Contents

1  Introduction: Coetzee and Philosophy
   Anton Leist and Peter Singer

Part I. People, Human Relationships, and Politics

19  1  The Paradoxes of Power in the Early Novels of J. M. Coetzee
    Robert Pippin

43  2  Disgrace, Desire, and the Dark Side of the New South Africa
    Adriaan van Heerden

65  3  Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication: A Strategy for
    Reading Diary of a Bad Year
    Jonathan Lear

89  4  Torture and Collective Shame
    Jeff McMahan

Part II. Humans, Animals, and Morality

109  5  Converging Convictions: Coetzee and His Characters on Animals
     Karen Dawn and Peter Singer

119  6  Coetzee and Alternative Animal Ethics
     Elisa Aaltola

145  7  Writing the Lives of Animals
     Ido Geiger

171  8  Sympathy and Scapegoating in J. M. Coetzee
     Andy Lamey
Part III. Rationality and Human Lives

197  9  Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee’s Archaic Postmodernism
     Anton Leist

223  10  Coetzee’s Critique of Reason
     Martin Woessner

249  11  J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker
     Alice Crary

269  12  Being True to Fact: Coetzee’s Prose of the World
     Pieter Vermeulen

Part IV. Literature, Literary Style, and Philosophy

293  13  Truth and Love Together at Last: Style, Form, and Moral Vision in Age of Iron
     Samantha Vice

317  14  The Lives of Animals and the Form-Content Connection
     Jennifer Flynn

337  15  Irony and Belief in Elizabeth Costello
     Michael Funk Deckard and Ralph Palm

357  16  Coetzee’s Hidden Polemic with Nietzsche
     Alena Dvorakova

385  List of Contributors

389  Index
The Paradoxes of Power in the Early Novels of J. M. Coetzee

_Robert Pippin_

Quiconque est maître ne peut être libre; et règner, c'est obéir.
—Montaigne, Lettres

**Political Philosophy and Political Actuality**

Any human social world is obviously finite, limited in resources and space, and it comprises agents whose pursuit of individual ends unavoidably must limit what others would otherwise be able to do, often directly conflicting with such other pursuits. This situation forces the issue of power: who will be subject to whose will, who will subject whom. But these individual agents are finite as well, unable to achieve most of their ends without forms of cooperation and dependence. The biology of human development insures a profound familial dependence throughout childhood, and the variety and breadth of the distribution of human talent and the frailty and vulnerability of human life all insure that various forms of social dependence will be impossible to avoid. So it has long been acknowledged that a human society is both deeply conflictual and competitive, as well as necessarily cooperative and communal. Our nature ensures a constant tension between a self-regarding desire for independence and freedom from subjection to the will of other self-regarding agents, as well as a powerful need to achieve some stable form of dependence and relative trust. The major, though not at all exclusive, arena where solutions to this basic problem are proposed and tried out is commonly known as the political.

Even if we presuppose a great deal of agreement at some time within some community about the proper form of the political (already a great idealization), we cannot ever be sure of the trustworthy compliance of everyone with the basic rules and procedures. So all political life involves the use of violence and the coercive threat of
violence by one group of people against another. The claim that there is such a thing as political life amounts to the claim that, while there is such violence and coercion, its exercise is legitimate, that power may be justifiably exercised over those who may in fact resist such an exercise. Those, like Marx and Nietzsche, who reject the idea that there really is such a thing as politics, deny this claim and so argue that what some call political power is just a disguised version of the exercise of violence by one group against another or by one “type” against another. According to some versions of such a critique, like Alexandre Kojève’s, there never are rulers and subjects, representatives and citizens, never even “human beings” as such. Until the final bloody revolution ensures classlessness, there are always and everywhere only masters and slaves, those who subject the will of others to their own, and those whose will is subject to the will of others.¹

Those who defend the claim to the legitimacy of politics argue in familiar ways. An ancient claim is that no true human excellence may be achieved without hierarchical relations of power, that without such coercive constraint, the baser instincts of human beings would reign and nothing worthwhile could be collectively achieved. Such baser passions, it is claimed, are not subject to persuasion or argument, and there are some human beings in whom such passions are paramount. These people (sometimes said to be most people) must be constrained “from above” just as any one individual’s passions must be ruled, rather than allowed to rule. The appeal to this sort of argument in the project of European colonialism (and the long history of male exercise of power over “naturally inferior” or “emotional” or “irrational” women) has understandably made it difficult for any such possible claim to be entertained now without the suspicion that it must be an apology for the brute exercise of self-interested power, masquerading in the form of such an argument. In “postcolonialism,” we are much more suspicious that anyone is ever free of such putatively tyrannical passions, and so “the natural rulers” always present the same danger as the “naturally ruled,” or that what looks base and nearly inhuman to one might look perfectly fine to another.

One might argue that everyone would simply be better off under some system of political rule, perhaps better off with respect to necessary common goods that no one could reasonably reject; perhaps better off merely by avoiding a state of such anarchy that no sane person could reasonably prefer it. Those inclined to think this way often think that even if there are a few who are very, very much better off, a coercive use of violence to preserve such an order is acceptable if everyone is at least better off than they would be otherwise. This kind of argument has its colonial echoes too. (“Yes, we got fabulously wealthy, but we ‘gave’ them the gift of English, or French schools, or developed industrial societies. Think how much better off they are.”)² Or one might argue that what appears coercion really isn’t, that inuita non fit

violent and everyone can be presumed to have reasonably consented to such an arrangement or would consent if they were rational agents. On an extension of this approach one could argue that the use of force to protect basic human rights is not only permissible but required, that no claim for the existence of such rights would be coherent unless measures, even violent and coercive measures, could be taken to protect and enforce them. There is no loss of freedom when one is constrained from doing what one may not do or is compelled to do what is a universal and rational obligation.

