, suggesting that “You [too] would find them [the glasses] useful out here in the desert. [. . .] At home everyone wears them” (1) can be read as

⁷¹ Bhabha also notes that the word “territorium” is etymologically related to the words “terra” (meaning “land”) and “terror” (*Location* 100, Bényei, *Traumatikus* 31)

a hint, suggesting which side the Magistrate is expected to belong to (that he is supposed to see the barbarians as Joll sees them).⁷²

The Magistrate occupies an ambiguous mediating role, halfway between Joll and the girl. Jane Poyner argues—suggesting yet another link with Oedipus’s figure—that it is the Magistrate’s “double consciousness” (both oppressor and oppressed) that leads to his final madness (54). “The ‘I’ and the ‘he’ cannot become one. [. . .] Oedipus is always someone else than who he is/another than what he is” (Simon 17-18, my translation).⁷³ Joll’s hint (that everyone wears glasses at home), at the same time, suggests that “at home” (in the heartland of the Empire) everybody shares his idea of truth, understood as something that is by definition hidden and yielded only under torture. His premise is that everybody contains such a nugget of truth in themselves (if one seeks it tirelessly). It is as if his glasses endowed him with the capacity of obtaining this “truth.”

Paradoxically, it is precisely his symbolic, self-imposed blindness that enables him to dig the truth—in his sense—out of the other. His interrogations take place in the old granary beyond the mill and the abattoir—the latter a sinister hint to what might be going on during these questionings. The granary/slaughterhouse is itself a symbolic site, identifying a crucial difference between the “barbarians” and the “civilized:” namely, agriculture and breadmaking. The Magistrate refers to the processing of grains and breadmaking as the threshold between “barbarism” and “civilization:” “But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry 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” (169). In the granary grains are thrashed and

⁷² Joll’s glasses, at the same time, will be imitated by one of the soldiers—(like Joll but unlike the Magistrate) a “true representative” of the Empire: “They [the soldiers] avert their eyes from the glare [of the sun], all save one, who looks sternly ahead through a strip of smoked glass glued to a stick which he holds up before his eyes in imitation of his leader” (*Barbarians* 14). As opposed to Joll and his soldiers, once we find the Magistrate saying “the sun is up and glares so savagely from the surface that I have to shield my eyes” (14). Similarly, the prisoners are blinking and shielding their eyes (*Barbarians* 26). Joll’s and the Magistrate’s disputes also evoke the conflict between Oedipus and Creon in the opening scenes of the play. Like Oedipus who suspects Creon to be the traitor and the enemy (“I find you a menace, a great burden to me” (80, line 612), the Magistrate finds Joll a menace and a burden to him accusing him “*You* are the enemy, Colonel!” (125).

⁷³ „Az én és az ő nem tud eggyé válni. [. . .] Oidipusz mindig is más, mint az, aki” (Simon 17-18).

ground to yield their hidden treasure, flour. Joll uses the same strategy to extort the truth he needs: “[. . .] first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth” (5).⁷⁴ Samuel Durrant identifies the torture scene as the novel’s originary event or primal scene “which drives the narrative and to which the narrative endlessly seeks to return” (434), a scene which, significantly, is not actually described—the direct experience of torture is hidden—and is present, like Joll’s eyes, in its concealment: one learns about what could have happened behind the walls only retrospectively from the barbarian girl’s relation.

Joll’s torture does damage to the eyes and face of the prisoners. Whether manifesting themselves as blindness, lameness or sores, the barbarians bear the marks of physical suffering and disability: the prisoner boy’s eye is swollen and he is also lame, his father, the old man, is blinded, the young girl (the Magistrate’s would-be mistress) is blinded and crippled by the interrogators. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault speaks about the “political investment of the body,” explaining how the body is directly involved in the political field and how power relations have an immediate hold upon it: “they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (“The Body of the Condemned” 173). According to Foucault, the body becomes a “useful force” if it is a subjected body (176). The fear, bewilderment and abasement to which the prisoners are subjected transform them into “docile bodies,” Joll’s torture functioning as a “general formula of domination” (“Docile Bodies” 179, 181).⁷⁵ In *The Wound and the Witness*, Jennifer R. Ballengee claims that “the torturer

⁷⁴ In the 2012 theatre performance of *Oedipus Rex* in Nagyvárad, director István Szabó K. chose one of the old granary/mill buildings of the city as the setting of the performance (instead of the theatre stage). Given the setting and also following Mihály Babits’s Hungarian translation of Sophocles, the performance plays throughout with the symbolism of the grain and its road from becoming flour to becoming bread as representing the inevitable destiny (self-torture and the fulfillment of fate) of Oedipus.

⁷⁵ Discipline produces subjected, docile bodies, producing reliable, easily controlled, machine-like subjects (Foucault, “Docile Bodies” 182, 186). Foucault discusses the panoptical gaze in his essay “The Eye of Power” (included in *Power/Knowledge*, 1972), in the “Seeing and Knowing” chapter of *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) and in the chapter entitled “Panopticism” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Foucault uses the example of the panopticon, a 19th-century prison design, a circular, ring-formed building with a tower of observation in the middle where by the use of backlight the observer cannot be seen by the observed. The idea behind this prison architecture was that in this way the observed gradually internalize self-surveillance (the gaze of the other is internalized) and start self-monitoring themselves.

believes that the body will release the truth if it suffers unbearable pain; therefore, the painful wound of torture signifies the truth that the torturer intends to extract. [. . .] The “effectiveness” of torture in this regard hinges upon its ability to break down and eliminate all that is known and familiar, to deconstruct the rational, to replace reason with unreason” (8).

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that the point of torture is that it “permits one person’s body to be translated into another person’s voice, [it] allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power” (18). Joll tortures and blinds his prisoners precisely because he cannot—is unable to—look them in the eye, and in this sense his protective glasses function as his gadget to refuse intersubjectivity and to deny the possibility of communion with the other. Joll’s interlocutor (whoever speaks to him or faces him) is inevitably positioned as occupying the “colonial,” “subaltern” position, while the glasses define Joll as English/Dutch/Afrikaans, different from the town-dwellers, the Magistrate and the barbarians. He injures, that is, he erases the prisoners’ eyes as if he could not endure their returned gaze. This opens up a new connotation and justification for his use of the sunglasses: they function as a gadget that enables him to look at something that would otherwise be blinding, like the sun (truth) for Oedipus—the traumatic, painful core of the Other.⁷⁶

The opening passage of *Barbarians* is thus an allegory of the colonial fear of an encounter with the Other and of the paranoia of the colonizer, as elaborated by Fanon and Bhabha:

This process is visible in the exchange of looks between native and settler that structures their psychic relation in the paranoid fantasy of boundless possession and its familiar language of reversal: ‘When their glances meet he [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, “They want to take our place.” It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.’” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 30)

Unable to encounter the other [the prisoners, the barbarians] as an Other, unable to face the other in a Levinasian sense, the Empire, in its attempt to extract the truth it imagines to be in

⁷⁶ Like Sophocles’s text, the novel is saturated with persistent and repeated references to the dominant presence of the dazzling sun, in Sophocles a symbol of Apollo’s truth-seeing and clairvoyance. Throughout the novel, the sun is associated with one’s ability or the lack thereof to look into it and see the truth: “there is only one emperor, the sun,” the Magistrate remarks (*Barbarians* 106).

the other, produces nothing but violence, putting out the prisoners' eyes, erasing their face, breaking their bones. The broken, maimed bodies of the prisoners (and especially that of the barbarian girl) could be seen as literalizations of Bhabha's optical metaphor: "The white man's eyes break up the black man's body" (Bhabha 42). Once confronting the "colonizer," once "I had to meet the white man's eyes" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 110), the "colonized" ends up with "points of irremediable damage, the eyes, the feet, [impossible] to be whole again" (*Barbarians* 36). The barbarians' brokenness is an embodiment of the "disturbed, split and distorted colonial identity" that Fanon and Bhabha speak about (Bhabha 42).⁷⁷

Wearing what everyone wears "at home," Joll strives to assert his imperial identity through the glasses, while the Magistrate reveals his distance from the Empire through his unfamiliarity with the glasses. The Magistrate's (and the novel's) first sentence ("I have never seen anything like it") is repeated on the next page, this time, however, having one of the barbarian prisoners as its subject: "He has probably never seen anything like it. I mean the eyeglasses" (2). The repetition of the sentence already suggests the Magistrate's not yet entirely conscious assumption of a sense of identity between himself and the barbarians. He assumes that their reading of Joll's glasses is also identical: "He must think you're a blind man" (2). The Magistrate's remark also implies that (unlike Joll) he presumes to know how the barbarians think, suggesting a shared subjugated position vis-à-vis Joll, irrespective of the fact that the Magistrate is supposed to represent the central imperial power.

In a later scene, Joll's glasses come to carry the function of a Foucaultian object of disciplinary panoptic power even more emphatically. After their capture by Joll, the barbarians are brought to town and mustered up in a strange posture:

[. . .] at the end of the rope, tied neck to neck, comes a file of men, barbarians, stark naked, holding their hands up to their faces in an odd way as though one and all are suffering from toothache. For a moment I am puzzled by the posture, by the tiptoeing

⁷⁷ As a supplement to the barbarians' maimed bodies, when the barbarian girl is taken back to her people, the feet of one of the Magistrate's soldiers is injured, swollen and inflamed, caked with blood and pus. Once again, as with the barbarian girl, it is the Magistrate—like Oedipus, the knower of the foot (Simon 13)—who sees to it that the sore is tended, cleaned and bandaged. It seems that in the borderline moment and zone of the encounter, when the colonizers go close to the barbarians, it is the "organs of encounter"—the feet that take you to the other (like in Beckett's *Molloy*) and the eyes that enable you to look into the face of the other—that are wounded.

eagerness with which they follow their leader, till I catch a glint of metal and at once comprehend. A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man's hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks. 'It makes them meek as lambs,' I remember being told by a soldier who had once seen the trick: 'they think of nothing but how to keep very still.' My heart grows sick. (113)

The repetition of the phrase "loop of wire" in this episode that is concerned with the violation of the prisoners' bodies provides an ironic echo of the "original" loops of wire—Joll's glasses, while this method of punishment also recalls Oedipus's punishment, his pierced calves and bound/tied feet, as a result of which he becomes "swollen-footed" (the meaning of his name in Greek), marked for suffering (confined, constrained) from his birth. The loop of wire comes to represent imperial violence and terror, the (bio)political right of power to inflict pain on the subaltern body, reinterpreting its first occurrence in the description of Joll's sunglasses. Joll's loops of wire (the glasses) come to represent the panoptical gaze, also known as the "medical regard" or as the observing or institutional gaze. The word "loop" appears one more time in the text (after the first, "original" loop, Joll's glasses), suggesting yet another link between the Magistrate and Oedipus: "The knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end" (23). Being associated with Joll (under cover) and later with his strategy of "training," the textual link suggests that the riddle to be solved by the Magistrate was set by Joll.

In contrast to Joll's glasses, the Magistrate's lantern—in the light of which he examines the tortured bodies of the prisoners—seems to be the opposite of Joll's dark glasses, becoming a symbolic object that "extends" his sight and enables him to see. In the light of the lantern, the Magistrate—as if wearing a pair of spectacles sharpening his vision—becomes a terrified seer of the colonial truth of the nightly tortures going on behind the thick walls of the abattoir. His decision to observe the interrogations—"in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself" (10)—can be read as yet another Oedipal gesture, although at this point the light of the lantern places him in an ambiguous voyeuristic position from which he can scrutinize the tortured bodies, the "little scabs and bruises and cuts" (*Barbarians* 10) without risking his safety. The lantern also prefigures the Magistrate's preoccupation with archeology and his role as reader, antiquarian and cartographer. It plays the role of the light that enables the Magistrate-Oedipus to read and unbind the knots of the story, to do the detective work he feels impelled to do and which will finally lead to his downfall: "I ought never have taken my lantern." His urge to reveal

the girl's secret—the secret of her blind gaze—becomes an obsession that is Oedipal in its intensity and its self-destructive outcome: “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girls’ body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (33). It is on her body that the unreadable-unsolvable secret is written.⁷⁸

“I am not myself”⁷⁹

In an early passage of the novel, the Magistrate introduces himself by saying: “I have not seen the capital since I was a young man” (2). Already this early statement contains a faint echo of *Oedipus Rex*, inasmuch as there is a sense of running away (and a sense of avoidance) behind the Magistrate's departure from the Empire, evoking both Oedipus's early exile from Thebes and the grown-up Oedipus's hasty departure from Corinth to avoid the dreadful prophecy. He decides to leave the home(liness) of the Empire for the promise of an easy life on the outlying frontier of the Empire, but ends up afflicted with the desire to learn the secret of the barbarian girl. Joll repeatedly hints that the Magistrate fails to act as he is supposed to act, just as Oedipus is who or what he is not supposed to be. Oedipus's story tells the untellable, shows the unseeable, exposing what can only be looked at with blind eyes.

The Oedipal aspect of the Magistrate's character is revealed in his claim (he speaks Oedipus' tragedy when he says): “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never to have taken my lantern [. . .]. On the other hand, there was no way, once I have picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again. The knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end” (22-23). The early passage suggests the failure of the Magistrate's Oedipal investigation (about the barbarian girl) even before he has

⁷⁸ For him, understanding her wounds (which, in this particular case, include her impaired gaze) amounts to learning the truth about her. The gaze as a metaphor for learning the truth also appears in Cixous's *Oedipus*: “Give me the gaze / That unveils everything” (Cixous qtd. in Miller 257). As if taking Cixous' statement literally, the Magistrate parts the girl's eyelids to, as it were, grasp her “gaze:” “Between thumb and forefinger I part her eyelids. The caterpillar comes to an end, decapitated, at the pink inner rim of the eyelid” (33). He scrutinizes the girl as if through a magnifying glass. His learning process is partly driven by his confidence in himself as a good reader or analyst (let me look, tell me, and I will put it all together, I will tell you what it means) and partly by his interest in and concern for the other (show me your wound and I will tend it).

⁷⁹ *Barbarians* 104.

started it. Also his hobby of digging and excavating ruins shows Oedipal features (this is what Oedipus does, symbolically, digging and excavating his past). The Magistrate is “reading the slips in a mirror” (17) like Oedipus who is forced to realise he has to read the findings of his search in his own mirror. To Joll he wants to appear to be what Tiresias calls Oedipus: “the best man alive at solving riddles” (Sophocles 79, line 502). In his effort to find out about Joll’s torture investigations (especially about what happened to the barbarian girl and her father) he acts like Oedipus: “I’ll speak out now as a stranger to the story, a stranger to the crime” (Sophocles 76, lines 248-9); but in the end, also like Oedipus, he has to acknowledge his complicity in the crime. Like Oedipus, he is driven by the humanist urge to save the people (the barbarians) from their distress and misery (by dispelling the curse of the Sphinx). He displays Oedipal features in his relationship with the barbarian girl: he reads her compulsively and cannot let go of her until her riddle is solved. The Magistrate’s insistent “What did they do to you?” question (*Barbarians* 31, 79), repeated several times to the barbarian girl echoes Oedipus’s insistent demand to Tiresias: “You’re bound to *tell* me that” (Sophocles 79, line 390).

The barbarian girl’s secret is a “received” one: it resides in the marks of the torture. Conforming to the disseminating presence of the Oedipus-myth in the novel, with her broken ankles and blind eyes, the barbarian girl too shares Oedipal features. Her wounds are injuries “received” from the Empire (Joll), and in this context her Oedipal wounds become (gendered) colonial wounds on her broken body.⁸⁰ Her figure at the same time also points toward the solution of the riddle the Sphinx poses to Oedipus, inasmuch as her walking stick recalls the third leg of man from the riddle. Her scarred feet, as well as Oedipus’s, are the keys to her identity which impel the Magistrate to want to understand her (as a riddle). Thus, with her blank gaze and her monstrous, crippled legs she also plays the role of the Sphinx, the monstrous, woman-headed lion with wings whose riddle Oedipus solves: “The feet lie before me in the dust, disembodied, monstrous, two stranded fish, two huge potatoes” (*Barbarians* 94-95). Her figure

⁸⁰ As part of the 2000 “Greeks” Project in Glasgow, Scottish playwright David Greig’s *Oedipus the Visionary* readapts the original play raising the question of English domination in Scotland, addressing the ambivalent identity of Scots as both colonizers and colonized (Hardwick 377, 384). The theatre performance in Glasgow suggested the India of the British Raj in its setting. Oedipus speaks about the afflictions of the city as wounds (of the empire): “this plague’s tearing out the heart of everything. / It’s cut open scars / And picked at scabs” (qtd. in Hardwick 383). In *Barbarians* the barbarian prisoners end up with all sorts of wounds and scars at the moment they encounter the Empire (Joll).

also recalls the monstrous Sphinx in a dream of the Magistrate in which he sees that she “changes shape, sex, size,” “arousing horror in me” (95). It is the girl’s bodily deformity that provides the motivation for his relationship with the girl. Without her damaged eyes and legs, the girl would cease to be a text to be deciphered by the Magistrate, and he would cease to be her reader.

