

Reading Against the Grain:
The Nature of Interpretation and Critical Appropriation
in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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"Did you notice how whenever, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?"

(J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* 166.)

After escaping from the Jakkalsdrif work camp, Michael K, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* returns to his former garden where he spends much of his time growing pumpkins and sleeping in a self-described "burrow" (106). One day a band of "men from the mountains," the guerrilla forces that oppose the government, pass by K's camp, leading him to consider joining them (108). While Michael appears sympathetic to their cause, he decides to remain on his farm. In the passage that follows the narrator describes Michael's intense personal connection to both the earth and gardening. This passage can quite easily be read as a justification of quietism in the face of political oppression, something that readers seeking a moral or political interpretation may find unsatisfactory:

[...] he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself [...] because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. (109)

Michael's seemingly apolitical stance may be unsettling to the reader, who, inhabiting a close space with the protagonist, may seek some clear sense of resolution the text does not afford: a decisive moment in which Michael, perhaps after an epiphany, some sort of untangling of what he has known, will take a political stand and become a kind of new South African hero.

While most critics readily acknowledge *Life and Times of Michael K's* realistic elements, the way it envisions a possible-future South Africa ravaged by civil war, many critics reject its lack of a viable solution to the problem of apartheid. Despite its deceptively simple story, prose, and protagonist, *Life and Times of Michael K* has spawned a complex and highly significant critical debate on the relationship among literature, politics, and interpretation.

Fellow South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer's review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books* first questioned the novel's political commitment. While Gordimer argues that *Life and Times of Michael K* represents a welcome departure from Coetzee's earlier "allegorical" novels with its realistic representation of "what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa" (111), she insists that "Political statements are made implicitly through the situations and reactions of Michael K that have no obvious political meaning," an unsurprising conclusion given her widely-recognized status as the foremost realist and political revolutionary in contemporary South African literature (110). She sympathizes less, however, with what she interprets as Coetzee's "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions," which she draws from the

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medical officer who narrates the novel's second section (111). The beginning of the review's final paragraph warrants quoting:

[...] is there an idea of survival that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine? Is there a space that lies between camps? [...] this book is unusual in posing its answer while writers customarily say it is their business only to explore questions. The place is the earth, not in the cosmic but the plain dirt sense. The idea is the idea of gardening. (111)

For Gordimer, fiction should pose important questions without static, prescribed answers. Yet she believes that Coetzee provides not only an answer but also an unsatisfactory one. Gordimer's interpretation hinges on a key passage, one that for her problematizes the novel's political stance: the gardening passage outlined in my introduction. For Gordimer, literary works should represent the South African material, political reality. For Gordimer *Life and Times of Michael C*'s "idea of gardening" offers no solution for apartheid and thus dramatically reduces the novel's efficacy as a political statement. She justifies this conclusion by emphasizing that this purported "answer" does not help to "solve" the question of how, as Coetzee says in an interview with David Atwell, "the tyranny of apartheid [shall] be ended" (*Doubling the Point* 207). Gordimer fails to recognize, however, that Coetzee's fictions do not attempt to communicate revolutionary political solutions but instead strive to unearth and interrogate the politics implicit within literary representation and interpretation. By focusing on this passage without discussing the lines that follow, lines where, as Coetzee says, "the text turns in upon itself and begins to reflect

upon its own textuality," Gordimer reads the *Life and Times of Michael K* from a limited perspective, one that, despite her desire to interject political realities outside the text, dwells on one aspect of the novel's structure (*Doubling the Point* 207). In doing so, she locates the novel's meaning as an inadequate moral message but misses the unreliability of the perspective upon which she relies, the medical officer, and Coetzee's stated intentions, which, although dealing with ethical and interpretive questions, deliberately avoid providing definitive answers.

Conversely, David Atwell, in his book-length critical work/.M. Coetzee: *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, insists that "K is not a representative figure who models certain forms of behavior or capacities for change" (100). Atwell instead insists that *Life and Times of Michael K* is a "situational metafiction [...] that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation" (20). The text achieves these effects through its inclusion of numerous indeterminate moments and metafictional elements, which for Atwell grant it the "capacity to "get behind" itself and displace the power of interpretation in such a way that K is left uncontained at the point of closure" (99). This reading represents an improvement over Gordimer's in that it not only acknowledges the novel's numerous metafictional elements but also considers how those elements impact the way readers encounter and interpret the novel. Atwell's reading falls short, however, in its reliance on claims derived from early deconstruction.

He insists that K is best described as "the narratological figure of the Derridean trace"¹ within a "metafictional frame" that "produces the deconstructive gesture of erasure," causing Michael's "essence" to "slip back into the open-endedness of textuality from which it comes and which it returns" (99). These seemingly contradictory claims imply that because K's words and actions can accommodate multiple interpretations, none of those interpretations can be considered legitimate. This conclusion has the paradoxical effect, however, of denying the legitimacy of all but one reading of Michael K, thereby reproducing the reductive, colonizing gesture it claims to resist.