This is all familiar and proceeds as classical and modern political philosophies always have: by assuming that the question of the legitimacy (or the goodness or value) of some form of rule involves a search for a rationale, an argument, a demonstration by force of the better case in favor of some arrangement of power and against some others, all in the service of resolving the original tension noted at the outset. But I have sketched this set of issues in its abstract form in order to stress that these familiar ways of looking at the issue are abstract. In order for philosophy to get a grip on the core problem of dependence and independence, a great abstraction must be made from, let us say, the complex psychological stake that individuals have in achieving and maintaining independence and the ways they come to care about and understand their varieties of mutual dependence. Of course some of this might inevitably have something to do with what can be rationally defended, justified without reliance on particular interest or bias. We can certainly come to care about such a standard a great deal and base a great deal on it. But there is no a priori reason to think that such a consideration always and everywhere trumps other ways of mattering, other stakes and investments, and there is no reason to think that we could ever agree on what counts as the actualization of such a standard. Its persuasive trump power might be illusory, might stem simply from its abstractness. To add to the problem, these different ways of caring and kinds of investments vary a great deal across different communities and across historical epochs.

And all of this makes philosophical abstraction both understandable and problematic. One wants some view of the resolution of this tension or problem that can be shared, and there is no reason to believe that one’s particular investment or the way things happen to matter to one (or to one’s group) will or can be shared. The assumption of a rational standpoint, entertaining considerations that rely on no particular point of view, would appear the only way to proceed.

But this comes at a high price. Since no one actually occupies such a rational standpoint (it is artificial, a fiction for the sake of argument), it is unclear what it can effect for finite, concrete agents. We cannot simply assume that, no matter their particular attachments and investments (parents, children, group, status, the motherland, God) they can be assumed to care more about what reason demands: the great-
est good for the greatest number, what form of law is consistent with pure practical reason, the supreme importance of avoiding the state of nature, what they must be assumed to have consented to, and so forth. None of these considerations have any obvious or inherent psychological actuality, and it seems absurd to wave away such concerns with actuality as a matter of mere "irrationality" that cannot concern philosophers. That approach threatens to turn political philosophy into a mere game, operating under initial abstraction conditions so extreme that they allow no actual role other than as "ideals" that we might hope to approach asymptotically, if ever that. Indeed, an insistence on the putative purity of such ideal considerations—the claim that the philosophical cogency of an argument form is one, wholly distinct thing, its possible application in a colonial project another—is just what inspires suspicions that the argument form itself is mere "ideology." What can be said about such a situation?

**THE POLITICAL ACTUALITY OF POWER AND COETZEE'S FIRST THREE NOVELS**

Hegel is the most prominent philosopher to argue that "philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought," and he argued for this with an elaborate theory about the necessarily historical and experiential content of normative principles and ideals, especially, in his own historical period, the ideal of a free life. His insistence that philosophy must attend to the actuality of the norms it considers is quite controversial and is often accused of accommodating the status quo, forming a "might makes right" theory of history, and abandoning philosophy's critical and reflective task. This is no place to begin to consider such a theory. I mention it only to introduce one important aspect of Hegel's attempt to understand and come to terms with what a norm or ideal has come to mean, how it has come to matter as experienced by subjects who avow it, that is, his appeal in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Sophocles, Goethe, Jacobi, and Schiller, to the literature of the age, as necessary moments of human self-knowledge about themselves and what they value? He does not treat such literature as examples of an ideal or moral commitment or general norm but as criterial aspects of just *what it could be* to espouse or avow such a value or, more important in his account, for such a value to lose its grip on its adherents (something that rarely happens because of any dawning realization about the force of any better argument).

Although his novels are more informed by philosophy, especially by the work of Hegel and Nietzsche and Buber, and by a wide array of literary theory and criticism than those of anyone now writing, and although it is not clear whether his texts are novels or allegories or fables or parables or more generally just "fictions," J. M. Coetzee is obviously not a political philosopher and novels in general do not in any normal sense express or defend claims about modern political life. Characters in novels are aesthetic constructs, and we "get to know them" in a way that is extraordinarily restricted and controlled, all in a context whose main values are aesthetic. And Coetzee's novels are complex modernist objects: verisimilitude is not the point, and the relation between text and psychological person, narrative and event, is complex, dense, and often problematic. But almost all his novels, and certainly the first three, take place in a recognizable historical world charged with explicitly political tension, profound dissension, and violent exercises of power justified by transparently self-serving or self-deceived appeals to reason or fact: the prosecution of the Vietnam war and the eighteenth century "exploration" and colonization of Africa (*Dusklands*); a colonizer's life in the country and the relations of power between whites and blacks, men and women, colonizer and colonized (*In the Heart of the Country*); and a magistrat administering an outpost at the edges of empire and beginning to disintegrate psychologically under the realization of what he represents, with what he is unavoidably complicit, forced into such a realization by his intense relation with a young "barbarian" girl (*Waiting for the Barbarians*). Indeed, his first novels seem deliberately designed as an extended historical series on colonial political power and its psychological meaning, charting something like the experience or, one might say, the psychological truth of the imperial exercise of power in its founding moments: a moment of European moral exhaustion or ending, a Gotterdammerung, a land at dusk in *Dusklands*; in the "heart" of the colonial experience of the eighteenth and nineteenth (and perhaps twentieth) centuries (*In the Heart of the Country*); and in the moment of empire's disintegration, potential revolution, and loss of faith in itself (*Waiting for the Barbarians*); and in the historical chaos of civil war in some distant future (*The Life and Times of Michael K*). After this series the novels all have a more determinate historical place and time, although there are obviously mythological and allegorical connections with the first series of books. (There is London in the eighteenth century for *Foe*, Capetown in the 1980s for *Age of Iron*, Petersburg in the nineteenth century for *The Master of Petersburg*, Capetown and its provinces in the late 1990s for *Disgrace*, and contemporary settings all over the world for the Elizabeth Costello stories and those that have followed.)