In another dream of his, he refers to her as “the girl, the only key I have to the labyrinth,” positioning her as the key figure of the truth he searches for. In this dream, the Magistrate carries the girl—not on the back but—in his lap: “I enter the barracks gateway and face a yard as endless as the desert. There is no hope of reaching the other side, but I plod on, carrying the girl, the only key I have to the labyrinth, her head nodding against my shoulder, her dead feet drooping on the other side” (118). The act of carrying her suggests the Magistrate’s self-imposed, humane obligation to try to help her. The humanitarian dream-gesture of carrying the girl does actually take place on the expedition they take her back to her people: “All of us walk except the girl. We have abandoned whatever we can afford to lighten the horses’ burden” (89). The girl is carried on horseback, the image recalling the parable of the good Samaritan, the Magistrate giving a helping hand to the exhausted, beaten, tortured, now sick, bleeding girl, then bandaging her wounds and lifting her on his horse (94).

The Magistrate himself is conscious of the dubious motives of his acts of charity toward the girl on their acquaintance: “I drop a coin into the cap. [. . .] I give orders; she is brought to my rooms, where she stands before me propped on her sticks” (27). From this point, his ideas about what the girl means to him become confused. What is certain is that she provides an indeterminate outlet for his fantasies: he speaks about “my freedom to make of the girl whatever I felt like, wife or concubine or daughter or slave or all at once” (86). These roles cast the girl as Jocasta, Antigone as well as the Sphinx in the Oedipus narrative. The Magistrate’s relation with and attitude towards the girl and, accordingly, the girl’s roles in their interactions retain their ambiguity throughout the story. He alternately relates to her as to a daughter (“I feed her, shelter her” [32]), a lover/prostitute (“[I] undress her” [46], “use her body” [32]), a slave (“I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her” [46]), a prisoner (“she is as much a prisoner now as ever before” [60]) and a puppet (“a dummy of straw and leather” [50]). This is one of the ways in which the novel stages the theme of dual or multiple identities of Sophocles’ drama. The identities of the Magistrate begin to multiply in relation to his own confused and multiple

fantasies woven around the girl: “How I daily become more like a beast [. . .] father, lover, horseman, thief” (93). The claim echoes Oedipus’s desperate diagnosis of his monstrous, transgressive, taboo-breaking, unnatural identity(-ies) as both father and brother to his daughters and both son and husband to his mother (79, 87, lines 520-22, 1336). The Magistrate’s “I am not myself” (104) and “Whether this, that, I am the same man” (42) echo the central sentence of Oedipus (“I know who I am”), revealing the Oedipal irony of his character. It is his unbearable transgression in solving the girl-Sphinx’s riddle and his incestuous-dreadful relationship with the girl that bring him to an Oedipal dead-end (Simon 8).

Prior to the torture, when she was one of the prisoners, the Magistrate did not even see her in the strong sense of scotomizing her; where she was is a blank in his memory. It is as if his subsequent obsession with the girl’s wounds—not unlike Susan Barton’s obsession with Friday’s wound in *Foe*—were an attempt to make up for his former blindness. Also somewhat like Susan, he wants to erase the marks of torture on her body, while, at the same time, he tends them and, by tending, perpetuates them. His movements of washing and caressing the girl’s maimed body partly aim to wash away (repair) the damage (the shame, the signs left by the Empire) and partly repeat (cannot help repeating) the damage.⁸¹ Laura Wright suggests that the Magistrate’s ritual washing of the girl is a metaphor of his attempt to wash himself clean of his sense of complicity with the Empire (74).

The irony of their first encounter lies in a misunderstanding. Unaware of the girl’s visual impairment, the Magistrate misunderstands her gesture of turning her head away from him, thinking she does not want to look at him, even though she turns her head away precisely in order to see him: “Each time she gives me a strange regard, staring straight ahead of her until I am near, then very slowly turning her head away from me” (27). She has peripheral vision: what she sees is a blur, only the edges are clear, therefore she has to turn her head away in order to focus on what she wants to see: “When she looks at me I am a blur” (31); “I look into the eye. Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing—my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where I am, only a blur, a blank?” (33). Considering her uneven gaze and the fact that the Magistrate begins by assuming Joll’s position of gazing at the prisoners, spending hours in hiding, watching the prisoners from behind his window which is

⁸¹ Durrant argues that the Magistrate’s caresses “hover undecidably between a ‘healthy’ process of working through and an ‘unhealthy’ compulsion to repeat, between mourning and melancholia” (430).

referred to as a replica of Joll's sunglasses ("from my window I stare down, invisible behind the glass" [21]), one could suggest that they both see the other as the Biblical phrase suggests, "through a glass, darkly".⁸² The Magistrate returns as well as mirrors the girl's blurred look in the sense that what he sees in her is not the girl herself (as she "really" is) but an image entangled by fantasy which might well be called a blur. There is no clear exchange of looks between the representative of power and the subaltern, the colonizer and colonized, *Barbarians* suggests.

It is crucial that the girl's partial blindness is not a given, innate blindness, but something that was inflicted on her by her torturers.⁸³ Her blind gaze can be seen as the embodiment of the gaze of the colonized, at least in Joseph S. Catalano's postcolonial reading of Sartre. Catalano redefines the colonial gaze as the gaze par excellence as elaborated in Sartre's existentialist-phenomenological account. As the Magistrate puts it, the girl's gaze "knows itself watched," (36) and his remark evokes the Sartrean gaze as the colonial gaze, or, more exactly, as the gaze of the colonized. The ultimate objective of Sartre's study on the gaze (*le regard*) is the intrusion of another in the subject's visual field, the recognition that one can be an object for another person and that one has an aspect of being seen. Sartre explains the sensation and the experience of "myself as seen" through the example of hearing someone else's footsteps and thus being caught while peeping through a keyhole. The essence of the Sartrean gaze is a sense of alienation from the self, the revelation of oneself as a foreign self seen by the other (Sartre 340): "the viewer becomes spectacle to another's sight" (Bryson 89). According to Catalano, Sartre's scenario is also an illustration of the colonial situation where one (the colonized) is suddenly brought to realize that he is not alone, being intruded upon (seen and objectified) by another (the colonizer) (160, 163). Under the girl's blind gaze, the Magistrate is an opaque blur. Bryson notes that in the Sartrean scene both participants are threatened and objectified by the other's gaze (not only the one who is intruded upon) (96). The label "it knows itself watched" might be said to describe the

⁸² The Biblical verse from Paul makes the difference between seeing dimly versus seeing clearly (the words are "face-to-face"): "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). "Whilst on this earth we can only have a poor glimpse of the Kingdom of God as if we are looking into a dark mirror, [...] when we die (...), then, when we meet God face to face, we will know the Kingdom of God fully" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

⁸³ In relation to the girl's partial blindness, Matt DelConte comments: "by injuring her eyes to the point where she can only see out of her periphery (and even then with blurred vision), the Empire has quite literally marginalized her perspective" (427).

look of the colonizer as well as that of the colonized, as both Bhabha and Fanon argue: “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation” (*Black Skin* 60). We can also suggest that the nomad girl’s unreflective eyes convey no interior, and in this case, the Magistrate’s assumption about her gaze according to which “it knows itself watched” is mistaken, as the blankness of her gaze would suggest precisely the opposite, namely that she does not care if she is watched, living in her own closed world. At the same time, her unreflective “insect eyes” (47) betraying nothing of an internal life, also recall Joll’s opaque glasses. In this sense, she is also a repetition or double of Joll, as one of the Magistrate’s descriptions of her face also suggests: her “face [is] *masked* by two black glassy insect eyes” (47, emphasis added), “her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin” (45). The word “mask” appears several times in the text to describe Joll’s glasses. The girl’s closed eyes reflect or repeat Joll’s closed eyes and face, his fear to encounter the other and they both reflect back an aspect of the Magistrate’s (Oedipal) blindness, the fact that he is unable to (or will only much later) see his own position and involvement. Even her gesture of turning her head away can be seen as a reflection of Joll’s refusal to look into the eyes of his adversary through the closed dark shields of his glasses.

The Magistrate, however, offers yet another interpretation of the girl’s strange look. While mostly seeing them as unreflective, he once claims to be confronted by “twin reflections” of himself staring back at him from the dead centre of the girl’s eyes: from her “two black glassy insect eyes” “there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my double image cast back at me” (47). This recalls Oedipus’s mistake: he wants to find another but has to recognize himself instead as the object of his search (presuming to look through a window but being forced to stumble into a looking glass, the mirror reflection of his own face). Likewise, the image of the Magistrate trying to see the girl “through my blind fingertips” (*Barbarians* 46) recalls the figure of Oedipus blindly groping to find his way in the riddle. The trope of blind fingertips suggests the Magistrate’s attempt to assume the girl’s blind perspective and try to “see” with her “eyes.” It is primarily his willingness or openness to encounter the other, his urge to find the other *and* his failure to find the other that make the Magistrate an Oedipal figure. Like Oedipus (and unlike Joll), he makes enormous efforts to find the unknown one, the other one, and, like Oedipus, he persistently fails to encounter the other in the barbarian girl or he persistently faces the impossibility of encounter with her. Their relation is a Levinasian encounter in the sense that

they are persistently bound to realise that knowing the other is impossible, the other will always remain a stranger to them.

The difference between the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl and his other women can be traced in the difference of the embraces he shares with them. While his dates with the barbarian girl prove unaccomplished for one reason or another, he embraces his lover (the bird woman), the prostitute he is often visiting:

I embrace her, bury myself in her, lose myself in her soft bird-like flurries. The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension. Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body. [. . .] I have a vision of her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin. [. . .] I shudder with revulsion in the arms of my little bird-woman, hug her to me. (45)

It is as if he were looking for some sort of consolation in the bird-woman for the failures he experiences with the barbarian girl. On two occasions when they embrace (the barbarian girl and the Magistrate), the embrace remains unrequited either by the girl or by the Magistrate, he embracing her while she is asleep: "I turn to the girl, embrace her, draw her tight against me. She purrs in her sleep, where soon I have joined her" (70); on yet another occasion she embraces him while she is asleep: "the girl is asleep, her arms clasped slackly around my back" (69), as if they could embrace only when one of them is asleep. Their lovemakings are no acts of communion; he "lose[s] touch with her" (71), he observes.

This impossibility of a fulfilled union with the subaltern is formulated by the Magistrate in a train of metaphors referring to him and the girl (not) making love: "I have not entered her. [. . .] Lodging my dry old man's member in that blood-hot sheath makes me think of "acid in milk, ashes in honey, chalk in bread" (36); "We are an ill-matched couple" (43). The metaphors convey a relationship of inclusion/inclosure—an (unrealised) embrace—of two different "countries:" "There is an impassable distance between myself and the other, who belongs to the other shore, who has no country in common with me" (Blanchot 52). Like their lovemakings ("it brings me no closer to her" [47], "she is herself"⁸⁴ [57]), the metaphors of the girl (milk, honey, bread) "embrace" (include, inclose) the metaphors of the Magistrate (acid, ashes, chalk), but they

⁸⁴ As opposed to his unaccomplished encounters with the barbarian girl, the Magistrate embraces the bird woman (the prostitute he is often visiting) "burying myself in her" (45).

embrace in a way that they can never unite; incompatible, they can never merge. The other remains a stranger, a foreigner, one whose country of origin is other than my own. S/he is a “land not of our birth,” “a land foreign to every nature” (*Totality* 33). He feels her as “an alien body” (*Barbarians* 45), adding that “of her there is nothing I can say with certainty” (46). “With this one there is no interior only a surface across which I hunt back and forth” (46). One can never possess the Other, Levinas argues, the Other’s otherness is impenetrable.

The Magistrate’s very un-Levinasian urge that “I ought to be filling her with the truth” (44) (and “I search for secrets and answers” [47]) is consistently faced with the realization that the girl is Other to him, impossible to learn and grasp. In her empty gaze too the Magistrate encounters the “impossibility of an ultimate confirmation from the Other” (Copjec 36) and her gaze always turns out to be lacking, eluding our grasp, slipping, passing (Zupančič 35): “Staring eerily ahead of her,” her eyes “look through and past me” (*Barbarians* 28, 27). Towards the end of the novel, the Magistrate learns from Mai, the kitchen woman (and his occasional sex partner), that the barbarian girl felt equally distant from him (and the same suffering) in their relationship: “She said you were somewhere else. She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her. [. . .] Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry” (166).

The Magistrate realizes the ultimate asymmetry and the irreconcilable distance between himself and the girl when the girl is finally returned to her people: “This is the last time to look on her clearly face to face [. . .]. [. . .] There is only a blankness, and desolation that there has to be such a blankness” (79). Even on the occasion of last seeing the girl, the Magistrate seeks for the possibility of a communion with her, once again coming up against the blankness he has always met in her eyes. “When I tighten my grip on her hand there is no answer. [. . .] a stranger, a visitor from strange parts now on her way home from a less than happy visit. ‘Goodbye,’ I say. ‘Goodbye,’ she says. There is no more life in her voice than in mine” (79). The Levinasian rhetoric of the passage provides the final tragedy of the narrative. On their separation (again), the Magistrate faces their strangeness to each other, she remains infinitely distant, “so remote a kingdom” (*Barbarians* 82). Is the reason behind their tragedy (of encounter) to be found precisely in the Magistrate’s Oedipal nature, in the fact that he relies on his own senses and understanding only and that he cannot see his own involvement in the riddle he is trying to solve? Their last goodbyes give voice to this tragedy of intersubjectivity—both the girl’s and the Magistrate’s voice is empty, lifeless, forbidding.

Joll's impenetrable dark glasses in the opening scene of the novel, thus, can be seen as the par excellence Oedipal accessory, metaphorically representing blindness as a colonial "sickness" or "handicap," and the impossibility of the exchange of looks as a dysfunctioning of colonial intersubjectivity. Besides the "twin reflections" in the girl's eyes, the Magistrate glimpses himself—his own image cast back at him—in Joll's glasses. In fact, it is their positions vis-à-vis the Magistrate that make the barbarian girl and Joll doubles of each other. Joll's blindness (the blindness of power) contaminates the world of the novel to such an extent that it is echoed in the girl's and the Magistrate's blindness, despite the efforts of the latter to understand the barbarian girl and to be different from Joll. In his self-imposed and symbolic blindness, Joll's tragedy might be said to be greater than the Magistrate's. His blind glasses hide his blindness, his inability to see, and this is what makes him fearsome. He is, however, also "omnipotent," knowing the future and seeing in the Magistrate what he is going to become from the start. This blindness and ability to see at the same time render him as a Tiresias figure.

At the same time, however, and once again according to the dispersive logic of the mythical traces, the barbarian girl can also be seen as a Tiresias figure in the Oedipus myth. Like Tiresias, who has been blinded as a child by Athene because he had seen something he was supposed not to see (unwillingly he saw her naked, while taking a bath),⁸⁵ the barbarian girl's blinding can be seen as a similar punishment received from the hands of the Empire (Joll) for having seen scenes (the torture and humiliation of the other prisoners, her father included) that she was not supposed to see, or better, that she is not supposed to tell. In this sense, her blinding is comparable to Friday's mutilation in *Foe*. In blinding himself, Oedipus chooses to have the same punishment Tiresias received for having seen what he was not supposed to see, because he repeated Tiresias' crime.