Just as Atwell problematically identifies aspects of the novel with terms and concepts derived from Derrida's early writings, other critics have turned to the writings of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (particularly his early work *Totality and Infinity*) to explicate Coetzee's texts. In *Writing in Crisis: Ethics and History in Gordimer, Ndebele and Coetzee* Stefan Helgesson applies aspects of Levinas' thought to *Life and Times of Michael K* a manner representative of much recent criticism in this vein. In a chapter entitled "Levinas and Passivity" Helgesson details those aspects of Levinas' philosophy that Coetzee critics most often rely on:

The radical thesis of Levinas's thought is that the other cannot be *known*. Knowledge and understanding are both imperialistic categories, incommensurable with the ethical dimension of the face-to-face relation. The intentional operations of knowledge appropriate the other, totalize it

¹ For Derrida, a word's meaning is neither "present" or "absent" but is instead manifested in the form of a "trace" that consists of "all the nonpresent differences from elements in the language system that invest the utterance with its "effect" of having a meaning in its own right" (Abrams 57). Atwell thus views Michael K's function within the textual system of the novel he occupies as analogous to the trace's function within the language system it inhabits.

and deprive it of its alterity. Instead, the other[...] surpasses understanding^..] The untotisable other can only be compared to an irreducible infinity. (194) As Helgesson explains, this inability to "know/" "understand/⁷ or "capture" the meaning of the other in philosophical or discursive formulations means that the other "[can] only be accounted for in terms of an irreducible ethical relationship" (194). Helgesson does not merely suggest that we will discover the text's true meaning by plugging the character of Michael K into Levinas' philosophical system, however. Instead, he observes that the relationship described by Levinas also applies to the relationship between the reader and the meaning they produce from the text:

Meaning[...] becomes an other, in the Levinasian sense - inappropriable yet undeniable. And the person who claims possession of it is the one who per definition does not possess it. The boldness of refusing to possess meaning and yet rely on it, can be read in terms of profound ethical trust[...] The result of such trust might be labeled an ethically sublime mode of writing.

(210)

By considering *Life and Times of Michael K* from the perspective of Levinas' thought, Helgesson claims that the novel has positive ethical content without actually "naming" what that content may be in the form of a moral or political system "lesson." Helgesson improves on Atwell's reading in that he does not grant K meaning only in the context of Levinas' system; he does insist, after all, that meaning is "undeniable" in addition to being "inappropriable" (210). Just as Atwell's reading implies that Michael K exists only to

deconstruct the text he inhabits, Helgesson's reading suggests that Michael K exists only to escape the reader's understanding.

While Atwell and Helgesson explicate *Life and Times of Michael K* from varying philosophical horizons, other critics have focused on intertextual reads, focusing on the novel's complex relationship to other literary texts. Patricia Merivale details the novel's numerous references to the works of Franz Kafka in "Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka." Merivale disputes Gordimer's insistence in "The Idea of Gardening" that the K in Michael K's name "has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka, instead asserting that several of Kafka's short fictions "suppl[y] a tradition of modernist parables fundamental to *Life and Times of Michael K*" (1 53). For Merivale *Life and Times of Michael K* "deploys the more 'postmodern' intertextual strategies of 'palimpsest' and 'bricolage', so that we may 'read' the tectonic plates of Kafkan episodes as they slide across each other, submerged yet legible under Coetzee's text (156). Merivale claims that Coetzee "constructs entire episodes" in the novel based on "the major Kafkan motifs of the 'hunger artist' and the 'burrow,' noting "the two 'burrow' settings of the cave and[...] the farm, which segue into the two 'hunger artist' camp scenes" (1 60). This observation leads Merivale to conclude that "for Coetzee, the fable form has been filtered through Kafka's remarkable development of it in his own[...] parables shown by many critics to be best read as metatextual allegory, of ambiguous, if indeed any, moral import" (163). Merivale concludes her analysis by raising the question of "the political implications of the Kafkan parable-form as one type of Coetzeean intertextuality" (1 64). Rather than answer the question, she contrasts Gordimer and Coetzee's "deployments of Kafka" as (respectively)

"[an] obliqu[e] and indirect strateg[y] for 'naming' the political' and "plain speaking for a wider but somewhat different audience/" leaving the reader to determine the appropriate "political application" of each (1 65). Merivale thus successfully undermines reading a specific moral significance from Coetzee's references to Kafka yet refuses to provide her own positive interpretative conclusion, instead posing a question that most careful readers of the novel have likely already identified.