In the spirit of the above remarks about the importance of finding a way to understand the "actuality"—experiential, psychological, and historical—of various ideals and norms, especially political ones, especially the tension and so the need to find some equipoise between the desire for some sort of independence and the deep dependencies among human beings, and with the somewhat fanciful suggestion of Hegel as a model, I want to suggest that Coetzee's novels represent unique, brilliant
attempts at a kind of political self-knowledge. The subject of the exploration is the psychological actuality of power, especially the exercise of power over another and even over nature and oneself, and the question asked is not directly about the legitimacy or overall defensibility of such an exercise, at least in the standard philosophical sense. For one thing, the issue of power is always tied to a deeper one in the novels: In modern philosophy we typically link the question of the possibility of agency or subjectivity itself with the exercise of power, either a causal power of initiating bodily movements ("spontaneity") or the general power to achieve one's ends in a world constrained by others' pursuits. So the issue is not limited to a question of politics of power exercised in the name of the common, the public, the state, although the core problem is the one discussed in the first section here: the right way to understand the relation between independence in a political or constrained, finite context (and so some sense that the life I lead is my own), and dependence, something like the proper acknowledgement of such dependence, without mere strategic compromises and certainly without subjection and conformism. These issues are approached in an unusual and extremely rich way by means of a trope or figure that is common in Coetzee's work.

The early novels are, to a large degree, concerned with forms of physical and psychological disintegration. This disintegration in physical and mental illness is in turn clearly linked with a Hegelian theme that Coetzee, in several interviews and essays, terms "reciprocity" or, more exactly, the failure of reciprocity; in explicitly Hegelian terms, the failure to achieve any mutuality of recognition and so the perpetuation of relations of mastery and servitude in some form (including in relations to nature and to oneself). The exercise of power in situations without reciprocity, situations of gross inequality, is clearly understood to be connected with a kind of illness or suffering that burdens the "master" in Coetzee's presentation of various versions of Hegel's famous "Lord and Bondsman" dialectic. The suggestion, or whatever one wants to call it—what we are clearly supposed to appreciate—is that such an exercise of unequal power is in some way difficult to sustain psychologically, difficult at least with the smallest dawning of some self-consciousness, escapable only with elaborate self-deceit or laborious, deliberate ignorance. Eugene Dawn, trying to write a report about psychological warfare in Vietnam, goes mad and even injures his own beloved son. Jacobus Coetzee in the second half of Dusklands, even in his ignorance and willful blindness, becomes deathly ill and dependent on "one whose he does not recognize as a recognizer," one could say in Hegelese, his servant, Klaver. Magda in In the Heart of the Country begins as the spinster daughter of a brute colonial farmer. She loses that role and must establish a new one with the black servant Hendriks, and, in some way because she cannot establish anything reciprocal (neither can he, for that matter), she disintegrates into delusional madness. And the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians loses hold of his own position and role once he is caught between, on the one hand, the dawning realization, provoked by the visiting brutal Colonel Joll, of just what empire he is administering, and, on the other, by his being erotically and, one might say, morally captivated by a tortured barbarian girl. And so he begins to suffer a confusion and disorientation that finally places him well on the other side of the representatives of power he had once been part of, finally suffering as their tortured victim.

Coetzee is often termed a bleak, uncompromisingly dystopian novelist who belongs with Beckett, Musil, Kafka, and other modernist, experimental writers, and in a literary sense, this is obviously the case (although it needs to be immediately qualified). Or he is considered a stern moralist, contemptuous and dismissive of the failings of meat eaters and the compromising, hot-hedged bourgeoisie (far too crude a characterization). But these repeated moments of disintegration suggest something about the internally self-defeating exercise of unequal power that is not a moralistic critique but an "internal" one, one that does not presuppose at all a settled moral position brought to bear on the characters from an independent or external point of view. And the suggestion that there is a form of suffering, perhaps (eventually) existentially unsustainable, or that there is a form of self-disintegrating suffering, is much more complicated view than these characterizations would suggest. This is all certainly linked to similar themes in modernist and postmodernist writing, especially in opposition to the pretense of autonomous subjectivity and authorial independence and related assumptions about the transparency and referentiality of language and the possibility of narrative and so the nature of historical time. In Coetzee, however, these issues are not driven by reflections on language itself, by evocations about the power of the unconscious, or by skepticism about referentiality or even meaning but by a link between a kind of political and a kind of psychological breakdown or failure, a failure that has to imply a possible if limited recovery and success. In some way, it is (in that contemporary modernist and postmodernist context) an unusual expression of hope. At any rate, this is what I would like to understand in what follows.

**THE FANTASY OF POWER: DUSKLANDS**

Dusklands begins with an epigraph, a quotation from Herman Kahn taken from an actual report written in 1968 by the Hudson Institute, a discussion by several authors, including Kahn, called *Can We Win in Vietnam? The American Dilemma.*
Kahn noted the understandable revulsion with which European and American audiences had reacted to scenes of American pilots "exhilarated" by their success in napalm bombing runs, but Kahn then coolly pointed out that "it is unreasonable to expect the U.S. government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their missions or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden." The words "unreasonable" and "excessive" stand out in this attempt to adopt some sort of wholly analytic or objective attitude toward the moral issues involved, as if those issues could be discussed from some wholly third person and exclusively strategic point of view. *Dusklands* itself is a parody of such a stance and related attitudes, a parody of the presumptions of such a scientific analysis, and, in the second half, a parody of the pretensions of documentary history, of the way first-person reportage comes to be incorporated in what pretends to be the objective historical record. (Kahn's "argument" is almost a parody of itself, as if an argument for the need to hire only sociopaths as pilots.) Both pretensions are also clearly intended to be connected with the kind of general stance or attitude that could make possible the project of a modern neocolonial war like Vietnam, or the original British and Dutch subjection and colonization of South Africa. Presenting the two documents together in one book, with no explanation or connection between them, suggests both a kind of mythic, repetitive, or circular time (as opposed to any linear or progressive history) and thereby an underlying, perhaps archetypal psychological pattern implicated in the extreme violence manifest in both accounts.