The naked Athene and the copulating serpents Tiresias saw as a child recall Oedipus's transgressive acts of seeing his mother naked and committing incest with her (Kerényi 251). The Magistrate's sexual affair with the barbarian girl can be seen as a colonial transgression, a

⁸⁵ In the best-known version of the myth, Tiresias was drawn into an argument between Hera and her husband [Zeus](#), on the theme of who has more pleasure in sex: the man, as Hera claimed; or, as Zeus claimed, the woman, as Tiresias had experienced both. Tiresias replied, "Of ten parts a man enjoys one only." Hera instantly struck him blind but in recompense Zeus (in another version Hera herself) gave him the gift of [foresight](#) and a lifespan of seven lives.

crossing of borders that he was supposed not to cross, having seen something he was supposed not to see. On one of their nightly rendezvous the Magistrate recalls the story of Eros and Psyche, yet another story of transgression that concerns love and illicit looking. In Apuleius' tale of Cupid (Eros) and Psyche (in *The Golden Ass*, also known as *Metamorphoses*), Psyche is supposed never to seek to see the face of her lover who visits her nightly, hiding his identity in the dark. However, on her sisters' insistence, Psyche breaks her promise, lighting a candle in the light of which she discovers the identity of her lover. She sees Cupid while he is sleeping, but wakes and scars him with her candle, spilling hot wax on his skin. It is the motif of spilling hot wax that is evoked in *Barbarians*. Sleeping with the girl one night the Magistrate says: "[...] bending over her, touching my fingertips to her forehead, I am careful not to spill the wax" (47). Playing the role of Psyche from the tale (mark the gender switch), in his affair with the barbarian girl he sees and does what he is not supposed to see and do (seeing the woman naked, making love to her). By having an affair with the girl, the Magistrate can be said to repeat what he calls Joll's sin of "trespassing into the forbidden" (13) (referring to Joll's transgression when he sets out on his journey to the barbarians for his barbarian-hunting). The spilling of hot wax recalls methods of torture like the burning (marking) of the victim's skin with hot iron or hot lead, yet another element that calls forth an association between the Magistrate and Joll. This image gives an ironic ring to the Magistrate's regretful outcry at the end of the novel: "I could not engrave myself on her" (148).⁸⁶

The Magistrate will be able to step out of Joll's conception of truth only by necessarily becoming a victim, occupying the girl's position. The final part of the novel (after he is beaten by Joll's officer) portrays the process through which the Magistrate identifies with (or "metamorphoses" into) the barbarian girl, a process of victimisation that is allegorised in the narrative as both feminization and animalisation. Both of these allegories imply his leaving behind the realm of the symbolic, of the regime of truth represented by the empire, and his entry into the realm of ethnicity, which, however, is beyond or outside language as the vehicle of truth. The novel seems to work with a dichotomy between the language and gaze of power on the one

⁸⁶ On one occasion the Magistrate calls himself "a go-between, a jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing" and the girl "a body we have sucked dry" (*Barbarians* 79). The word "jackal" has already appeared in the text, referring to Joll (and his torture): "The jackal rips out the hare's bowels [...]" (*Barbarians* 24). Once again, in accordance to the dispersive logic of the novel, the Magistrate shares traits with Joll.

hand, and the realm of the subaltern, the victim, on the other hand, offering no mediating term, no possibility of translation or communion. In order to understand the native, the tortured victim, one has to become one, which, however, also means that the experience becomes unavailable in the truth-seeking language of the empire. The process is anticipated by an episode during the expedition which carries the barbarian girl back to her people. The Magistrate slowly loses control over his crew, order and discipline collapse, and his men slay one of their horses: “my throat they cut, my bowels they tear, my bones they crack” (81), comments the Magistrate. Charged by the Third Bureau for “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (85), locked up for two months, and utterly humiliated, he escapes from his cell and realizes that “I am a hunted man,” “a man in disgrace, a fugitive” (103-104), observations that once again associate him with Oedipus (in Colonus) (not himself, a man in disgrace, a fugitive). In its outcome, the Magistrate’s beating by Joll’s sergeant repeats the barbarian girl’s beating, maiming and blinding:

[. . .] he [the sergeant] stands with his stick raised for the next blow. ‘Wait!’ I gasp, holding out my limp hand. ‘I think you have broken it!’ He strikes, and I take the blow on the forearm. [. . .] Blows fall on my head and shoulders. Never mind: all I want is a few moments to finish what I am saying now that I have begun. I grip his tunic and hug him to me. [. . .] I hear the blow coming and turn to meet it. It catches me full across the face. ‘I am blind!’ I think, staggering back into the blackness that instantly falls. I swallow blood. [. . .] My nose is broken, I know, and perhaps also the cheekbone where the flesh was laid open by the blow of the stick. My left eye is swelling shut. (117, 118)

In *At the Mind’s Limits*, Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry considers torture as “power, domination over spirit and flesh” (36), looking at torture from the perspective of the tortured: “The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I want to feel. [. . .] It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the two partners [. . .] you yourself suffer on your body the counter-man that your fellow man became” (Améry 28). “[O]nly in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. The tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that” (Améry 33-34, 40). Though torture is the central motif and act of the novel, it is not represented from the perspective of the tortured until the Magistrate

himself suffers torture: it is as if this were the only way of understanding that the girl's secret and knowledge (about torture) can be acquired only by repeating her experience.

The denouement of the Magistrate's drama is "the fall of the once mighty" (87), once again reinforcing the Oedipal subplot. It is Colonel Joll who sarcastically calls him "the One Just Man" and a "refuse-scavenger" (124)—like Oedipus, the epitome of whose final ironic fate is to have been made to scavenge his own "dirt," his unacceptable, monstrous deeds. In a final act of helplessness, the Magistrate clasps his torturer to himself. As the peak of his humiliation, he is forced by Mandel to wear a woman's frock and a bag on his head for a mock hanging: "'Here,' says Mandel, and hands me a woman's calico smock. 'Put it on.' 'Why?' 'Very well, if you want to go naked, go naked'" (128). The symbolic "feminisation" and animalisation of the Magistrate goes hand in hand with his abjection as insane. As Jane Poyner also notes, Mandel constructs the Magistrate in the mock hanging scene as insane (55, 63).⁸⁷

The Magistrate's arms are broken, as if they wanted to punish him for his miscegenating-incestuous liaisons with the barbarian girl. After his beating, the Magistrate calls out: "it is worse to beat a man's feet to pulp than to kill him in combat" (118). Referring to the girl's maimed body, as well as to his own, he formulates the working mechanism of the Empire: torture, humiliation, intimidation, defacement, but all born out of a terrible sense of uncertainty and ignorance, an attempt to assert oneself against something that remains entirely unknown. Slowly but firmly adopting the girl's identity, the Magistrate uses the same words and epithets to describe himself which he previously used to describe the girl: "The wound on my cheek, never washed or dressed, is swollen and inflamed. A crust like a fat caterpillar has formed on it. My left eye is a mere slit, my nose a shapeless throbbing lump" (125). The word "caterpillar" has appeared once before in the text, describing the girl's eyes (44). The word "shapeless" occurs twice before, describing her feet: "her feet are swaddled, shapeless" (29); "her ankles are large, puffy, shapeless" (31). The Magistrate cannot know/learn the other (the girl), he can only experience her colonial or female or barbarian identity by becoming (transforming into) her.

⁸⁷ The ending of the novel constructs not only the Magistrate as a (mad)woman, but—at least in the Magistrate's fantasy—also the barbarian girl as a Jeanne d'Arc of masculine strength: "'Perhaps when the barbarians come riding in,' I say, 'she will come riding with them.' I imagine her trotting through the open gateway at the head of the troop of horsemen, erect in the saddle, her eyes shining, a forerunner, a guide, pointing out to her comrades the lay of this foreign town where she once lived" (167).

As a fitting sequel to the inversion of gender roles and to the Magistrate's final identification with the barbarian girl (the scene is also a repetition of the opening scene of the novel, with the sun dazzling), he reacts *as* the barbarian girl (becoming her) when he is finally released after the mock hanging: "Then the hood comes off, the sun dazzles my eyes. I am hauled to my feet, everything swims before me, *I go blank*" (132, emphasis added). The word "blank," appearing about ten times in *Barbarians*, usually refers to the barbarian girl (most often to her gaze); on two occasions (here and on page 33), however, it is also an attribute of the Magistrate, and once (on page 36) it refers to both of them. Going blank, after a disfiguring humiliation and torture, in a woman's frock, might be construed as the Magistrate's final metamorphosis into the barbarian girl. In the end the Magistrate repeats Joll, the two of them ending up in an identical position (being dazzled by the sun, like Oedipus), which Joll (as Tiresias) had known from the beginning: he foresaw the future, suggesting to the Magistrate on their first encounter that he would find eyeglasses "useful out here in the desert. [. . .] They protect against the glare of the sun"(1).

Joll removes his glasses only once, when we last see him, at the end of the narrative, after he returns broken from the expedition to the barbarians that proved to be such a fiasco. They return as "famished, exhausted men who have done more than their duty in hauling this policeman to safety out of the clutches of the barbarians" (160). From the darkness, stones, shouts and curses are thrown at the "madman's" (160) carriage. Joll comes back broken, a "faint blur" (160), as if he too, by the end, became and transformed into what the barbarian girl sees the Magistrate. It is as if Joll came home from his last expedition slightly affected by the confrontation with the barbarians (the girl), even if only for a faint glimpse of a moment: "I stare through the window at the faint blur against the blackness that is Colonel Joll" (160). Shivering from the "tension of suppressed anger" (160), an urge runs through the Magistrate "to smash the glass" of Joll's carriage, through which he sees him. The scene seems somewhat like a (more aggressive) echo of the opening scene of the novel. The Magistrate sees Joll through the glass of the carriage. Like the girl, Joll first averts his face from him, then he looks at him, "his face is naked, washed clean, perhaps by the blue moonlight, perhaps by physical exhaustion" (160) and then he looks at the Magistrate, "his eyes searching my face. The dark lenses are gone" (160). Though the lenses are gone, we still see him through a glass. The last image of Joll—also related to the supplementary meaning attached to his glasses, which are worn in order to hide "Joll's

truth,” so if they are removed, one sees his “truth”—reveals him broken and defeated (sobbing, “no stronger than a child” [161]), leaving into darkness: “shielding his head with his hands, he races into the darkness” (162). The word “shield,” which referred several times to his glasses and to the covering of his sight, recurs, but now it is not the glasses that shield, cover and shadow his eyes and sight but his hands.

The final irony of the motif of looking in the novel is that the only clear vision in the novel appears to belong to authority, “the blue eyes of Mandel” (132)—perhaps a straightforward racial hint—that is, Joll’s henchman. As an ironic answer to the desire for the “truth” behind the Empire’s glasses, one sees what the Magistrate, with bitter irony, refers to as Mandel’s “clear eyes, windows of his soul” (137). “Truth” equals Empire, the Empire as a truth-producing machine that will always successfully extract the truth it requires: the blindness of power turns out to be clear-sightedness in this fundamental sense. The Empire prevails, while the Magistrate’s attempts at humanism inevitably fail because, in the colonial-imperial world, the only relevant type of intersubjectivity is that of torture. The ethics and politics of the empire necessarily evade both a Levinasian encounter with the Other as alienness and a genuine communion with the other, which is possible only through metamorphosis, leaving behind the order of truth. The very last, closing episode of the novel shows a snowman built by children that has a body, a head, and a crown, but no arms: “It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere” (170). The (snow)man lacks—and needs—arms, arms that would embrace, reach out to another and touch (or hit). The armless snowman’s image suggests a painful lack of interference and contact between man and man, an idea that will be of relevance in Coetzee’s following novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, written three years after *Barbarians*.

The inconclusive ending of the novel (Poyner 68) brings the motif of looking once again into the focus, suggesting a lack of accomplishment, disillusionment, and resignation on the Magistrate’s part: “I think: ‘There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it.’ [. . .] [I am] feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (170). The above sentence, one of the last ones in the novel, can be read—just like the first sentence of the novel—as a further Oedipal statement. The concluding image of the novel posits the barbarian girl as the owner of the knowing gaze—the owner of knowledge or of “truth”—and the Magistrate as the repetition of Joll, his eyes being filmed over with a thin tarnish similar to Joll’s dark shields, unable to receive the barbarian girl’s look.

Like many of Coetzee's novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians*—like *In the Heart of the Country* (the Magda-Hendrik couple), *Michael K* (the mother-son relation), or *Foe* (the various love relations)—dramatizes the failure of reciprocity in intersubjective relations. “The craving to touch and be touched by another human body sometimes comes over me with such a force that I groan” (105), cries out the Magistrate in a Molloyesque “craving for a fellow” (*Molloy* 15) in his cell, after being locked up for more than two months, denied any human contact but the one with the little boy bringing his food.⁸⁸ “Truly, man was not made to live alone!” (*Barbarians* 87), he cries out in his confinement, but after all, by the end of the novel, one finds the Magistrate alone. The encounter that he craved for—that of two strangers, two others—has not taken place. In the next chapter I shall explore the way the Magistrate's (and Susan's, and Magda's) Molloyesque “craving for a fellow” (or craving for intersubjectivity) is present (or missing) in one of Coetzee's most Beckettian novels, *Life and Times of Michael K*.

⁸⁸ I am referring to Molloy's “craving for a fellow” from the story of A and C in Beckett's *Molloy*. See my next chapter on *Molloy* and *Michael K*.

Chapter Four

Homo Solitarius:

Intersubjectivity in Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Beckett's *Molloy*

“[...] all my life, I think I had been going to my mother [...].”⁸⁹

Samuel Beckett

“We must all leave home, after all, we must all leave our mothers.”⁹⁰

J. M. Coetzee

“S aki él, mind-mind gyermek / és anyaölbe vágy.”⁹¹

József Attila

Cape Town Beckett

Several critics have noted the Beckettian-Molloyan roots and traits of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Coetzee's fourth (and his first Booker-prize winning) novel, written three years after *Barbarians* and three years before *Foe*. Tajiri claims that “in a sense Michael K is Molloy placed in South Africa;”⁹² Bozena Kucala calls attention to the (Molloyesque) “ostensible lack of plot in the novel” (272) and to the fact that, though very differently, both novels question the ability to communicate with others and the power of language to perform its traditional functions (272). Cantor and Kellmann claim that Coetzee derives his narrative techniques and strategies especially from Beckett's trilogy (Cantor 87, Kellmann 161), but consider *Heart of the Country* Coetzee's most Beckettian novel (Cantor 85), unlike Gilbert Yeoh, the most influential critic to insist on this novel's Beckettian traces. Yeoh considers

⁸⁹ *Molloy* (81).

⁹⁰ *Michael K* (154).

⁹¹ „Amit szívedbe rejtesz” (407).

⁹² *Molloy* is the first novel of Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*), written in 1951 in French, translated into English by Beckett and Patrick Bowles in 1955.

Michael K to be the most *Molloy*-like, calling it a “conscious rewriting of *Molloy*” (121) and claiming that it is “modelled after *Molloy*” (128). Yeoh examines how Coetzee’s novel evokes three Beckettian elements—nothingness, minimalism, and indeterminacy—and the Beckettian trademark tropes of blindness, disability and impotence which are envisioned here within the South African reality (121).

In “Samuel Beckett in Cape Town: An Imaginary History”,⁹³ Coetzee imagines what might have happened had Beckett been offered the lectureship at the University of Cape Town in 1937, a job that he applied for but failed to obtain:⁹⁴

Even if S. B. Beckett had been offered the lectureship, he would in all likelihood not have accepted, for his ambitions stretched in another direction. He wanted to be a writer, not a language teacher. [. . .] he might indeed have found himself, in 1938, at the southern tip of Africa.

In that case, the outbreak of the war would have trapped this citizen of neutral Ireland seven thousand miles away from home. What might then have followed?

Conceivably, after years of easy colonial life, he might have found a return to war-ravaged Europe unappealing. Conceivably he might even by then have met and married a South African belle, and settled down and had children. (Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett in Cape Town” 75)

Coetzee ponders what might have happened had Professor Beckett still been in residence at the University of Cape Town in 1957, when he enrolled at that institution as an undergraduate:

Since I would have been no less resistant to adopting Professor Beckett or anyone else as a spiritual father than Professor Beckett would have been to adopting me as a spiritual son, I would in all likelihood have left South Africa once I had graduated—as indeed happened—and have made my way, via England, to the United States. But I would

⁹³ Published in *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett* [2006] on the occasion of the centenary of Beckett’s birth.