That stance, to return to the set of issues I have introduced, is the presumption of mastery, self-sufficiency, or autonomy, and the two aspects of this attitude of interest here are the kind of difficulties encountered in sustaining that stance and what such a failure implies about some redemption or reconciliation, and ultimately a world of genuine reciprocity. Eugene Dawn has been assigned to write an assessment of the psychological aspects of the U.S. propaganda campaign in the war, and it is the writing of the report that seems to drive him mad. We read in the first half Eugene Dawn's report itself in numbered sections in part 2, but the majority of what we read are his scattered, disjointed remarks about the act of writing it, his understanding of what it is to try to provide an account of the mythological meaning of the propaganda war, and eventually what led him to give up on such a project. (Given all the self-thematization of writing itself, one understandably sometimes hears Coetzee's fiction characterized as "metafiction.") Dawn's supervisor is a man named Coetzee, an expert in game theory whom Dawn mistrusts, and with reason. We learn later that Coetzee deleted and destroyed Dawn's reflections on mythology. Dawn argues that the "self" embodied in U.S. propaganda has been too much a "Cartesian" self, divided against itself, skeptical and self-doubting, too rational, too distant from itself. He proposes an approach more in tune with traditional Vietnamese folk society, a division of labor in which our Vietnamese allies adopt a "fraternal" role, and we a "paternal" or sky-god voice, striking fear into the rebellious band of sons according to the basic script provided by the (not named) Freudian account in *Totem and Taboo*.

But Dawn realizes that such a posture is also self-defeating. "For one thing, the myth of rebellion has a no-surrender clause. Punishment for falling into a father's hands is to be eaten alive or penned eternally in a volcano" (25). The myth, that is, hardly encourages surrender or compromise. But, more importantly, Dawn comes to realize that the whole notion of a mythic approach to propaganda presupposes a stance toward the world and others that "history" has already "outdated":

> The myth of rebellion assumes that heaven and earth, father and mother, live in symbiosis. Neither can exist alone. If the father is overthrown, there must be a new father, new rebellion, endless violence, while no matter how deep her treachery toward her mate, the mother may not be annihilated. The scheming of mothers and sons is thus endless.

(26)

Dawn goes on to suggest that it is this presumption of symbiosis (or the acknowledgment of any form of deep dependence) that has become outdated, that "we live no longer by tilling the earth but by devouring her and her waste products" (26). Given that this is so, "When the earth conspires incestuously with her sons should our recourse not be to the goddess of *technē* who springs from our brains?" (26). So Dawn loses any sense that his report and the approach it embodies any longer make any sense; his text in part 2 as it deconstructs itself. It is a useless "Phase IV." The next phase is all that matters and we should get on with it, Phase V, total victory, an open and merciless bombing campaign (perhaps what was famously known at the time as Curtis LeMay's plan—that we bomb the Vietnamese "back into the stone age"), defeating at once both the enemy and the pretense that there is or can be any great question of the "meaning" of what is being done.

The suggestion of a voracious, devouring predatory subject, flattening any question about meaning and value into the questions of human survival, comfort, and the power to effect one's will echoes with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its charge that the Enlightenment attempt to reject myth has turned into its own unreflective myth of absolute self-sufficient power and the total negation of nature, with Marcuse's analysis in *One-Dimensional Man*, and, of course, with Heidegger's attempt to show that the late-modern reliance on technology does not just create technical problems and is not the mere application of a tool but has fundamentally altered our sense of ourselves, our sense of Being itself, so that we have come to live comfortably with a thoughtlessness and forgetfulness so complete it may become final and unredeemable. But as noted throughout, the interesting twist
on these issues given by Coetzee is what the embodiment of such a stance comes to mean psychologically for Eugene Dawn.

Dawn comes to understand what the war reveals about “who we have become” as that stance is embodied in three horrific photographs of abuse and violence against Vietnamese people that he carries around with him almost as totems. His realization of his part in it all, even as he (like Kurtz in The Heart of Darkness) begins encouraging a war of complete annihilation (“Kill them all!”), drives him mad. His paranoia grows; he kidnaps his own son, and when tracked down and confronted by the authorities, impulsively stabs his boy and is captured and confined to a mental hospital. There Dawn adopts a kind of therapeutic, almost third-personal attitude about what he has done, and, while generally agreeing with his therapists that it wasn’t “him” who stabbed his son and rejecting any guilt, he remains baffled by what he has done. He ends by saying “I have high hopes of finding whose fault it am” (49).

Clearly Coetzee is associating the political, national subjection of others both with classical mythological meaning (even as Dawn is coming to reject the relevance of this association) and with modern strategic calculations of self-interest, but he is also suggesting that there is something qualitatively different and potentially more inhumane and blind to itself in modern assertions of imperial power. For one thing, such a modern exercise seems associated with a much broader assertion of absolute mastery over oneself and over nature, a presumption that is wholly unchecked by any modesty or humility; it is associated with a worldview, or a form of life itself. At this level of meaning, the concern is not beliefs or principles but a broad, pervasive, and much deeper prereflective orientation that is difficult to view as a whole. For Dawn and the people he works for, in a postmetaphysical or scientific age all that is “other” than the self and human will is merely stuff, obstacle, material, chaos, and dangerous contingency to be mastered. There is pure will and obstacles to the realization of will, and that is all. Potential patterns of meaning and perhaps purpose arise only as possibly strategically useful illusions in a propaganda war, and even in that sense are pronounced “outdated.” The allegorical dimensions of Dawn’s fate at the end, as a kind of culmination of such a way of being-in-the-world, embodies our own fate: self-reflection and self-knowledge severely limited to a kind of inquiry into causes, as if we don’t do anything but are mere elements in a causal series. And even with such a reduction and flattening, we get no real answers. We are “doing” all this over historical time to ourselves—destroying or injuring, like Eugene, our own children, in effect, as well as ourselves and the earth—and we have no idea why. Given what we have come to think counts as genuine knowledge—predictability and control—and the unsuitability of such a model for self-knowledge, this is no surprise.15

So such independence and autonomy is bought at a high price. We end up with the same sort of stupefied wonder as Eugene in the end, wondering if we can ever discover “whose fault we are.” One thinks of Nietzsche’s “last men,” who have invented happiness and merely “blink” in a similar state of stupefaction.

The question of self-knowledge is foregrounded by a number of literary details that have been much discussed. The document itself is supposed to be the product of Eugene’s reflections, his attempt at self-knowledge, and its paranoid, chaotic form is in some way connected with the profoundly monologic character of his voice, a stance that itself embodies the insistence on mastery and control typical of both the prosecution of the war, the larger “metaphysical” (for want of a better word) theme of human subjectivity itself (as, essentially, effective power), and the controlling, unyielding voice of Dawn himself. Dawn recounts few dialogues; nothing “gets through” his own projections and fantasies. His musings about his wife, Marilyn, give us no sense at all of her except as an object of his fantasy and paranoia. The question of who is the “real” author of the document, what role his supervisor “Coetzee” might have played in its current form, what it means for Eugene to worry about “getting it past Coetzee,” and the relation of all this to the historical author, J. M. Coetzee, further warn us, at the least, not to take any representation of self-knowledge and self-mastery at face value, even the relation between author and his creations.

This ambiguity is extended in the novel’s second half in the flurry of “Coetzee’s” we have to disentangle, given the four documents that make up the texts concerning Jacobus Coetzee’s so-called explorations in the eighteenth century.16 Self-opacity or self-blindness is not the only implication of the modern conception of subjectivity; the second half of Dusklands deals with another. The main document is the narrative written by Jacobus Coetzee of his trip deep into the “land of the great Namaqu.” This recounts Coetzee’s “detention” of sorts (as he sees it)17 by Namaquas he calls “Hottentots”; the desertion of some of his crew; his illness, delirium, and slow recovery, during which he is taken care of by his oldest servant, Klawer; their journey back, during which Klawer is killed; and then a horrific second journey of revenge when Coetzee returns and massacres his former tormentors. The voice that we hear in this narrative is full of arrogance, racism, self-satisfaction, and phoniness, self-deceived humanistic concern for his servant, and a nearly mad sense of his own significance and fury at perceived slights. And the unreliability of the narrative is again stressed. Coetzee narrates incidents, the death of Klawer, for example, that are then contradicted by others, such as Klawer’s reappearance in the narrative only to die again, all of which makes us wonder what, if anything, “really” did happen to Klawer. But there is one point at which another implication of this picture of predatory subjectivity is stressed.
Jacobs Coetzee becomes lyrically articulate about just this issue. He imagines himself a modern, separate, spectatorial master subject, and then by an internal poetic logic, imagines what that means.

I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see. Such loneliness! Not a stone, not a bush, not a wretched provident ant that is not comprehended in this traveling sphere. What is there that is not me? I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun.

(79)

Coetzee eventually calls this the "metaphysics" of the gun: a subject conceived not as an embodied, desiring, vulnerable, and especially dependent being but a supreme eye, a transparent sac, its world locked away inside it as a core of images, a Cartesian subject locked up inside itself and therefore unable to reassure itself about its claims about the world or its position in the world without a violent assault on nature and others to realize its mere ideas. Colonialism is seen as the extension of this idea of the self-sufficient and masterful self, and its assertion (since the acknowledgement of dependence is rejected) can only count as successful by this test of power. But in the human or, as I am using the word, psychological dimension, this project must result, above all, in a position necessarily and irredeemably lonely, trapped by being so successful in denying and negating all dependence-making otherness that the voice of such a subject becomes not just monological but monomaniacal, the modern voice still echoing with Descartes's original promise to make us "masters and possessors of nature," to create technical power that will "enable us to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth," and so reversing by technical power the fate decreed for human beings in Genesis, that they must forever toil by the sweat of their brow (319). The burden of such a project is not just the epistemological skepticism and potential subjective idealism of this Cartesian stance but a cost perhaps only manifest in a novel like Coetzee's, a cost realized by Jacobus in a flash: "Such loneliness!"

---

A FAILED SELF: IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

Extreme loneliness, extreme to the point of being a kind of ontological burden, the burden of a failed self (the way we speak now of a failed state), is most prominent in Magda's suffering in In the Heart of the Country. That is, a human subject can continue to exist in some form but only as failed, not what a self or state truly is. In the former case, this is because a self is not on object in the standard sense and cannot be apprehended by observation or introspection. To be a self, I must take myself to be who I am in some determinate way or other. And I am who I take myself to be. A self is thus self-constituting. But this also means, in the most obvious sense, that I can take myself to be some subject in a way that is not acknowledged, affirmed, or perhaps even noticed in my social world, and in that sense would have to be counted a failed self, living a mere fantasy of self-identity. Without such reciprocal gestures as acknowledgment, love, esteem, solidarity, and respect, I cannot distinguish between who I really am and who I merely imagine myself to be. And this is the language of failure and reciprocity that Coetzee himself frequently uses in his essays and some speeches.

So Magda says at one point, "Drowning, I drown into myself" (54). And the result: "For I seem to exist more and more intermittently. Whole hours, whole afternoons go missing. I seem to have grown impatient with the sluggish flow of time" (80). The form of the suffering and its meaning are often given a recognizably Hegelian characterization. It is a burden brought on by the lack or reciprocity or any mutuality of recognition. She says, "I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have" (97). The striking phrase, "the pathos of its distance," is from Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals and suggests in quite a compressed way something that only arises indirectly in Nietzsche's account of and apparent enthusiasm for "master morality." It is the isolation and loneliness, the complete lack of reassurance and acknowledgment, that results from the master's indifference to those whom his willing affects. (Nietzsche's frequent, though not thematized, expressions of his own loneliness certainly have something to do with such a pathos, whether knowingly or not.) Magda, the only child of a coarse colonial farmer at an isolated farm, says at the beginning, "I create myself in the words that create me. I, who living among the downcast have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another's eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine" (8). Elsewhere she says, "It is not speech that makes man man, but the speech of others" (126).