⁹⁴ In 1937 the University of Cape Town advertised a vacancy for a lecturer in Italian. T. B. Rudmose-Brown, Professor of Romance Languages, promptly contacted Beckett and suggested that he apply. Beckett followed his teacher’s suggestion, though without enthusiasm. He sent in an application but failed to get the job, which went to a specialist in the Sardinian dialect (Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett in Cape Town” 74-75).

certainly not have spent my time at the University of Texas laboring over a doctoral dissertation on Professor Beckett's prose style.

Whether I would have shaken off the influence of that prose style on my own—whether I would have wanted to shake it off—is another question entirely. (Coetzee, "Samuel Beckett in Cape Town" 75-6)

Interviewed by David Attwell about the influence of Beckett on his fiction, he said: "Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing—that must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose" (Coetzee, *Doubling* 25).⁹⁵ Coetzee's interest in Beckett can be traced back to his absorption in modern linguistics (generative grammar, stylistics, rhetoric and semiotics) in the 60s and 70s, a pursuit that was anticipated by his mathematical studies. His interest in Beckett's "mathematical metaphors and technical obsessions" resulted in a doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin, a stylistic analysis of Beckett's *Watt* (*Doubling* 22), in which he wanted to uncover the "underlying matrix" and the "rules of construction" of Beckett's texts (*Doubling* 25, 1). The encounter with *Watt* and *Molloy* meant much for Coetzee, giving him a "sensuous delight that hasn't dimmed over the years" (*Doubling* 20). What captured Coetzee in *Molloy*—which he described as "a very embodied work"—was "that unbroken concern with rationality," Beckett's capacity of "pushing reason beyond its limits" (*Doubling* 23, 26), "as far as it is humanly possible to go" (*Doubling* 27). Perhaps not incidentally, the same comment has often been used to describe Coetzee. In the 60s when Coetzee started to write, Beckett's fiction stood out as the most engaging and disturbing avant-garde handling of the novel to date, and Beckett remained his most important literary influence (Hayes 2).⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Coetzee and Beckett have been compared in their relation to writing as well: "In English letters of the last century he [Coetzee] may be comparable only with Samuel Beckett in the centrality of writing to his life" (Kannemayer 429). Deidre Bair says writing to Beckett was "the substance of his life. Beckett insists that his life is 'dull and without interest. The professors know more about it than I do'" (640). Like Coetzee, Beckett abhorred the interest in his person and insisted that "nothing matters but the writing," "there has been nothing else worthwhile" (Bair 640).

⁹⁶ In his monograph on Coetzee (*J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett*, 2010), Patrick Hayes suggests that his concern with the style of Coetzee's fiction and with Beckett's legacy in Coetzee's fiction might be seen as constituting a "rather regressively 'literary' approach to a 'postcolonial' writer, attempting to 'depoliticize' his writing. His central argument is indeed that Coetzee's writing should be understood in its broadest terms as an attempt that positions literary value (form)—the "jocoserious" play that governs writing (a term he borrowed from Joyce)—as superior, or even transcendent of, politics (3).

What Gilbert Yeoh does not discuss in his study on the Molloyan roots of *Michael K* is the Beckettian context of the way intersubjectivity is treated in *Michael K*, and this is what I shall address in the novel, which conceives of intersubjectivity differently from *Foe*, or *Heart of Country*, or *Barbarians*. The question this novel seems to raise is whether intersubjectivity, the relationship with the other, is the only possible, viable way for man to live, a question that seems to be answered by the other novels in the affirmative. *Michael K*, however, appears to offer a different answer. I am going to read the connection/relationship of the two novels in the context of the politics of intersubjectivity in the colonial conditions (in the time of apartheid), arguing that Molloy and Michael K's "emptiness," "dullness" or "stupidity" are to be understood as means of resistance.⁹⁷ One could say that Coetzee "translates" *Molloy* into a colonial or apartheid *Michael K*, in the sense that in his novel he historically concretizes Molloy's paralysis. I understand Michael K's bodily defects as symptomatic colonial/apartheid wounds, arguing that the dysfunctional nature of his intersubjective relationships is clearly attributable to the world he lives in, which contaminates all relationships, even the most intimate ones. Michael K's refusal of intersubjectivity is thus a political decision and it is in this context that his (non)relationship to his mother (and to human beings in general) has to be understood. The world he lives in is saturated and infected with power, oppression and violence.

Speaking about the "violence of intersubjectivity," Debra B. Bergoffen argues that for both Hegel and Sartre (and Lacan) "the question of the Other is linked to the question of violence," the aggression of the fight-to-death and of the master-slave struggle or the aggression of the gaze, and "the Other is positioned as the one who destabilizes my experience of myself as occupying a secure and legitimate place in the world" (74). This idea is dramatized in *Michael K*, the novel's protagonist conceiving of the other and of the relationship with the other in this vein. For both Hegel and Sartre, Bergoffen goes on, "the meaning of the relationship between the

⁹⁷ Opening with a motto from Heraclitus' *The Cosmic Fragments*—"War is the father of all and king of all. / Some he shows as gods, others as men. / Some he makes slaves, and others free."—*Michael K* raises the question what form of address is possible under apartheid conditions (Attwell, *South Africa* 4). The motto prefaces a philosophy of war that sets up the pattern of gods versus men and slaves versus free people, "preparing" and prefiguring the protagonist K as a "slave" of apartheid regime. On the other hand, however, it is the "slavery" and helplessness entailed by apartheid that Michael K rejects and escapes when he decides to leave the war-ravaged city behind and live a solitary life in the country. In this sense, he, by his own will and decision, ends up as a free man precisely by rejecting the "laws" of apartheid and thus removing himself from the system.

subject and the Other, and aggression, concerns the refusal of the subject to accept its position in an intersubjective world [. . .]. The violence engendered by the presence of the Other is a violence born of competing claims to subjectivity and of mutual (unwelcome) experiences of vulnerability” (75). “Though all these literatures recognize this violence as an inevitable feature of the human situation, none give violence the last word. [. . .] In each case, transcending the violence of the self-other relationship requires that I recognize the Other’s destabilizing effects on me as the legitimate meaning of intersubjectivity” (Bergoffen 75). The other’s threat to me and my threat to the other is not found in what I do but in the very fact that I am (75). In *Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, Roger Frie too argues that drawing on Hegel, Sartre discusses the nonrelational dimension of individual subjectivity, the ontological separateness between subject and Other and the rejection of intersubjectivity (66-67, 70). This idea of the refusal of intersubjectivity is the question I shall address in Coetzee’s novel. Following Hegel and Sartre, I consider the rejection or refusal of intersubjectivity as a possible type of intersubjectivity. The (Hegelian and Levinasian) subject comes into being as an answer given to the other’s question. Michael K’s answer is that he has no answer, but this lack of an answer to the other is a very meaningful answer. I assume that the intertextual reading of this novel with *Molloy* as well as a reading of the mythical motifs evoked in the two novels shed light on this aspect of the novel.

Beckett’s novel offers several versions of flawed or failed intersubjectivity, and the discussion of the connections between the two novels’ treatment of intersubjectivity may just as well start with an episode in *Molloy* that is also reminiscent of the Sinbad story. The encounter of Molloy with the charcoal-burner is similar to the one between Sinbad and the Old Man, both stories dramatizing the (wish of) refusal of the communion-type relationship with the other. The “young old man” living in the woods wants to offer him shelter and company, then does not let him go away, assailing him. Molloy reacts like Sinbad, finally murdering the man with a hard blow to the head. Here is the episode from *Molloy*:

I had a certain number of encounters in this forest, naturally, where does one not, but nothing to signify. I notably encountered a charcoal-burner. [. . .] He was all over me, begging me to share his hut, believe it or not. A total stranger. Sick with solitude probably. I say charcoal-burner, but I really don’t know. [. . .] [A] long dialogue ensued, interspersed with groans. [. . .] [H]e was born in the forest probably and had spent his

whole life there. I asked him to show me the nearest way out of the forest. I grew eloquent. His reply was exceedingly confused. Either I didn't understand a word he said, or he didn't understand a word I said, or he knew nothing, or he wanted to keep me near him. It was to this fourth hypothesis that in all modesty I leaned, for when I made to go, he held me back by the sleeve. So I smartly freed a crutch and dealt him a good dint on the skull. That calmed him. The dirty old brute. I got up and went on. But I hadn't gone more than a few paces, and for me at this time a few paces meant something, when I turned and went back to where he lay, to examine him. Seeing he had not ceased to breathe I contented myself with giving him a few warm kicks in the ribs, with my heels. (77-78)

Molloy introduces his confrontation with the charcoal-burner as an "encounter" and indeed their confrontation does become an encounter in the Levinasian sense. The charcoal-burner offers a communion-type of relationship to him—he offers Molloy to share his shelter with him, also offering food—but this is rejected by Molloy, suggesting that he conceives authentic communion impossible (which could be read as the driving force behind his quest for the mother). He proves incapable for the communion-type of relationships with anybody (which is as much true of Michael K).⁹⁸ Molloy first considers the charcoal-burner "sick with solitude" (a castaway, alone, like him, in the original story), but later, after "he was all over me" he refers to him as a "dirty old brute," finally doing away with him. Though the man's solitary life in the forest "clearly resembles Molloy's" (Cousineau 65), Molloy's automatic reaction to his offer of shelter and some kind of (sexual) communion is firm rejection: he "seems determined to remain marginal" (Stewart 110), looking at the other as his "assailant" (*Molloy* 79), and pushes him away with a blow on his skull. Even the gesture of rejecting a communion with the other is possible only as a violent one, thus unwittingly returning the "evader" into the world of violence. In the charcoal-burner, Molloy sees a sense of containment (Stewart 110). The same rejection of communion takes place in *Michael K*. This episode encapsulates the main theme of both novels; in both *Molloy* and *Michael K* intersubjectivity as containment and the rejection of intersubjectivity as bondage are primarily presented in the framework of the mother-son relationship.

⁹⁸ Molloy is also invited by Lousse to share shelter and live together with her but, after a shorter or longer time (he doesn't know), he rejects this ménage and leaves (*Molloy* 42-52).

Both novels raise the disturbing question whether the relationship between two strangers is in any way different from the relationship between mother and son/child. Molloy says: “[...] all my life, I think I had been going to my mother with the purpose of establishing our relations on a less precarious footing. And when I was with her, and I often succeeded, I left her without having done anything. And when I was no longer with her I was again on my way to her, hoping to do better the next time [...]” (81). Molloy here talks about his relationship with his mother in terms of a relationship with a stranger, as is the case in *Michael K*. The question both novels raise with an almost unbearable acuteness is this: do I (does one) need another?

Set in war-torn South Africa, *Michael K* tells the story of a slow-witted, hare-lipped man (Michael K) and his fatally ill mother. In his account of the convoluted writing process of *Life and Times of Michael K*, David Attwell calls attention on the fact that the text went through a complete turn-around concerning the figure of the protagonist. Surprisingly, the drafts start off as the story of a white intellectual, an academic, only to end up as the opposite in the end; Michael K, as we know him, is an underclass Black suburban outlaw. Arrested by the police (and having no official papers), in his charge sheet he is identified as: “Michael Visagie—CM—40—NFA—Unemployed” (70), CM standing for Colored Male, and NFA for No Fixed Abode (Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox* 69). Another source and possible model for the protagonist K considered by Coetzee and featuring in the manuscripts was the Kamieskroon killer—an actual murderer who went on a killing spree targeting Whites in the northern Cape town of Kamieskroon. The idea was finally dropped because Coetzee was unable to inhabit his consciousness. The different characters and circumstances of the original manuscript are basically unrelated to the final outlaw narrative and there were several twists and turns before it became the story of the “wise simpleton or idiot-sage or holy fool” we know him to be (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and a Life of Writing* 115).⁹⁹

Abandoned by his mother at a very early age and raised in a foster home until the age of eighteen, Michael doesn’t know parental love. He is carrying his mother in a homemade cart

⁹⁹ The belief that behind Coetzee’s Michael K lies the figure of Kafka’s Josef K is partly true (he even considered the title *The Childhood of Josef K*), but Attwell reveals that Heinrich von Kleist’s German Romantic novel of 1810, entitled *Michael Kohlhaas*, is as much behind Coetzee’s novel, as this becomes clear from the drafts. Nevertheless, Coetzee turned away considerably from his model: while Kohlhaas embraces violence, K does not. Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist” is mentioned at a late stage of drafting of the novel.

back to the land where she was born, but the mother dies on the way. This lack and failure of love between son and mother is one of the central motifs that connect Coetzee's and Beckett's novels. Both protagonists reject communion with the m/other, opting for bare material or animal existence. Invoking Beckett's "aesthetics of nothingness" (Yeoh 123), K lives his solitary life in the veld "wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing" (*Michael K* 69). Yeoh observes that both Molloy and K operate at the level of the minimum in their "body, senses, appetite, locomotion, possession, knowledge, certainty, speech, social stature; [. . .] sexual desire, needs and wants, daily activities" (128).

Both *Michael K* and *Molloy* are quest narratives, organized around a quest for the mother and a quest for a home, but sharing many other motifs like disability, compulsiveness, and intense suffering. It is as if *Michael K* contained Beckett's text in its "memory," like Molloy, the son contains or bears his mother's marks in himself, as Moran explains: "After all perhaps I knew nothing of mother Molloy, or Mollose, save in so far as such a son might bear, like a scurf of placenta, her stamp" (112). The relation between the two texts, however, is by no means hierarchical, with *Molloy*/Beckett taking precedence and ruling over *Michael K*/Coetzee. Rather, it is an ambiguous relationship that recalls a passage from *Molloy* formulated by Moran: "There is no doubt one sometimes meets with strangers who are not entirely strangers, through their having played a part in certain cerebral reels. This had never happened to me, I considered myself immune from such experiences, and even the simple *déjà vu* seemed infinitely beyond my reach" (112). Moran's train of thought is a fair description of the way I see the relationship of the two texts: Molloy (Moran) is "not completely unknown" to Michael K, since he "played a part" in K's "cerebral reels." One of the opening sentences of *Molloy*, for instance, is strongly reminiscent of Michael K's figure: "What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying" (7).¹⁰⁰ K, Coetzee's main character searches for the "things that are left" and "finishes dying." Also, the scene when Michael goes back to his mother's room—and thus comes to his mother's destination—at the end of the novel is reminiscent of the opening sentence of *Molloy*: "I am in my mother's room" (7); "In the room where his mother had lived there was a dense clutter of furniture" (*Michael K* 180). It is as if Coetzee's text were suffering

¹⁰⁰ Another, almost word-for-word repetition of this sentence in *Molloy*: "The day will come for me to say what is left of all I had. [. . .] it will be the end" (76).

from déjà-vu with respect to Beckett's and this way Coetzee's novel writes itself into the inner dynamics of Beckett's text.

For all the striking similarities, the two novels are also very different. For instance, while *Molloy* is a first-person narrative (with two narrators, Molloy and Moran), *Michael K* is a third-person narrative. Also, while Molloy is a speaking and thinking "machine," performing dazzling acts of ratiocination and occasionally using a highly erudite language, Michael K is weak and slow(-witted) in speaking and thinking.¹⁰¹ One could ask if the differences are in any way related to the colonial background of *Michael K*, whether Coetzee is playing with the idea of a "Cape Town Beckett" or a "colonial Beckett." Unlike *Molloy*, *Michael K* is an apartheid story and the colonial condition shapes the general condition of all intersubjective relations; like *Barbarians*, it relates what happens when human relations are blocked or hindered by the political environment.

The opening sentence of *Michael K* initiates one into a (very Beckettian) "deficiency narrative:"¹⁰² "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip" (3). An "exemplary realist sentence, redolent of Thackeray and Dickens, slightly puzzling" (Attridge 51), the opening portrays K from the moment of his birth as a problem, a defective specimen:

The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped. Obscuring the child for a moment from its mother, she [the midwife] prodded open the tiny bud of a mouth and was thankful to find the palate whole.

To the mother she said: 'You should be happy, they bring luck to the household.' But from the first Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months. The child could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger. She tried a bottle; when it could not suck from the bottle she fed it with a teaspoon, fretting with impatience when it coughed and spluttered and cried.

'It will close up as he grows older,' the midwife promised. However, the lip did not close, or did not close enough, nor did the nose come straight. (3)

¹⁰¹ Bozena Kucala reads *Michael K* as a novel which makes part of a "literature of silence," a term coined by Ihab Hassan to describe literary phenomena like Beckett (272).