The dense dialectical first phrase in the first quotation, "I create myself in the words that create me," poses an ontological problem (what is it to be a self, a subject of one's life, an agent?) that is immediately given a quite modern, romantic meaning ("I create myself") and then a social dimension in the rest of the sentence and the book, as if proposing a social ontology. The self fashions itself and is also itself fash-
tioned in a social world. Such a subject is never the pure or absolute subject dreamt of in much of modernity, autonomously decreeing what its word and actions mean. It is dependent not just on the social conventions of language but on the various ways meaning and significance are always already established and inherited, and all this without mere subjection to the regard of others. (In that case we would lose the first half of the phrase, would lose any grip on the notion of “creating myself.”) As we shall see, in Magda's world, there is no effective social structure within which this balance can be worked out, and the forms of mastery and even, with Hendrik, her attempts (or imagined attempts) at abject subjection that she acts out are therefore deeply unsatisfying. Such mutuality would allow me to see myself in the regard of another if and only if I regard that other as an equal. And this kind of language reappears several times. In a frequent image (one we already have seen in Jacobus Coetzee's account) a disembodied eye, seeing but not being seen, not allowing oneself to be seen, is often tied to Magda's extreme “solitude and vacancy” (47); her relation to her servants is such that they might as well be on “separate planets” (28). The solitude and sense of isolation is so extreme that it counts as itself a form of insanity. She says at one point, “Too much misery, too much solitude, makes of one an animal. I am losing all human perspective” (53). And the social pathology of what she calls “the psychology of masters” (33) is described in terms that sound like a quotation from Hegel’s famous discussion of Lord and Bondsman in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Magda writes, supposedly of what she hears spoken by the sky gods in aircraft at the end of the book.

It is the slave’s consciousness that constitutes the master’s certainty of his own truth. But the slave’s consciousness is a dependent consciousness. So the master is not sure of the truth of his autonomy. His truth lies in an inessential consciousness and its inessential acts.

(30; italics in the original)

In *The Heart of the Country* is also the novel with the most elaborate modernist structure and so the most unreliable and often confusing narration. The diary or journal or whatever we are reading is in numbered paragraphs, emphasizing, Coetzee once noted, what is missing, discontinuous, in the narration. “The suggestion of gaps, that there is no way to make a narrative out of what we are reading, is only the beginning.” I noted earlier that it is difficult to pick an actual historical time for the events, since we seem to range from horse and buggy days to the airplane, perhaps even the jet age. Or at least Magda cannot locate herself. Her sense of her historical time seems dreamy, often fantastic. And the narrative is most untrustworthy. Her father is described bringing home a bride. But there is no bride. Magda describes how she axe-murders her father. Then he shows up again and she kills him again, this time with a rifle, to some extent accidentally. The father dies a slow, agonizing death. Hendrik either rapes her several times or one time imagined different ways or the whole thing is an archetypal colonial fantasy of Magda’s. Suddenly Magda reports, “The voices speak to me out of machines that fly in the sky. They speak to me in Spanish” (126). And Magda arranges stones in messages, trying to communicate in Spanish, a language she does not understand but finds “immediately comprehensible” (126). Finally, at the end of the book, in paragraph 161, her father seems to reappear, inhuman, blind, and old, cared for by Magda with some tenderness. The reader has no idea if this is some compensatory fantasy, or if it is true and Magda has only imagined the affair between her father and Hendrik's wife, imagined killing her father and the rape by Hendrik.

Such unreliability has sparked a lot of discussion about Coetzee's postmodernism and the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism. This involves a number of large distinctions and labels. I need here to point out only that the unreliability of the narration is not tied in any obvious way to the unreliability of narration itself, but to Magda's position. It is her voice that is fractured, discontinuous, increasingly unsure of her own reality or of the distinction between reality and fantasy in what she narrates. Having lost confidence in any master narrative, she has lost hold of all the norms for rendering intelligible what is happening to her. There is no alternative known to her to the language of power and domination, although she is suffering from the isolation and loneliness that such a “pathos of distance” creates and knows she is suffering from just that. (She resembles the Magistrate at the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, “like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” [152].)

This crisis has occurred because to purport to narrate is to claim some sort of authority for the selection of and emphasis on the details one includes and for the claimed irrelevance of what one slights or ignores. And such implied claims to authority raise the same normative and psychological questions as colonial authority itself and can often be deeply linked with that sort of authority. (Recall Magda's complaint about being born into a language of hierarchy and distance.) Authority differs from mere power not simply by virtue of the fact that a philosophical argument can be provided justifying its exercise. It also has to have a psychological legitimacy in the eyes of those who administer and accept it, and the minimum condition for that sort of authority is missing in colonial power; some sort of reciprocity, without which no acknowledgment of genuine authority and so no psychological actuality can be possible. Absent that distinction, the claim to genuine authority is empty (compli-
I grope my way out of the kitchen to my own bed. I am doing my best in this unfamiliar world of touch.

(103)

In spite of this confusion and awkwardness, Magda nevertheless has some fairly clear intuition of what would fill the gap in her life that she has come to experience:

"Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median—that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!" (133).

THE MEANING OF HUMANITY: WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

There is one last turn of this screw much in play in Waiting for the Barbarians, and I will conclude briefly just by noting the questions it raises.