¹⁰² K's inarticulacy is "originally caused by his bodily deformity" (Kucala 272).

Michael K is born into a racially defined world in which otherness (whether manifesting itself as color of skin or bodily deficiency) has its express—(politically) stigmatized—consequences. K comes into the world with a grimace on his face, a symptomatic wound foreshadowing his future inability to form human relationships. The curling lip and the gaping nostril are tokens of his physical stiffening and symbolic numbing against the war. K, one could say, looks and will act as an idiot “in the face of” war. The sign of disinterest and lack of understanding, the hare lip—contrary to the midwife’s promise that “it will close up as he grows older”—refuses to close up, continuing to gape on the world even after K grows up. Opening with laying bare (exhibiting) K’s birth defect, the novel posits deficiency as a “colonial problem” or “war problem.” War-torn South Africa, it is suggested, cannot help producing defective specimens. The child’s inability to suck his mother’s breast can be attributed either to the physical handicap or to an unconscious refusal to eat: the child also refuses to suck from the bottle, and, when finally fed with a teaspoon, it splutters out the food. Thirdly, his refusal to suck might be seen as the counterpart of the mother’s reluctance to give the breast to a “monster.” Her denial of the “freak son” (“She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months” [3]) seals the child’s fate from the start, marking the beginning of a malfunctioning mother-child relationship.¹⁰³ Marked from birth as a wrong issue, the child Michael is with disturbing frequency referred to as an “it” in the opening passage (five times on the first page only), lending an alienating effect to the idea of the child in time of war. Signaling that children should not be born in time of war, the hare lip gapes idiotically, refusing and unwilling to understand the world. K’s hare lip is a mark of animality, of monstrosity. In the end, he will indeed end up living as an animal on his farm. At the same time, his hare lip is a wound, an opening that Michael cannot choose to close: the mark of an originary vulnerability, an involuntary, naked, defenseless-helpless openness to the world. It is a mark and wound of subjectivity in the Levinasian sense: subjectivity understood as trauma or as an originary traumatism (Critchley, “The Original” 194). In a way, Michael K has always already let the other

¹⁰³ Michael K does not know his mother in fact, their acquaintance being reduced to the son’s Sunday visits to her. Molloy reveals a thoroughly sick mother-son relationship that verges on lunacy (he communicates with her by tapping her skull, she does not know or is unsure about his son’s name, mistakes him for the son’s father, etc.): “We were like a couple of old cronies, sexless, unrelated, with the same memories, the same rancours, the same expectations. She never called me son” (*Molloy* 17).

in, yet, it is the same wound that prevents him from sucking, that is, incapacitates him in terms of the most basic and most intimate kind of intersubjectivity.

Detours: The Story of A and C

“Women don’t like a stranger at the tit.”¹⁰⁴

Jeanette Winterson

The central motif that links the two treatments of intersubjectivity in the two novels is the mother-son relationship. Both protagonists define themselves in and through this relationship or its lack, and both novels (both protagonists) are marked and defined by a “movement toward the mother.” Molloy is never-endingly on his way to his mother, constantly approaching but never reaching her. He is always in-between, never at home, stuck on the road towards her. Following Blanchot, Tamás Bényei talks about the Molloyan nomad mode of existence characterized by a sense of foreignness felt everywhere and a perpetual being on the road (*Archívumok* 62-63). The homeless, nowhere-belonging, rambling modes of existence characterize both protagonists (contrasted and opposed to the homecoming mode of existence).

An early episode of *Molloy* is particularly relevant to the similarities between the treatment of intersubjectivity in the two novels: this is the “story” of A and C, recounting the encounter of two strangers. A and C’s story poses the question of the difference of two kinds of intersubjective relationships: the mother-son (/child) relationship and the relationship of two “total strangers,” like the one between Molloy and the charcoal-burner. *Molloy* dramatizes the contrast between two dispositions (the urge to leave one’s home and the desire for turning back, coming home) through the edifying story of A and C, which is all the more significant as it is this encounter that impels Molloy to go and see his mother: “that night when I saw A and C *and then* made up my mind to go and see my mother” (55, emphasis added). The story goes like this: A and C set out separately on their way out of the town; one of them gets tired and turns back, thus meeting the other: “they raised their heads and observed each other, for a good fifteen paces, before they stopped, breast to breast. Yes, they did not pass each other by, but halted, face to

¹⁰⁴ Weight. *The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (9).

face, as in the country, of an evening, on a deserted road, two wayfaring strangers will, without there being anything extraordinary about it” (9). They exchange a few words, then go their own ways, one (A) back towards the town, the other (C) out of the town, heading toward the lands. C wears a cocked hat, and is overtaken by an “anxiety which was not necessarily his, but of which as it were he partook” (10). A—referred to as a “gentleman” (12)—is bare-headed, wears sand-shoes, smokes a cigar and is accompanied by a Pomeranian dog (a companion dog). C carries a stick: “it was a stout stick, he used it to thrust himself onward, or as a defense, when the time came, against dogs and marauders” (10). The stick or club (prosthesis and weapon at the same time) and dog, “accessories” of the two men, make (of) them hypothetical adversaries: both own and “carry” something to defend themselves with against the other (opponent) or to defeat the other with. It is the accessories that turn the two equal wayfarers into hypothetical adversaries, implying, at the same time, the possibility of the formation of a hierarchical relationship between the two, as the narrator-focalizer Molloy ponders: “if by some strange chance he were to pass that way again, after a long lapse of time, vanquished, or to look for some lost thing, or to destroy something [. . .]” (10-11). Two of the three reasons given for the man’s turning back explicitly suggest the idea of a fight having taken place—one of them has been or is about to become defeated by the other. The idea of a threat is inherent in the encounter: “But the way of walking, the anxious looks, the club, could these be reconciled with one’s conception of what is called a little turn?” (13) In contrast, the third reason for one’s changing his mind and turning back is motivated by a lack and the desire to fill this lack: looking for “some lost thing.” It is this latter conduct that provides the basis for Molloy’s and Michael K’s journeys.

The question is: what does the story of A and C say about Molloy (and Michael K), and what relevance does it carry concerning the nature of intersubjectivity (and the mother-son relationship)? At one point, Molloy’s account of the story of two strangers slips, and their encounter starts sliding into (being) the encounter of two persons very intimately related. Speaking about the dog accompanying one of the two men, Molloy refers to the animal as a companion “that you pick up and take in your arms, from compassion or because you have long been straying with no other company than the endless roads, [. . .] than at long intervals the fellow-convict you long to stop, *embrace, suck, suckle* and whom you pass by, with hostile eyes, for fear of his familiarities” (8, emphasis added,). The dog, it is suggested, is a surrogate for a human companion—the fellow—that one craves for. The intimate, even erotic, tone of the

discourse shatters the neutral tone of Molloy's account. It is as if at this point the story of two strangers started leaking, and the new discourse is concerned with a relationship of a different nature and a higher stake. With the phrases "embrace," "suck," and "suckle" the discourse about the encounter of two fellows becomes permeated with incongruous language, introducing the possibility of a (physical) communion which evokes not so much the erotic embrace of lovers as the polymorphous perverse dyadic sexuality of mother and child. It is the wish for a primary attachment to and affection for another human being that Molloy (the narrator and interpreter of A and C's encounter) expresses here, a craving for a communion or merging of an intensity that is traditionally attributed to the mother-child bond. "[T]he need to have a Ma" (*Molloy* 13) forms a gaping void in both *Molloy* and *Michael K.* It is no wonder that, given this primary lack, both of them are cripples of a sort. Lacking (having lacked)—because never having been offered—this primary love of his mother, Molloy displaces and defers motherly love unto another—a stranger. Indirectly—in a rhetorical slip ("a little turn" [*Molloy* 13])—he expresses his wish for a dyadic unity: the (completeness of the) state when mother and child are still one, when the child has not yet detached from its mother—the breastfeeding stage. The primary craving for the other human being is motivated by this lack, the same which generates his incessant talking. Molloy talks in order to fill this lack.

The story of A and C has a supplementary, compensating role: Molloy speaks about A and C instead of talking about his mother; he needs their story in order to be able to come to talk about his mother. In "Jung and the Narratives of 'Molloy,'" J. D. O'Hara says: "When we begin 'Molloy' we are given no sign that it is the story of Molloy's search for his mother. Indeed, aside from a few puzzles (...) it seems a dismissible matter, and Molloy's own interest is elsewhere. [...] he emphasizes the intensity of the meeting between A and C; he speaks of his own 'soul's leap out to' C. [...] [it is] a vision of possible companionship between men (...), a vision arising from Molloy's loneliness" (22). Ironically, even the "craving for a fellow" is articulated in a roundabout way by Molloy; he starts talking about loving a "mangy cur," once again displacing his craving for the love of a fellow creature: "Until the day when, your endurance gone, in this

world for you without arms, you catch up in yours the first mangy cur you meet, carry it the time needed for it to love you and you it, then throw it away” (12).¹⁰⁵

It is the lengthy detour and displacement of the story of A and C that finally enables Molloy to talk about his mother: “For it is natural I should dilate at lesser length on what I lost than on what I could not lose, that goes without saying” (41). “I needed, before I could resolve to go and see *that woman*, reasons of an urgent nature (...) and I seized with a trembling at the mere idea of being hindered from going *there*, I mean to my mother, there and then” (11 emphasis added). The psychoanalytic, self-analyzing nature and compulsion of Molloy’s narration endows his speech with a talking cure quality. His rhetoric falters whenever it comes to saying “mother,” as if he were unable to utter the word “mother,” or describe the infantile suffering caused by the absence of his mother. His circumlocutory and often unnecessarily wordy and roundabout diction might be seen as a token of his mental and emotional helplessness with regard to his mother.

It is at this point of rhetorical slippage that the stake of Beckett’s treatment of intersubjectivity is revealed. The story of A and C is there to hide what this slippage discloses. The phrases “embrace,” “suck,” and “suckle” function as slips of the tongue of the (psyche of the) text that “give away” the real stake of Beckett’s text, which starts with an account of the encounter of two strangers because it wants to—but cannot directly—talk about the encounter of Molloy with his mother. The slippage in the story of A and C introduces the question of bodily intimacy (asking why strangers [“normally,” usually] do not suckle each other) and the possibility of a (“motherly”) intimacy with a stranger.

¹⁰⁵ On yet another occasion in *Molloy* the dog appears as the surrogate for human love (in general), and, in a deferred way, for motherly love; after Molloy accidentally kills Lousse’s dog, the woman asks him to stay and live with her: “I would as it were take the place of the dog I had killed, as it for her had taken the place of a child” (42).

Prosthetic Relationships: Sisyphus, Roch

“Mount Atlas they soon called me, not for my strength but for my silence.”¹⁰⁶

Jeanette Winterson

Both Michael K and Molloy see their births as accidents, mistakes that should not have taken place. On the other hand, their compulsion to define themselves through their moment of birth anchors the meaning of their lives in their mothers, as if they were born to life not for their own sake but primarily as their mother’s life-time “prostheses,” as we learn about K: “he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (7); Molloy, in turn, says: “if ever I’m reduced to looking for a meaning to my life, you never can tell, it’s in that old mess [his mother] I’ll stick my nose to begin with” (18). Given that their births were traumatic, shouldn’t-have-happened accidents, Molloy and K keep on repeating the unsuccessful, “undigested” event of birth, either verbally or by means of surrogate acts.¹⁰⁷

Neither of them can help being for their mothers (in Hegelian terms they are both slave consciousnesses); this is a “necessity,” as Molloy puts it: “It came back to my mind, from nowhere, like a moment before my name, that I had set out to see my mother, at the beginning of this ending day. My reasons? I had forgotten them. But I knew them, I must have known them, I had only to find them again and I would sweep, with the clipped wings of necessity, to my mother” (27). Molloy cannot give the reasons why he is going to his mother; it is a compulsion, lacking any relevant explanation, except for the notion that “[her] charity kept me dying” (*Molloy* 18). In his word choice—“charity”/“caritas”—Molloy evokes the figure of the breast-feeding mother (often surrounded by several other children), the traditional Renaissance allegorical representation (personification) of charity and of self-sacrificing, unlimited generosity

¹⁰⁶ Weight. *The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (23).

¹⁰⁷ Sucking appears as an emblematic act in Molloy, its meaning both related and unrelated to breastfeeding. According to Leslie Hill, Molloy’s famous stone-sucking game plays the role of a surrogate act. The urge and burden of finding meaning in his birth is juxtaposed with the happiness of the meaninglessness of stone-sucking, which, at the same time, for Molloy, can be read as “a constant encounter with the indigestible” (91). Stone-sucking, just like his birth is no singular event but a “process continually being repeated” (Hill 89). Molloy’s pebble-sucking, at the same time, reminds us of Demosthenes, the prominent Greek orator, who suckled pebbles and thus recited his poems in order to improve his oratorical skills, an idea relevant in Molloy’s speech constraint.

and love in general, but the allegorical reference is ironically twisted in both texts: in Molloy's understanding, his mother kept him dying instead of giving him life (milk), while Michael K comes to occupy the position of being-for-the other designated by the figure of Caritas. On the other hand, the word "necessity" evokes the figure of Ananke, the Greek goddess of fate, often portrayed with wings. The name comes from the ancient Greek word meaning "force, constraint, necessity" and she is the personification of inevitability and compulsion. Molloy's reference to the clipped wings of necessity gives yet another ironical twist to the notion of the mother-son relation. It is grotesque (and comical and symptomatic) that Molloy is suffering from all sorts of problems with his leg, the part of the body that is supposed to bring him to his mother and finally—lacking sound legs—(rhetorically) he chooses to go to her flying (which he is unable to do) on the "clipped wings of necessity" (27), a body-part that he completely lacks (if one reads Molloy's metaphors literally).¹⁰⁸ A third manner of proceeding toward his mother he ponders about is crawling on his belly like a serpent. The final choice of a vehicle to carry him there (succeeding the crutches) will be his bicycle, the physical progress of which is hardly shown; what we see of the bicycle is that Molloy stops and rests on it, "my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms" (20). Journeying for Beckett, Leslie Hill writes, "is a contradictory process, an alternating movement of egress and regress, attraction and repulsion, desire and loathing, displacement and stasis" (61). "For most of the novel," Hill adds, "though the claim must be that he is still on his way to see her, the narrator travels ever further away from her" (86). Molloy's manner of progressing toward his mother resembles more an impotent and helpless backward movement or an endless standing and struggling at one point.

Like Molloy, Michael finds his meaning in being-for-his-mother when she needs him, to serve her in her need. Carrying out "the dutifulness of a dull son" (*Michael K* 7), Michael sets

¹⁰⁸ Molloy's words are, at the same time, reminiscent of Dawn's complaints in *Dusklands* about a pain ("crampedness," like Molloy's) in the back and the lack of (space for) wings on his back. Dawn is broken-winged (he only aspires for wings), while Molloy's wings are clipped. Dawn and Molloy, as well as Michael K, are incapable of/for (incapable to build) an intersubjective relationship, which their various bodily pains and disfunctionalities are symptomatic of (leg problems, back pain, hare lip). In addition, two of Moran's "questions of a theological nature" that preoccupy him directly refer to problems of the leg. The first and second questions read: "What value is to be attached to the theory that Eve sprang, not from Adam's rib, but from a tumour in the fat of his leg (arse?)?" and "Did the serpent crawl, or as Comestor affirms, walk upright?" (166). Moran's questions reinforce Molloy's obsessions with the sickness of legs (and behinds).

out to fulfill what his mother wants him to do: to quit the city (Cape Town) that “held little promise to her” and return her “to the quieter countryside of her childhood” (7), Prince Albert. Vainly waiting for the permits to leave the city, Michael steals handtools and a wheelbarrow from Parks and Gardens to serve his mother in place of the wheelchair that the hospital refuses to supply them with. Carrying his sick mother in a homemade cart padded with blankets and cushions, K looks miserable and defenseless in front of the authorities:

The cart was not really big enough, he realized: it bore her weight, but she [his mother] had to sit hunched under the canopy, unable to move her limbs. [. . .] K kept up a steady pace, stopping every half-hour to rub his cold hands and flex his aching shoulders. The moment he settled his mother in the cart in Sea Point he realized that, with all the luggage packed in the front, the axle was off centre, too far back. Now, the more his mother slid down the box trying to make herself comfortable, the greater the deadweight he found himself lifting. (20-1)

Just like Molloy’s manner of “unprogressing” towards his mother, the image of Michael stooping and bending down to push the heavy load in front of him recalls the image of Sisyphus rolling the huge rock up a steep hill. Sisyphus received this task as a punishment for his violation against the gods (for betraying Zeus’s secret about abducting Aegina, daughter of river god Asopus).¹⁰⁹ Like Sisyphus, Michael violates the laws, stealing from Parks and Gardens and “abducting” his mother. Laboring under the deadweight of the load of the cart bearing his mother, K’s shoulders ache, his arms go numb, his muscles are strained to the limit. Michael’s work is Sisyphean also because of the meaninglessness of the task: on the way to the land where she was born the mother dies. The heights that K struggles towards and continually falls back from are personified in the figure of the mother who pushed him away at his birth and who pushes him away neverendingly every Sunday when he goes to visit her and is then bound to leave her. He reaches the heights—on Sundays he “unites with” (meets) his mother—only to be thrown down to the depths (to leave her) again. Their encounters follow the painful nearing-

¹⁰⁹ He is known as the greatest rascal, famed for being deceitful, the emblematic figure of cunning (he raped Anticleia and thus *he* is father of the most cunning one, Odysseus, rather than Laertes, as Homer suggests [Graves 316, Kerényi 163, 235]). He also took pleasure in killing travelers and guests coming into his kingdom. His wife Tyro (daughter of his hated brother Salmoneus) slayed the twins she had from her uncle Sisyphus.

departing, releasing-recalling rhythm of an inverted fort-da game, where the mother plays the son's mastering role.

The myth of Sisyphus, so central to Beckett's *Molloy*, is evoked by Moran. In a sense, both Molloy and Moran can be seen as Sisyphean figures and their journeys as Sisyphean fiascos: Molloy only has memories of having spent time with his mother, but in the "narrating present" he is never with her. It is Moran, on the way to find Molloy but never finding him, who evokes the myth:

But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places. And it may even be they are not too particular about the route he takes provided it gets him to his destination safely and on time. And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction. (133)

It is the Sisyphean plight of never reaching one's destination that *Molloy* and *Michael K* share. The boulder from Sisyphus' myth is personified by the mother in both novels. Portrayed as carrying the boulder either on his back (like Atlas) (as for example, in a painting by Titian) or embracing it in his lap (as on an Attic vase from the 5th century, BC), Sisyphus's figure is as apposite as the recurrent story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea, which is indirectly invoked (alluded to but not named) by the medical officer in his letter written to K to portray his burdensome relationship to his mother. Though the name Sinbad is not mentioned, taking into consideration the antecedents of the story in the previous novels, it is quite obvious that the medical officer refers to this story:

And—if I may be personal—you should have got away at an early age from that mother of yours, who sounds like a real killer.¹¹⁰ You should have found yourself another bush as far as possible from her and embarked on an independent life. You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside. Because when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all the other feats of filial piety you no

¹¹⁰ The phrasing once again recalls *Molloy*: "I know she [mother] did all she could not to have me [. . .]. [. . .] And I forgive her for having jostled me a little in the first months and spoiled the only endurable, just endurable, period of my enormous history" (18).

doubt performed, I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death. (150)¹¹¹

The medical officer's imaginary portrayal of K's mother evokes not only the image of the Old Man sitting on Sinbad's shoulders, but also the mythical figure of the monstrous Empusa: "[. . .] your mother in her circle of flaming hair grinning and beckoning to you with crooked finger to pass through the curtain of light and join her in the world beyond" (*Michael K* 150).¹¹² In both novels, the mother occasionally assumes the appearance of this fearsome child-devouring female Chronos (Saturn) in the son's mind.

The parasitical intersubjectivity of the Sinbad story (here illustrating the mother-son relationship) is portrayed by yet another legendary figure—Saint Roch—whose story, invoked by Molloy, has relevance in both Beckett's and Coetzee's novels. The motif of sucking is significant in both Beckett's and Coetzee's novels. Apart from the previously discussed passage and the famous stone-sucking game, it comes up once again in the second half of *Molloy*, where the narrator, Moran, poses several questions of a theological nature that greatly preoccupy him. The tenth question reads: "Is it true that the infant Saint-Roch refused suck on Wednesdays and Fridays?" (167) A Christian saint and confessor known to have lived in the 12th or 13th century, Saint Roch is one of the "plague saints" (a group that includes Saint Rosalia and Saint Sebastian). His birth was considered a miracle, for his noble mother had been barren until she prayed to the Virgin Mary. Miraculously marked from birth with a red cross on his breast, he began early to evince strict asceticism and great devoutness. On days when his "devout mother fasted twice in the week," "the blessed child Rocke abstained him twice also (...) and would

¹¹¹ The same image of "mother death" appears in *Foe*, portraying Susan Barton as just such a mother to the little girl appearing to her when she lives in Foe's house, claiming she is her mother.

¹¹² Often illustrated with flaming hair, the mythical Empusai are fearsome underworld daemons, the daughters of Hecate, who frightened travelers. The ancient equivalents of vampires and succubi, they were believed to devour human beings. Often associated with the Lamiai, the Empusai assumed different forms, seducing young men and sucking their blood so that they died of their wounds (Graves 276, 300). Robert Graves mentions that Lamia was seduced by Zeus and out of jealousy Hera murdered her children. In revenge, Lamia murdered the children of others. Later she joined the Empusai. Graves notes that child-murder formed an integral part of their mysteries (Graves 300). The motif of child-murder is also relevant in Sisyphus's story (his wife Tyro murdering their children) and it is a recurrent theme in "The Cruel Mother" murder ballads (in both English/Scottish and Hungarian versions [collected by Zoltán Kallós]).

suck his mother but once that day” (*Legenda Aurea*). The patron saint of pilgrims, invalids and falsely accused people, Roch is “brother” (fellow) to both Molloy and Michael K, themselves pilgrims of a kind, invalids, and falsely accused people.¹¹³

In the Saint Roch legend, the issue of suckling plays the role of presenting the child Roch’s solidarity and commiseration with his fasting mother, a symbolic reinforcement of the bond between child and mother. While in Saint Roch’s legend, the child Roch’s refusal to suck is a factor tightening the mother-son relationship, in the case of K it serves to separate the child from his mother. The act of sucking reappears towards the end of the novel, when a prostitute performs fellatio on K—an act of charity offered to him by the other homeless people to cheer him up—, which he receives with passivity, experiencing it as degrading. Sucking, thus, acquires negative connotations in Coetzee’s novel, associated with the burdensome nature of intersubjectivity: sucking—dependence on the other—is rejected by the son, while the child refusing to suck is a burden to the mother, and the act of prostitution is experienced as shameful by Michael. It is this degrading experience that makes him realize that he abhors all companionship (whatever its nature) and he now comes to declare that solitude accords him the only means of achieving authenticity.

The figures of A and C and that of Saint Roch foreshadow Molloy’s and Michael K’s features in another respect as well, through the motif of the stick, an attribute of the wayfarer C and of the pilgrim Roch. An accessory that functions partly as a weapon and partly as a tool to aid one in walking, the stick may also function as prosthesis to help one move about. Bényei talks about the flawed, deficient functioning of the phenomenological subject in Beckett. The

¹¹³ Roch also personifies solitude, a lonely wayfarer like Molloy and Michael K. Accompanied only by his dog, he also recalls the figures of A and C from *Molloy*, themselves foreshadowing Molloy’s sense of lack and his narrative of loneliness and solitude. *The Medieval Sourcebook: the Golden Legend or the Lives of Saints* cites a prayer to Saint Roch: “Dear medical pilgrim, you once took care of the sufferers. You yourself had no home and you died in a dungeon. No wonder countless invalids have confidently invoked your help” (“Golden Legend” n.p.). The prayer portrays a Saint Roch who very much resembles Coetzee’s Michael K, both men personifying self-sacrifice (being for another) (“charity,” “caritas”), the idea of homelessness and asceticism. The text of the prayer could be said to portray K as well, himself a “medical pilgrim,” a guardian angel making his appearance to take care of his suffering mother and to carry out her last wish before she dies. K also resembles Vercueil in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990), the homeless figure showing up in Mrs. Curren’s garden on the day when she learns the news of her deadly illness. He will escort her during her last days as K accompanies his mother on her last journey.

sense of space in *Molloy* is defective, the protagonists' (phenomenological) body does not function the way it should, space appears to the subject as a "cannot," and the body needs complements and prostheses (bicycles, crutches, sticks) to move and to manipulate space (*Archívumok* 58). Michael K's hare lip and Molloy's (and Moran's) lame leg are disabilities that are both causes and symptoms—physical and symbolic—of the malfunctioning mother-son relation. K's hare lip prevents him from sucking; due to his foot injury, Molloy moves toward his mother riding a bicycle, and when he is not using a bicycle he uses his crutches. Molloy's and K's relation to their mothers might be characterized as prosthetic; instead of directly approaching (and touching) their mothers, they both advance toward their mothers through supplements; it is sticks, crutches, bicycles, wheelbarrows and homemade carts that lead or take them on their way to their mothers.¹¹⁴

Presenting motherlessness and homelessness as inseparable from the colonial condition, *Michael K*, like *In the Heart of the Country*, is about the "failure of love and reciprocity" (Attwell, *Doubling* 97). Love—motherly or filial—is impossible. The episode of K's arrest on the road while he is carrying his mother's ashes and the soldiers' examination and emptying of his suitcase—his (mother's) on-the-way home in his homelessness—amounts to an aggressive and humiliating home-raid:

K lifted the suitcase off his shoulder and opened it. The soldier waved him back, pinched out his cigarette, and in a single movement overturned the case. Everything lay there in the road: the blue felt slippers, the white bloomers, the pink plastic bottle of calamine lotion, the brown bottle of pills, the fawn plastic handbag, the floral scarf, the scallop-rim scarf, the black woolen coat, the jewelry box, the brown skirt, the green blouse, the shoes, the other underwear, the brown paper packets, the white plastic packet, the coffee tin that rattled, the talcum powder, handkerchiefs, letters, photographs, the box of ashes. K did not stir. (36)

K's suitcase contains what is left to him of his mother—her past, her memory, her smells, her pains (handkerchiefs, letters, photographs). K's carrying of his mother's suitcase portrays K in his servitude (his "being-for-another" attitude) to her mother, a burden-carrier; he dwells in her home (her suitcase), he dwells her life, lacking his own, like Molloy living in her mother's room rather than in his own, carrying *her* past and *her*—for him useless—belongings): "That

¹¹⁴ Moran is lame too, his leg is wounded and he also uses a bicycle to go on.

was what she wanted me to do” (48), he says. The emptying of their suitcase symbolically repeats K’s and his mother’s eviction in the city, but is at the same time symbolic of an enforced letting go of the mother, as if in a premature birth, in which the mother dies (is killed and left behind), the son left with the mother’s ashes. Unhoused and deprived of all his property, K’s helpless reaction to the soldier’s violation of his “home”—of his mother, of what is left of his mother—is characteristically Beckettian: “K did not stir” (36). The word “stir” is a typically Beckettian word (Bényei, *Archívumok* 66-7) and in its negative (“K did not stir”) it also alludes to K’s (“Molloyan”) longing for the “stoneness of being.” The negative form of the verb related to K gains even more significance as the same verb appears in the positive-affirmative in relation to the soldier doing the “home-raid” (emptying of the suitcase): “The soldier stirred the contents around [...]” (37). Considering both sentences, K’s conduct of doing the opposite (not stirring) of what the soldier does (stirring) is an act of resistance.

“A creature beyond:”¹¹⁵ Gardening

“Truly, man was not made to live alone.”¹¹⁶

J. M. Coetzee

“Too much misery, too much solitude makes of one an animal.”¹¹⁷

J. M. Coetzee

Leaving the suitcase behind, K parts with and leaves behind the “mother-burden.” His arrival at the farm, that is, the end of the physical quest, initiates his quest for an authentic sense of selfhood, as he remarks in a Beckettian-phenomenological sentence: “Now I am here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere” (52). Michael’s statements convey a strong sense of arrival, of the possibility of finding himself on the farm. “Now I am here” might be seen as a version of “Here I am,” but while Magda’s and Susan Barton’s “Here I am” convey their

¹¹⁵ *Life and Times of Michael K* (151).

¹¹⁶ *In the Heart of the Country* (80), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (87).

¹¹⁷ *In the Heart of the Country* (58).

dissatisfaction with being alone, K's "Now I am here" suggests a contentment in being alone. On the farm he starts building a home (life) of his own. "Unbearing, unborn" (135), he is now born (he bears himself) into a new home also in the sense that he develops a very intimate, almost familial relation with the seeds he plants, thinking of them in family terms, taking care of them as if they were his children, calling the first ripe pumpkin his firstborn (113): "Now two pale green melons were growing on the far side of the field. It seemed to him that he loved these two, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers. Under the melons he placed pads of grass so that their skins should not bruise" (113). He is worried to leave them alone when he has to go to the city to do his shopping: "Now when I am most needed, he thought, I abandon my children" (63).

For the first time in his life, he finds pleasure and happiness in being a cultivator, in making a blooming farm out of the desert. Finding authenticity in being a gardener makes him speak the words of God or those of Adam, the first man and first tiller of the soil (somebody whose lot is labour): "Now it is completed, he said to himself. All that remains is to live here quietly for the rest of my life, eating the food that my own labour has made the earth to yield. All that remains is to be a tender of the soil" (113). He feels that now "he was himself" (115).¹¹⁸ In contrast to other Coetzee figures who suffer from solitude and aspire for communion with the other, Michael is content to be on his own; he aspires for an insect's existence which means a happy alternative for him for intersubjectivity.

K's "different packet of seeds, for each pocket" (*Michael K* 182) that he will take with himself after he leaves his farm) are reminiscent of Molloy's pebbles—they are their most treasured possessions (Head 105), and likewise somehow (indirectly) related to (un)birth in the sense that they might be read/understood as referring to his unwillingness to have children, the seeds taking the place and playing the role of K's unborn children—his seeds. Trying to understand K, at the end of the novel the medical officer fixes K's meaning in his inability to be born and to father offsprings,¹¹⁹ an inability which is attributed to the time of war he was (not) born in: "Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature" (135).

¹¹⁸ The phrasing (inversely) echoes the Magistrate's words in *Barbarians*: "I am not myself" (104).

¹¹⁹ This unwillingness of K's to have/father offsprings stands in contrast with Molloy's remark at the beginning of his narrative: "All I need now is a son" (3).

His encounter with the Visagie grandson on the farm marks a significant stage in his evolution. A deserter from the army, the boy takes refuge on his late grandparents' farm, the farm where K has taken up residence and started the cultivation of his pumpkins. From the first moment, Michael refuses a hierarchical relationship, though the boy strives to set up a master-servant relationship with him ("I am boss Visagie's grandson" [62].), feeling superior to the "servant," as he calls Michael, and he tries to convey a sense of "accusation, threat, reprimand" toward him (61, 64).¹²⁰ Michael resolutely rejects the boy's attempts to control or master him: "Already it was hard to believe that he had known someone called the Visagie grandson who had tried to turn him into a body-servant" (65). He refuses because "The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one (...)" (67). He withdraws from contaminated human contact, and feels as if he was merging with the soil that he is cultivating: "If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heel. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. [. . .] I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in the sand" (67-8). Once again like a Beckettian character, K describes his transformation into stone.

¹²⁰ The open fight for power and the direct refusal of subjection with the Visagie grandson recalls the memory of Huis Norenus to K's mind: "As a child K had been hungry, like all the children of Huis Norenus. Hunger had turned them into animals who stole from one another's plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings. Then he had grown older and stopped wanting. Whatever the nature of the beast inside him, it was starved into stillness. [. . .] One of the teachers used to make his class sit with their hands on their heads, their lips pressed tightly together and their eyes closed, while he patrolled the rows with his long ruler. In time, to K, the posture grew to lose its meaning as punishment and became an avenue of reverie;" (68). The evasion of the aggressive setting up of master-servant roles is learned and practiced by K from early childhood. *Molloy* too abounds in power-based, hierarchical human relations. Molloy's relationship with his mother and the policeman arresting him, Moran's relationship with his son, with the servant Marthe, with the agent are all, directly or indirectly, master-servant relations or instances of parasitical intersubjectivity, some of them literally enforced by ropes and knives: Moran binds his son to himself with a rope and contrives to force him not to leave him by keeping the son's beloved scout knife with him. Violence appears as necessary and unavoidable. The lack of this parasitical intersubjective relationship with the other is formulated by Molloy when he talks about his (very bodily) sufferings: "Molloy or life without a chambermaid" (54).