The presence of the themes I have been considering is announced right away by the visiting Colonel Joll's sunglasses. We meet him immediately as a man who insists on seeing but in effect rejects being seen as a like-minded other. He hides his eyes, whereas the young barbarian girl is almost blind; she can be seen but can barely see, cannot return any gaze, even if the gaze is an invitation, not an attempted subjection. That is, Joll's one-sided stance is voluntary, hers is not. She has been made blind and lame by torture. At the end of the novel, after Joll's expedition results in catastrophic failure and his pretension to pure independence has been shattered, the sunglasses are gone, and the Magistrate forces him the lesson of internal disintegration or self-undermining familiar in the other novels. "The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves... not on others" (143). We also hear again of Nietzsche's "pathos of distance," this time, in ways the Magistrate feels but does not understand, distorting and diminishing his sexual pleasure with women (45). And that disturbance, the consequences of that distance, are at the heart of what goes on between him and the girl.

For the Magistrate is clearly moved, touched by the girl's suffering, and clearly guilty in being part of the official apparatus of the empire that did this to her. He takes the girl in, and that is clearly intended to begin some act of expiation and penance. He washes the girl, cleans her feet, anoints her with oil, and sleeps with her, but they do not have sex. All this is not completely straightforward. He claims to want to understand her, to "decipher" what the marks of torture on her body mean, much as he tried to decipher what appear to be texts on slips of paper that he has found from an
ancient barbarian culture. But he "reads" her that way, as a text. He thinks of himself as loving her (74), but he makes no attempt to learn her language, to converse with her as a fellow subject. So his humanist intervention is a limited and confused one, and accordingly his failure to "reach" her cannot be simply read as an indictment of all liberal, humanist, moral gestures in the face of such oppression. But the frustrating limitations of such gestures (and the danger of self-congratulation in making them) are certainly at issue.

Of course, he does return her to her lands and countrymen, and this has catastrophic results for the Magistrate. He is branded a traitor and mercilessly tortured. But he never seems to understand what he actually intended with the girl and so does not understand why it all ended so unsatisfyingly for him, what his history with her amounted to. He does not seem to realize, except confusingly and in disconnected flashes, that in the world they inhabit, even gestures of pity and benevolence are inseparable from the relevant social positions both occupy and so are inappropriately implicated in the relations of power firmly established in that world. A moment of such realization occurs when the girl, puzzled that the older man seems to have no sexual interest in her, offers herself, and is rebuffed. The Magistrate writes,

Though my heart goes out to her, there is nothing I can do. Yet what humiliation for her! She cannot even leave the apartment without tottering and fumbling while she dresses. She is as much a prisoner now as ever before. I pat her hand and sink deeper into gloom.

(54, my emphasis)

Later, the Magistrate does not appear surprised when a confidante of the young girl reports to him, "She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her... Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?" (148).

And as with the other novels, this is not an issue that can be restricted to the question of the proper realization of political and institutionally secured egalitarianism, however relevant it is to that issue and however important philosophical argument about that issue is. There is a deeper form of dependence at work, and a different way of exploring its meaning in Coetzee's novels. The issue has to do with how the possibility of individual, independent agency in itself, how that social status, can be actualized, made psychologically and socially real in the lives of finite subjects faced with the basic dilemma sketched at the beginning here. In the Magistrate's terms, the very "meaning of humanity" is the issue, and the Magistrate comes to realize in his own limited way how such a status must be socially achieved and sustained and how terribly fragile it is. It is not a status one has merely by "showing up, and the complexity

of the conditions for its achievement (the dialectical relation between independence and dependence) are everywhere apparent in these novels. Here are his reflections on the issue, and it will serve to indicate in one final way the great scope of this recognition theme in Coetzee's work. It is a fitting closing comment on the deepest issue in the three early novels: the "meaning of humanity":

They [his torturers] were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pins of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians and what the barbarians had said to me. So I had no chance to throw the high-sounding words I had ready in their faces. They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal.

(113)

Notes

1. The thought expressed in this chapter's epigraph is not unique to Montaigne, nor to Hegel, for that matter. Compare: "Tel se croit le maître des autres, qui ne laisse pas d'être plus esclave qu'eux" (J. J. Rousseau, Du contrat social, in Œuvres complètes, vol. 3 [Paris: Gallimard, 1964], 353). And of course J. M. Coetzee: "In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free" ("Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech," in Doubting the Point, 96).


3. Even at the end of his horrific ideal, the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians can still rehearse for himself this sort of justification. See his remarks on "mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam" (195).

4. Cf. The self-understanding of Eugene Dawn (the representative of American self-understanding about the Vietnam war) in Dusklands: "I am the embodiment of the patient struggle of the intellect against blood and anarchy" (27). Or, in the second half, the "explorer" and elephant hunter Jabobus Coetze: "I am a tool in the hands of history" (106). As Coetzee points out in another context (an interview), it is an important, not a marginal fact that "British liberalism failed to engender equal and reciprocal relations, period—failed to persuade the colonists, British or Dutch, that equal and reciprocal relations were a good enough thing to make sacrifices for" (Coetzee, "Interview," in Doubting the Point, 65). Again, one could always insist that the philosophical merits of "British liberalism" as a position have nothing at all to do with the fact that sincere adherents
to such a view could eschew it while "contradicting" it in their colonizing practices. That seems to me an implausible position, but I won't try to argue against it here. One could sum up one central aspect of the problem in Magda's lament in *In the Heart of the Country*: "I am gagging on a diet of universals" (13).


6. I'll use this designation throughout, *faute de mieux*.

7. The "New Life" project, a Vietnam report, in the novel's first half is being written by Eugene Dawn, suggesting by contrast with the novel's title (and the standard characterization of the West as an evening land, *Abendland*) a pretense at a new beginning, dawn not dusk, or essentially the promise of technological, capitalist modernity. Cf. Dawn's remark about "poignant regret" (6).

8. The time frame of the narrative in *In the Heart of the Country* is difficult to pin down. It seems, fantastically, to range from an early-modern farming economy to the age of airplanes.