He realizes that the best way to evade subjection is to evade any possibility to be addressed, that is, to become invisible. The Visagie grandson's statement—"Michael, I am speaking to you as one human being to another" (64)—is an ironic complement to the question of address in the novel, the boy's aim being the opposite, to subject K rather than address him equally. K will resort to a mimetic behavior, melting into nature, hiding from the world outside, taking every precaution not to leave any trace behind, merging with his farm, becoming a plant himself. He will find authenticity in loneliness, in the evasion of any social relation whatever, that is, in the refusal to live as a human being:

How fortunate that I have no children, he thought, how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling. I would fail in my duties, I would be the worst of fathers. Whereas it is not hard to live a life that consists merely of passing time. I am one of the fortunate ones who escape being called. (104)

Michael becomes what Magda from *Heart of Country* fears: "too much solitude makes of one an animal" (58). Canepari-Labib notes in reference to *In the Heart of the Country* that "it is the possibility to interact with other human beings that determines the individual's 'humanity' and prevents a regression into an animal state" (30). The statement is equally true of Michael K and it is this possibility of interaction between human beings as human beings that is annulled in time of war. Echoing the title of Coetzee's earlier *In the Heart of the Country*, *Michael K* makes the terrifying point that children (human beings) are not for war, man should not be born in time of war, as Michael insists, and if they are, they are foredoomed to be(come) the faulty and sick specimen that K is (has become).

In the end, K, like Molloy, finds authenticity, or at least peace, in mental and bodily paralysis, in the "stoneness" of being (or in what Attridge calls "the 'insectness' of being" [56]). As the medical officer observes:

He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. *Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature.*

I cannot really think of him as a man, though he is older than me by most reckonings.
(135, emphasis added)

With an overt reference to Kafka and Kafkaesque metamorphosis, “Waving an arm like an insect’s claw” (*Michael K* 135), Michael K has become an “insect” as a result of living in time of war, the medical officer insists. He has become an “opgaarder,” an Afrikaans word meaning “gatherer,” “hoarder,”¹²¹ a word that brings the association of somebody who carries something or somebody—a porter, like Sinbad, which he used to be. Also, he is likened to “a squirrel or an ant or a bee” (*Michael K* 137), no longer human, slowly distancing himself from the human world surrounding him and becoming one with the garden he keeps. Yeoh argues that K’s “minimal [Molloyesque] being” is reflected through Coetzee’s use of metaphors for K: pebble, insect, ant, termite, earthworm, mouse, snail (many of which are the medical officer’s descriptions of him). Finding authenticity in merging with the soil he cultivates, he comes to utter the divine words “I am what I am” (130). It is after going back to the place where his mother lived and stating “Now I am back” (180) that he finally claims: “[. . .] the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground” (181). And then he adds: “I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (182).¹²²

Bényei notes that Molloy and Moran are obsessed with animals (dogs, sheep, cows, chicken, horses, bees) and objects, as if human existence should define and validate itself in the face of objects, in the world of objects in every moment, precisely because the borderline separating man from object—despite its opacity—is so unbelievably slender (*Archívumok* 61, my translation). The stone-human being opposition runs through Beckett’s trilogy (Bényei, *Archívumok* 61), and Michael K conceives not being addressed as the (non)action that offers him the happiness of the “stoneness” or “insectness” of being (living as a mole or earthworm, invisible in his garden). K formulates the opposite of Magda’s claim in *In the Heart of Country*: “Truly, man was not made to live alone” (80). Michael K aspires for Moran’s “extended

¹²¹ <http://www.majstro.com/dictionaries/Afrikaans-English/opgaarder>

¹²² In the closing (self-defining) passage of the novel, Michael K’s thoughts are presented as first person monologues and in the crucial final pages “free indirect discourse” is used (Head 101).

paralysis sparing only consciousness” (O’Hara 37). At one point, the increasingly Molloyesque Moran fantasizes about total paralysis:

Such are the advantages of a local and painless paralysis. And it would not surprise me if the great classical paralyses were to offer analogous and perhaps even still more unspeakable satisfactions. To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something, my mind swoons when I think of it. And mute into the bargain! And perhaps as deaf as a post! And who knows as blind as a bat! And just enough brain to allow you to exult! (140)

K’s final condition resembles Molloy’s initial hiding attitude and mimetic behavior as the narrator of A and C’s story. Flattened against a rock “the same colour as myself, that is grey” (*Molloy* 8), Molloy observes (A and) C. Like Michael K, Molloy merges with the inanimate nature surrounding him. They both are outsiders, invisible “chameleons” (*Molloy* 25). Hiding, Molloy observes of C: “He hadn’t seen me” (8). Molloy and Michael K want to stay invisible. They (want to) tell a story about themselves invisible and silent. At the beginning of his narrative (in the middle of the story of A and C) Molloy remarks: “What I need now is stories, it took me a long time to know that, and I’m not sure of it. [. . .] And to think *I try my best not to talk about myself*” (13, emphasis added). Molloy’s remark raises a question that concerns the whole of his narrative: is *Molloy* a narrative about the self or about the other? Is he talking about himself because he cannot talk about the other?

The motif of storytelling appears in Michael K’s final words as well: “I am more like an earthworm [. . .]. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (182). K ends up living in silence, not telling stories (before he used to tell stories to himself rather than being told stories). Molloy’s tragedy is that for him the experience of encountering another is, in fact, unknown for “I never left myself” (9). He therefore has no other knowledge and experience than (and no other choice but to learn and tell) “the laws of the mind [. . .], of my mind [. . .]” (9). In the end of his narrative Michael K ends up invisible like Molloy at the beginning of his narrative, grey, like a rock (*Molloy* 6). One could say that K’s final narrative of silence is told by Molloy and in *Molloy*. Molloy goes on talking “the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind [. . .]” (9) where Michael K stops talking.

Conclusion: Orpheus and Eurydice

“Cuando me encuentran yo no soy.”¹²³

Manu Chao

“Hendrik and I, in our different ways, ruined for love.”¹²⁴

J. M. Coetzee

“whatever we embraced wilted”¹²⁵

J. M. Coetzee

My dissertation is an examination of stories of colonial intersubjectivity in Coetzee’s early novels. Drawing upon Hegelian and Levinasian ideas of intersubjectivity, it joins the ethical strand of the critical reception, represented by the likes of Attridge and Marais. In my readings of the individual novels, I started out from small textual details, repeated patterns and motifs of intersubjective encounters (primarily, versions of the embrace, of carrying another on one’s back and of the gaze), showing how these recurrent instances function like core fantasies of Coetzee’s narratives. I also tried to show that these basic scenarios of intersubjectivity permeate the fictional world of the individual novels partly through evoking certain mythological stories in a manner that seems typical of Coetzee. Perhaps also due to the seemingly fragmented and desultory presence of myths in his fiction, this is still an under-researched area in the reception.

In the conclusion I shall consider the references made to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in Coetzee’s seventh novel, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), to explore once again the nature of the stories of intersubjectivity told by Coetzee’s novels through the web of mythological references. A novel about the trauma of losing a son, *The Master of Petersburg* is a text of mourning both in the sense that in it the protagonist Dostoevsky tries to work through the

¹²³ “Desaparecido.”

¹²⁴ *In the Heart of the Country* (129).

¹²⁵ *Dusklands* (17).

trauma of loss (and through him Coetzee the trauma of the loss of his own son¹²⁶) and in the sense that the novel textually performs the work of mourning by trying—and failing—to understand this loss. Coetzee's Dostoevsky cites the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in connection with the death of his son and his own experience of this loss. The presence of the Orpheus myth in *Petersburg* is significant for my argument in that it tells the story of a wished-for but (never realized) communion and in this it is suggestive of the difficult and wounded nature of intersubjectivity that Coetzee's novels evoke.¹²⁷

In *The Master of Petersburg* Dostoevsky's mourning is gradually saturated with certain mythological motifs and stories. It is as if the very state of mourning evoked mythological stories by its sheer archaic intensity. Reminiscences and traces of the myths of Daedalus, Penelope, and Orpheus are at play in the novel, informing Dostoevsky's mourning and his "tale of Pavel," his son. *The Master of Petersburg* evokes the myth of Orpheus (and those of Penelope and Daedalus) as underlying subtexts behind the story of the death of Dostoevsky's son and of his mourning. These myths are there *in place of*. As in Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," in which it is not Orpheus who is crying but his lyre *instead of him* ("out of one lyre / more grief came than from all grieving women"), in this novel these myths follow a figurative logic. Like Penelope, Dostoevsky weaves with these myths a new tapestry, composing his loss in different ways—into *patterns*. Coetzee's method of planting mythological fragments in the novels discussed in this dissertation is similarly tropological. These mythical fragments function as evoked, rudimentary metanarratives to the characters' stories of identity serving to complement their narratives.

The role of the fragments of myth in Coetzee's novels, at the same time, raises the question of the significance of the postcolonial context of his fiction. As Michael Bell argues: "Much [myth]interpretation today accords a great deal of importance to the recognition of the contexts in which myths originate" (6). The context of Coetzee's novels poses the question of the

¹²⁶ Mourning as a theme of the novel has a biographical aspect as Coetzee's son died in 1993 in an accident (in a mysterious fall from a high balcony) when he was twenty three, shortly before the writing of *The Master of Petersburg*.

¹²⁷ Only Mike Marais calls attention to Coetzee's repeated references to the Orpheus myth in his oeuvre, reading the myth as an "analogue for the writer's desire for the Other and the literary ambiguity which complicates this desire" ("Little Enough" 163).

postcolonial significance of these myths (if one can point out any postcolonial significance or relevance in them), a question that sheds light on the particularity of Coetzee's use and understanding of myth. While myths are usually understood as ahistorical and abstract (Coupe 5), in Coetzee they seem to serve as a means "politicizing" his narratives; what one finds behind his myths is politics and power games, as in *Dusklands* or *Foe* where the stories of Sinbad and Herakles portray the ambivalent politics of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, or in *Barbarians*, where the scattered traces of the Oedipus myth suggest the ways in which no intimate intersubjective relations are allowed to remain untainted by the power dynamics of the Empire. In most of these novels, the mythological traces or motifs are not assigned exclusively to certain characters; instead, they are disseminated among the characters in unpredictable ways. In *Dusklands* and *Foe* both participants of the colonial scenario play the role of the "aggressor" Old Man. The role of the blind Oedipus (read as representing one's colonial fear from the other) is played variously by the Magistrate, Colonel Joll and the barbarian girl in *Barbarians*, where traces of Oedipus and Tiresias are divided between the representatives and victims of imperial violence. In *Michael K* the (occurrence of the) Sinbad story further consolidates the reversibility of roles, Michael and his "opponents" jointly experiencing and rejecting the other's presence as burden. *Dusklands* and *Foe* juggle with the roles of the carrier or the carried in the Sinbad tale performed by both the colonizer and the colonized, having Jacobus, Klawer, Susan and Friday try and occupy both roles in the mythical narratives. The instability of colonial roles might be said to suggest the reversibility of the roles of colonizer and colonized—as in the allegory of the colonial gaze referred to earlier. This reversibility is yet another trait that would align Coetzee with the postmodernist tradition of mythopoetics. Linda Hutcheon claims that postmodernism contests myth, investigates and questions it (48). The reversibility of roles in the myths invoked in Coetzee's novels might be seen as an instance of the postmodernist ironic contestation of myth, where there is no consolation of a fixed, culturally approved meaning (Hutcheon 50). Steven Connor claims that the difference between postmodern myth and modernist myth is that "where Modernism sought single and universal truth in myth, postmodernity embraces myth's multiplicity" (267). Through an instantaneous juxtaposition of mythical narratives with the colonial narratives of his fictional worlds, as well as through the permutation of the mythical traces among the characters, Coetzee contests and questions the univocal meaning of myth, teasing out its multivalence.

One could also argue that, rather than evoking myth in order to provide the (colonial) narratives with prestige and fixed meaning, myth in Coetzee works towards destabilizing not only meaning but also the narrated scenarios of intersubjectivity. Maurice Blanchot talks about the function of myth in the encounter between the self and the Other, pointing to myth as one of the factors that are *not* part of the ethical relation: “The human relation is terrible, because it is tempered by no intermediary. [. . .] It is a naked relation, *without myth*” (59, emphasis added). “When man truly approaches the Other, he is uprooted from history” (*Totality* 52), says Levinas, and we might add with Blanchot that when man truly approaches the Other, he is also uprooted from myth. Coetzee’s early novels are portrayals or retellings of what happens when “man truly approaches the Other” and the fragments and flashes of myth play a double role in his scenarios of intersubjectivity. Partly, through myth’s inherent meaningfulness, they try to alleviate the traumata of the (colonial and metaphysical) encounter, trying to embed it into meaning(fulness). At the same time, however, precisely through their brokenness and fragmentariness, they rhetorically perform and present the traumata of this encounter. As William G. Doty and Eric Gould claim, in myth “what is to be interpreted is the Other, that which is not present, that which is concealed” (qtd in Doty 188). In Coetzee, myth appears as the narratives’ Other, that is why it appears in a fragmentary and unassimilable nature. The scattered body of myth in Coetzee’s early novels functions in an Orphic manner, like Orpheus after his death, whose body is scattered all over, being torn apart by the Maenads (Ovid, Book XI, 1-66). In *Petersburg* the father Dostoevsky perceives his son’s death in a similar Orphic manner. Pavel is “torn and scattered like Orpheus” (152). Pavel is figured as the dead Orpheus and the father’s task left to him is “to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts” (152). Myths flash up in a similar, analogous manner in Coetzee’s fiction; instead of featuring as full-bodies stories, they are instantaneous or sudden associations, “torn and scattered like Orpheus.”

The Master of Petersburg deliberately and repeatedly calls the Orpheus legend into play, by having Dostoevsky refer to Pavel either as a (dead) Orphic figure¹²⁸ or as a Eurydice figure and to himself as a (failing) Orpheus: “Ultimately it will not be given him to bring the dead boy back to life. Ultimately, if he wants to meet him, he will have to meet him in death” (237-8). “Poetry might bring back his son. But he is not a poet. [. . .] A gate has been closed behind his son, a gate bound sevenfold with bands of iron. To open that gate is the labour laid upon him”

¹²⁸ See Michelle Kelly’s study on the novel in Tim Mehigan’s (ed.) book.

(17, 19). Mike Marais's (Blanchotian-Levinasian) reading of the novel marks the presence of the Orpheus myth in the novel as a metaphor for that desire which inspires Dostoevsky to write, suggesting a relation between writing and death, Orpheus's encounter with Eurydice being an encounter with the dead ("Death" 90).¹²⁹ Just like Orpheus, Marais argues, Dostoevsky betrays (rather than reestablishes) the filial relation ("Death" 91). The consequent paradox of the novel, Marais notes, is that in failing to find the right words in his mourning, he establishes what Levinas terms as "unrelating relation" (*Totality* 295) ("Death" 92).

According to the legend, Orpheus is driven into the underworld by his desire for his wife. So, unlike Perseus, Heracles, Theseus, or Iason, he undertakes the trip to Tartaros out of love; he goes down wailing (Ovid, Book X, 1-85, Kerényi 366). Even Hades is moved by his song and he only shows mercy once, allowing Orpheus to bring his wife back to the land of the living as long as she walks behind him and he never tries to look at her face until they reach the surface. Dostoevsky "thinks of Orpheus walking backwards step by step, whispering the dead woman's name, coaxing her out of the entrails of hell; of the wife in graveclothes with the blind, dead eyes following him, holding out limp hands before her like a sleepwalker" (*Petersburg* 5). In the myth, Orpheus agrees but fails, looking back at the very end to make sure his wife is following, and thus he loses Eurydice forever (Ovid, Book X, 1-85, Graves 159). The novel conjures up the central moment of Orpheus's attempt to rescue his wife—the act of looking backward:

Not oblivion but the moment before oblivion, when I come panting up to you at the rim of the well and we look upon each other for a last time, knowing we are alive, sharing this one life, our only life. All that I am left to grasp for: the moment of that gaze, salutation and farewell in one, past all arguing, past all pleading: 'Hello, old friend. Goodbye, old friend.' Dry eyes. Tears turned to crystals.

I hold your head between my hands. I kiss your brow. I kiss your lips.

¹²⁹ Concerning the evoked figures of Orpheus and Eurydice, Michelle Kelly discusses how it is precisely the risk implicit in how one treats one's inspiration that gives inspiration its power (144). Chiara Lombardi also examines the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice and that of Eros and Psyche as illustrations and representations of the paradoxical relation between life and writing.

The rule: one look, one only; no glancing back. But I look back. . . . Forever I look back. Forever I am absorbed in your gaze. (53-54) ¹³⁰

The test Hades sets for Orpheus is a test of desire. It is Orpheus's desire for the other, the beloved woman—not to resist looking backwards—that finally kills Eurydice;¹³¹ it is the very desire for an encounter with the other that sends the other away. As Gillian Rose argues, Orpheus's mistake consists in gazing at Eurydice and thus risking everything (110).¹³² Blanchot reads Orpheus's backward look at Eurydice as transgressive precisely because of its violence in wanting to possess—and by possessing destroy—the (otherness of the) other: “when Orpheus looks back, ceasing to speak in order to see, his gaze reveals itself to be the violence that brings death, the dreadful blow. [. . .] Man facing man like this has no choice but to speak or to kill. [. . .] should the self ever come under this command—speech or death—it will be because it is in the presence of *autrui*” (60).

“Cain killing Abel,” Blanchot goes on, “is the self that, coming up against the transcendence of *autrui*,” attempts to confront it by resorting to murder (60). He adds, however, that in this speech/murder alternative, “speech is no less grave than death” (Blanchot 62). Orpheus descends into hell to bring back his beloved but he comes back alone. He was able to move and charm and delight anyone with his song, he even has Sisyphus sit down and rest on his boulder, making even the stones (all that was wild [Kerényi 313]) enchanted by his song, but now, on encountering his real other/*autrui* in Eurydice, he is no longer able to move her, as this is most beautifully presented in Rilke's “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes:” she is “without impatience.

¹³⁰ Though primarily alluding to the Orpheus legend, the motif of looking backward is present in the Daedalus-Icarus legend as well, in relation to Daedalus the father, who looks back from his own flight to see how his son manages with his wings. Daedalus's look behind is the loving backward glance of the father at his son.

¹³¹ In Coetzee's novel, it is suggested that Dostoevsky is responsible for and implicated in Pavel's death. Allusions to his implicating himself in Pavel's death abound: “*I will come back*. The same promise he made when he took the boy to school for his first term. *You will not be abandoned*. And abandoned him” (*Petersburg* 5). Ironically, the novel opens with his already late arrival to Petersburg; his son dead.

¹³² Like in Rilke's poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” (1904), it is the undoing (failing to obey the prohibition and looking backward) which makes the work: “If only he might / turn once more (if looking back / were not the ruin of all his work, / that first had to be accomplished).”

She was in herself” (Rilke/Kline).¹³³ Rilke’s poem might help in understanding Coetzee’s world as both of them speak about a “failure of love” in their works.¹³⁴

The Orpheus and Eurydice myth in *Petersburg* may be interpreted as an allegory of Coetzee’s use of myth, as well as an allegory portraying and entwining the many failed intersubjectivity plots of Coetzee’s fiction. This myth, thus, sums up the mythical stories present in the novels discussed. Mike Marais is right when he argues that Coetzee’s repeated use of Orphic overtones in his fiction (apart from *Petersburg*, Marais points out short, half-sentence passages in *Foe*, *Disgrace*, and *Age of Iron*) does not mean that his fiction merely rehearses Blanchot’s argument on the relation with alterity: his staging of the Orphic descent points to a negotiation of desire and ambiguity (“Little Enough” 163). Besides Blanchot’s well-known reading of the myth (*The Infinite* 60-61), I believe that Kaja Silverman’s reading of the myth complements Coetzee’s stagings of the myth, as the Orphic encounter takes place somewhere between the Blanchotian and Silvermanian understandings of this encounter. In Silverman’s ingenious reading of the Orpheus myth (based on Rilke among others), Orpheus represents the failure of the “a-relational male subject” whose “defining attribute is solitude”—a man “going to pieces”—for he has repudiated his partner that would assure his integrity (8-9): “Orpheus’s repudiation of Eurydice dramatizes man’s inability to love women; his retreat to a remote location symbolizes the latter’s increasing solitude; the dismemberment of his body signifies the salutary disintegration of the male ego; and his descent to Hades and reunion with Eurydice stands for the arrival of the heterosexual couple” (Silverman 10). So in Silverman’s reading Orpheus’s backward glance is a salutary, redemptive act of the subject’s (re)completion by means of which his repudiated partner

¹³³ A. S. Kline’s translation. Kerényi and Valastyán discuss a 5th-century Attic relief representation of the encounter of the three—Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes—which shows the woman holding the hand of both men, with a hand taking leave of her husband and being taken by the other hand by Hermes, who is already escorting her back (Kerényi 268). Eurydice lays her hand on Orpheus’s shoulder and he holds her hand—thus taking a last farewell from each other—and, at the same moment, Hermes too takes Eurydice’s hand thus signaling his destination of escorting her back to the underworld. The uniqueness of this representation stands in that it so powerfully presents the tension of separation and connection (Valastyán n.p.)

¹³⁴ In Rilke, the encounter between Orpheus and Eurydice does not take place; it is impossible to take place as Eurydice is alone, deep in herself, declining Orpheus; she does not want to because she cannot encounter the other. She cannot turn (her looks) to the other, because she turns (in) to herself. She no longer desires the other, the other’s intimacy ails her: “She was no longer that, that man’s possession no longer” (Rilke/Kline).

is newly embraced and thus the unity of the self is established by the other.¹³⁵ For Silverman, the Orpheus-Eurydice encounter is precisely about the hailed reunion and communion of Orpheus and Eurydice depicted and represented in the ending of the Middle English narrative poem entitled “Sir Orfeo” (14th century, trans. J. R. R. Tolkien), a poem to which Silverman does not refer. When this salutary backward glance (of curative power) occurs and the past is thereby “cured,” he will finally start learning how to love [. . .]” (Silverman 9). Coetzee’s novels are depictions of the state *before* this wished-for unity. Silverman’s reading of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth is about the solitude of the subject and about one’s yearning after one’s repudiated other. This aspect of her reading of the myth coincides with Coetzee’s speech about the failure of love in South Africa (as an underlying plot of South African literature).

Silverman’s reading of Orpheus stands in stark contrast with Blanchot’s interpretation: while for Blanchot Eurydice is the unassimilable Other and the myth represents “the excess of an involvement with an alterity” (Marais, “Little Enough” 163), for Silverman Eurydice is Orpheus’s repudiated part who needs to be newly embraced and thus his capacity to love will be restored.¹³⁶ For Silverman Eurydice plays the role of the repudiated, desired-after partner who, if “restored” (reembraced), (re)assures the unity of the subject, the entity that restores the subject’s ability to love. In the portrayal of the barbarian girl, Coetzee seems to combine the Blanchotian and Silvermanian understandings of the Eurydicean figure of the girl, who embodies both the Blanchotian unassimilable strangeness but at the same time an express wish for a union with her

¹³⁵ Silverman appeals to Lou Andreas-Salomé’s psychoanalytic theory which differs somewhat from the Freudian model but it is also a tribute to it: “Salomé believed that most people are unable to experience this feeling [of unity] because they have repudiated one of their “partners” and that the goal of analysis should be to reawaken this affect in those who have lost it. She organized her therapeutic practice accordingly. Instead of focusing on her patients’ Oedipal problems, she helped them turn around and claim the one they had left behind—and she did this by occupying the symbolic position of Eurydice. In her memoir, she also turns around to claim the mother *she* had left behind. [. . .] She attributes a redemptive power to this kind of looking—the capacity to make the past happen again, in a new way” (Silverman 8).

¹³⁶ “Over the centuries, the male subject has become increasingly a-relational, and now a “man of the ‘new grain’ ” has emerged, whose defining attribute is solitude. Since it is neither psychically nor ontologically possible for any of us to be alone, this man is “going to pieces.” When this “salutary” process of decomposition is complete, he will finally start learning how to love, and at some point in the future we will witness something that we have not yet seen: the heterosexual couple” (Silverman 9).

(even if this wish remains unrealized). The figures of Friday and Michael K remain closer to the Blanchotian reading of the myth (and of the figure of Eurydice). Or, from Silverman's perspective, they represent the lonesome Orpheus, the "a-relational male subject" (8).

Complementing Blanchot's and Silverman's readings of the myth, Rilke's "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" presents two contrasting attitudes of Orpheus and Eurydice that might be seen as allegories of Coetzee's scenarios of intersubjectivity: Orpheus desiring but, at the same time, destroying the other and Eurydice declining or unable to receive the other's advances. The two contrasting attitudes can be seen as manifestations of a failure of love, one for its violence, the other for its strangeness. Orpheus desires the other (and with his desire kills her), while Eurydice declines intersubjectivity. Eurydice's question from Rilke's poem—"Who?—bears witness of Eurydice not even realizing Orpheus's presence. The two contrasting intersubjective attitudes are also manifested in the Sinbad tale: the Old Man (just like the charcoal burner in *Molloy*) strangles Sinbad, violates his intimacy, clings on him, refusing to let go, whereas Sinbad is eager to get away from the Old Man and be alone. Coetzee seems to change the gender roles: in his novels, it is the female characters—Magda, Susan Barton—who represent the impatient Orphic desire for an encounter with the other, while male characters such as Friday or Michael K represent the Eurydicean closure, inability or resistance to an encounter with the other. The parasitical, murderous, annihilating act of the Sinbad tale or the parasitical motif of the story of Herakles' death serve as powerful legendary-mythical examples of the failure of love (the "pathological attachments, of anger and violence" [*Doubling* 98]) and failed colonial embraces Coetzee referred to in his Jerusalem Address.

One might even sense a parallel between the 1950's (deeply symbolic) law of South Africa forbidding sexual intercourse between the whites and the colored (that Coetzee discusses in the Jerusalem Address) and Hades's gesture of prohibition, his forbiddance of love/desire to Orpheus. Michael K's hare lip—as well as Friday's or the barbarian girl's mutilation—are "torsions of power" (Coetzee, *Doubling* 97), physical wounds and visible signs of the deformed, stunted relations Coetzee talks about; they indicate the characters' inability to form and experience human relationships in the colonial conditions. They all remain strangers to their adversaries, like Eurydice in Blanchot's reading. The colonial condition transforms Michael K from man into either a "freak/monster" or an animal or a stone. He ends up (he cannot help ending up) in a state where he, in Coetzee's words, is "directing his love toward the land, that is,

toward what is least likely to respond to love” (*Doubling* 97). Like Eurydice, he sets out to encounter the m/other, but he is, and will remain, in fact, forever alone. He (as well as Friday or the barbarian girl, occasionally) personifies Eurydice not even realizing there is another there, incarnating loneliness; he is, like Eurydice, the lonesome one closed into himself. Like Eurydice, Michael is no longer ready for a (sexual) encounter with the other, he is a “virgin,” experiencing sexual approach as violence and aggression; his sex (like Eurydice’s in Rilke’s poem) is closed (he doesn’t even stir), his hands are “weaned” from the other, the other’s intimacy ails him, he has a “fear of being embraced in return” (Coetzee, *Doubling* 97); he is “man’s possession no longer” (Rilke/Kline).

Waiting for the Barbarians is an exception in terms of the gender roles which here conform to those in the Orpheus myth. Like Orpheus, the Magistrate wishes for a communion with the barbarian girl but (like Oedipus) is bound to see himself in Joll’s glasses/eyes. The blind barbarian girl with “dead eyes” (reference to Eurydice in *Petersburg* [5]) personifies the blind Eurydice—she is far away, “deep within herself” (Rilke/Mitchell) and she “does not see the man in front” (Rilke/Mitchell). The Magistrate plays the roles of both Orpheus and Hermes, escorting the girl back to her place, where she belongs, holding one of her hands as Orpheus, and the other hand as Hermes (holding her and taking leave at the same time). The Magistrate, as well as Susan Barton or Michael K, might at the same time be seen as playing the role of Hermes in the myth. The Magistrate escorts the girl back to her people in the end, Susan Barton “escorts” or “carries” Friday, she is as much in his service as Friday is in hers when he carries her. Michael K escorts and carries her mother to the place where she wants to die; he is, like Hermes, a psychopomp. Hermes, like Saint Christopher, is in the service of the other (Kerényi, “Hermész” n.p.) and this recalls the Levinasian facet of his figure (and of Coetzee’s characters). The merging and blending of roles the various Coetzee characters play from the myth—and the accompanying ambiguity—might be seen as postcolonial (and postmodernist) aspects of Coetzee’s use of myth.

The Magistrate and the barbarian girl’s last farewell—the last exchange of looks, or rather the lack thereof—evokes the crucial moment of the Orpheus myth: “This is the last time to look on her clearly face to face [. . .]. [. . .] There is only a blankness, and desolation that there has to be such a blankness. [. . .] When I tighten my grip on her hand there is no answer. [. . .] a stranger, a visitor from strange parts now on her way home from a less than happy visit.

‘Goodbye,’ I say. ‘Goodbye,’ she says. There is no more life in her voice than in mine” (*Barbarians* 79).¹³⁷ *Barbarians* as well as *Michael K* seem to tell the colonial story of intersubjectivity that the full stops (the punctuation marks) act out and stand for *between* Orpheus, Eurydice (and Hermes) in the title of Rilke’s poem: “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” Instead of using a comma between the names, the full stops suggest an unbreakable barrier between the protagonists. The Levinasian rhetoric of the passage suggests what he termed an “unrelating relation” (*Totality* 295).

The function of the fragments of myths in the novels discussed seems to be, then, to embed the unbearable, terrifying encounter in some context that will render the forever wounded and wounding nature of the encounter meaningful. Their function seems somewhat similar to the intermediary function of Hermes in the Orpheus-Eurydice encounter; they are evoked to alleviate and temper the terrible-traumatic (metaphysical and colonial) encounter in Coetzee’s fiction. His recourse to these mythological references suggests possibilities of rewriting the myths, but in a very fragmentary and erratic fashion: myths are present as momentary flashes, and it is precisely their momentariness that makes their presence so meaningful in Coetzee’s oeuvre. The mythical fragments and flashes are themselves like the ever-elusive, traumatic nature of the event of encounter in Levinas. They flash up only to disappear in the next moment, in the next sentence. The singularity of the encounter, its traumatic “eventness,” unsuited to the stability, continuity

¹³⁷ The penetrating-aggressive Orphic gesture has no effect on Eurydice who remains unchanged and untouched by the encounter with Orpheus. Her question “Who?” in Rilke’s poem is more tragic than the Magistrate and the barbarian girl’s “goodbye,” which at least acknowledges the presence of the other, even if acknowledging the impossibility of a (Silvermanian, wished-for) union. Eurydice does not even realize there is another there (that Orpheus was there). Orpheus remains a mere spectator like in another sonnet of Rilke’s: “And we, spectators always, everywhere, / looking at [. . .] we live our lives, for ever taking leave” (Rilke, “Eighth Sonnet”). Orpheus takes leave in Rilke’s poem(s), Eurydice does not even do that. “Who’s turned us round like this, so that we always, / do what we may, retain the attitude / of someone who’s departing?” Rilke’s poem suggests an innate “separateness” (challenging the Platonic myth). In Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” both Orpheus and Eurydice depart, but while Orpheus departs from Eurydice, Eurydice departs from no one. While Orpheus is changed by/after the (non)encounter—he stands there “someone or other, whose features / were unrecognizable,” nothing happens to Eurydice, who walks backward as she came “by that same path,” “uncertain, gentle, and without impatience” as she was before. The encounter cannot take place, not even through the mediation of a third party, Hermes, who is present between the two of them as a messenger, to mediate between the two but whose physical presence reminds of the impossibility of an unmediated (“naked”) union between the two of them.

and durability usually attributed to myth, takes away the comforting meaningfulness and coherence of myth, perhaps reawakening the forgotten traumatic core of the encounter with the (divine, human) other that gave rise to mythological stories in the first place. In Coetzee, myths flash up for a painful instant (as if) repeating the unintegratable nature of the encounter.

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