9. David Atwell's study, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) focuses helpfully on the question of agency, especially in the South African political context. There is another take on the issue in Coetzee's later novels (Slow Man and *Diary of a Bad Year*): how to understand agency or subjectivity when the capacities or powers of agency begin to decline and rote, in late middle age and afterward (or when the balance between independence and dependence tips, but for nonpolitical, biological reasons.)

10. So, with respect to the moral issue he has lately been most associated with, our treatment of animals, Coetzee's modernist sensibilities require him to attend to the way this treatment is written and thought about, how it is theorized, mediated through language and experience. So Coetzee does not give lectures about animal rights, but tells Elizabeth Costello's stories/fables. (The *Lives of Animals* is, somewhat ironically, ill about our lives; we are the animals at issue, given what we do to other animals.) So, again, the concern is for what such treatment is doing to us, and it would be grossly inaccurate to read his fables about such themes as moral tracts, simply presented in a narrative way. The same holds for the political novels.

11. This Coetzee is one of four in Duklands. There is also Jacobus Coetzee, the eighteenth-century elephant hunter whose report of his adventures is the main text of the second half. (Jacobus is in fact a "remote ancestor" of the historical author, I mean, *the real J. M. Coetzee*. See "Remembering Texas," in *Doubling the Point*, 53.) Then there is Dr. S. J. Coetzee, who is said to have published an edition and introduction of that *relaxa* in 1951, and his son, named as "J. M. Coetzee," who presents himself as the translator of that edition. I suppose one has to say that there are five Coetzes, if we make the obvious distinction between this character, J. M. Coetzee, and J. M. Coetzee, the actual historical novelist who taught at the Committee on Social Thought in Chicago and who lives now in Adelaide. The names introduce issues of inheritance, complicity, and the historicity of an author that would require a substantial independent discussion.

12. From the agent's point of view, any "prediction" I make about what I will do is either an avowal, a practical pledge that I will do it (in which case it is not a prediction), or it has to count as a paradoxical (and usually cowardly and self-deceived) denial of one's own agency, something one can only do qua agent. This is obviously another large, independent topic.

13. There is (1) the text presented as written by Jacobus Coetzee. That text is presented as if (2) in an edition by Dr. S. J. Coetzee, published in 1951, with an introduction by him, and now (3) in a translation done by Dr. S. J. Coetzee's son, who is called J. M. Coetzee. And (4) there is a ludicrously sanitized "official" deposition by Jacobus Coetzee written in 1760.

14. Perhaps the ultimate humiliation of Jacobus, in his narcissistic fantasies of mastery, is that the Namaqua do not torment or torture or take much advantage of him. For the most part, to his unacknowledged shame, they ignore him. Or at least they do until Jacobus does something outrageous, almost as if to make his presence felt. He bites off the ear of a child during a tussle, and so they expel him. Jacobus's self-absorption is as extreme as Dawn's, but more physically embodied. He becomes intensely preoccupied with a carbuncle near his anus until he is able to lance it. See the Lacanian discussion by T. Dowey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Johannesburg: A. D. Donker, 1988), 67-148.


16. This is the language (the failure of selfhood) used by Coetzee in his essay on Asterberg in *Doubling the Point*. Here is a particularly illuminating passage: "The hide-and-seek! In Sterne has become a serious game, with dangers to the psyche, in Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' What has intervened has been the rise and decline of the romantic-liberal notion of the self. The self in Eliot is struggling with problems of authentic being. The self in Beckett is struggling with problems of being at all, unable to get from Descartes's cogito to Descartes's somn. I hint so skimpily as an entire history because I intend no more than to point to what lies behind the metamorphosis of fiction from the adventures of the self in nineteenth-century classical realism to the metafictional commentary on the fictionality of self that precipitates such fictions as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and that forms the whole of Beckett's *The Unnamable*. The poetry of these works is a veritable poetics of failure, a program for constructing artifacts out of an endlessly regressive, esotized self-consciousness lost in the labyrinth of language and endlessly failing to erect itself into autonomy" (86–87). I think *In the Heart of the Country* and the character of Magda represent such a "poetics of failure," in just this sense, with the difference being that such failure is intelligible in terms of what might have been.


19. In *Doubling the Point*, see Coetzee's essay, "Achterberg's 'Ballade van de gasfitter';" and his remark in the commentary, "All versions of the I are fictions of the I. The primal I is not recoverable" (75). One might argue that if these versions are fictions, there must be something, some I, they are false to. But the denial of any "primal I" means that what gives a fictive I a kind of stability, what redeems it from mere fictionality, is its future, not a relation to a past primal I, and that future is its engagement with and acknowledgment by, and so realization by, others. See also the remarks on Buber and the I-Thou relation on the previous page, 74, and the illuminating discussion by Arwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 35-69.

20. Cf. also the Hegelian formulation at the end of: "Was my father crucified by the paradox the voices expound: that from people who bent like reeds to his whims he was asking in his way for an affirmation of his truth *in and for himself*" (130, my emphasis)


22. Magda says that she wants "my story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end," and she fears she will live only in "the yawning middle without end" (43). Later she says, "Lyric is my medium, not chronicle" (71).

23. See Coetzee's agreement that it is no part of his intention in *In the Heart of the Country* to "dissolve" the problems of selfhood and relationship "into postmodernist gameplaying" (*Doubling the Point*, 60); P. A. Cantor, "Happy Days in the Veld: Beckett and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*," in *The Writings of J. M. Coetzee*, ed. M. Valdez (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), makes a similar point (that: the issue is not the "unrepresentability of reality" but "false representations" [103]) but does not much develop it.

24. See Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 65: "There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them." There is much of value in Derek Attridge's discussion on the "modalities of otherness," the relevance of modernist techniques in dealing with such modalities, the performative character of texts, and the "ethical demands" that all this raises. See J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6.