Michael Valdez Moses also explores the novel from an intertextual angle with similarly inconclusive results in "Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*." Moses discusses ways in which Rousseau's *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1 782) functions as a key intertext for *Life and Times of Michael K* (132). Moses notes that "Central to both Michael K's and Rousseau's solitary existence are the experiences of idleness and reverie" (133). For Moses this idleness is "characterized largely by what it is not-that is, by what the idler avoids or escapes" including work with economic or social purpose and ownership of private property (133-135). Moses extends this insight by concluding that both characters "seek [...] freedom from all social obligations and civic duties" (137). He directly addresses Gordimer's review from this perspective: "For Gordimer to find in Michael K an unheroic and politically irresponsible character is both perfectly correct and also beside the point, since what is at issue is the unsatisfactory character of social life in general" (140-141). This does not mean that Moses thinks that the complete withdrawal desired by both Michael K and Rousseau can be achieved, however; instead he notes that "the body provides an undeniable link between the life of the most solitary individual and the social existence of civilized

humanity" (149). After drawing these and other parallels between Rousseau and Michael's impossible desire for complete withdrawal from social and civic society, Moses shifts his focus to the novel's self-reflexive elements, arguing that "the most important moments of [K's] existence-his reveries-are precisely those that cannot fully or finally be expressed in and through language" (152). The only way Coetzee's text can avoid the same power-couched coerciveness present in the medical officer's attempts to invent a story for K, then, is through its "self-conscious fictiveness[...] intended as the admittedly weak, but only available counter to the power of history" (153). Despite insights such as the passage quoted above, Moses' article seems largely dependent on making intertextual connections that, while interesting, add little to our ability to understand or appreciate either Rousseau or Coetzee's work. Most critics readily accept that numerous literary texts are palimpsests of *Life and Times of Michael K*; few, however, seem to employ this recognition to produce original insights into the text.

Sam Durrant explores the novel's relationship to history in a far more nuanced and innovative manner than Moses in the chapter on Coetzee from his book-length study of *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*. Durrant contests Gordimer's implied claim that only those aspects of the novel that directly reference historical reality should be considered politically relevant. He insists that Gordimer "misunderstands the nature of Coetzee's allegories," because she fails to recognize that "the indeterminate settings of the narratives are not simply symptoms of a perverse desire to dehistoricize apartheid; they are instead an attempt to represent and to contest the historical conditions of apartheid" (25). Durrant characterizes this contestation in terms borrowed from Theodore Adorno's

1962 essay "Commitment" in which he argues "art should provide a "negative image" of society, one that stands in dialectical contradiction to society, as its critique" (28).

Significantly, the two authors Adorno identifies as having produced art of this kind are Coetzee's foremost literary influences: Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Working from this connection, then, Durrant concludes that "Like the work of Beckett and Kafka, Coetzee's novels attempt to remain speechless before history" because they recognize that "it is only in the breakdown of historicizing narrative that we are able to glimpse the materiality of history" (29, 31). By "grappl[ing] with the material, bodily affect" of apartheid instead of merely "translating] the past into discourse" Coetzee's texts "confront an indigestible past [...] that can never be truly remembered or forgotten" more responsibly than texts that "mimetically reproduce] the *historical* content of apartheid" (31, 50, my emphasis).

Durrant applies this view of the relationship between history and representation in Coetzee's texts to *Life and Times of Michael K* by focusing on Michael's relationships with his mother and with gardening. Michael K here attempts to "identify with the way in which his mother has been forgotten" by a society that cremated her immediately after her death (39). Durrant's speculation on the meaning of K's occupation brings his discussion of the novel full circle: "K tends to his garden because he recognizes that human nature is not wholly determined by the idea of civilization; he waits for the end of the time of history as the beginning of the time of the human" (41). While Durrant's complex reading of *Life and Times of Michael K* does not focus extensively on the novel's metacommentary on the nature of interpretation, his exclusive focus on memory and mourning allows him

to avoid the sort of critical appropriation the novel warns against and other critics of Coetzee's works often succumb to.

While Durrant's discussion of *Life and Times of Michael K's* relationship to history avoids the critical pitfall of denying the legitimacy of non-historical critical approaches, Derek Wright's attempt to situate it in relation to the history of South African race relations in a chapter on Coetzee from *New Directions in African Fiction* fails disastrously by blatantly denying the novel's key insights on the unnecessary and illegitimate nature of identifications based on race. For Wright, Coetzee's writing represents a turning point in the history of South African fiction where "reflexiveness and self-referentiality [...] assumed the dimensions of a controlled polemical strategy" (80). Wright discusses two specific aspects of *Life and Times of Michael K* to this critical end: how Michael K's relationship to and representation of the land differs from that found in most Afrikaner fiction, and how the medical officer who narrates the novel's second section functions as a representative of colonizing Afrikaner consciousness (82, 90). Wright notes that Afrikaner writing often expresses either an implicit or explicit yearning for the "pastoral ideal" of "taming" the landscape of South Africa (83). He contrasts this yearning with Michael K's embracement of the "harsh, inhospitable earthscapes of the Karoo" because of "their refusal of human meanings, their proverbial nothingness" (83). For Michael K the land not only "lacks humanizing dimensions" but is also "not merely silent but empty-a place where nothing happens" (83). Wright then links Michael's acceptance of the land with his resistance to the medical officer's attempts to "take [...] it upon himself, inauthentically, to assume voices and compose stories for the silenced black other" (80).

The medical officer's various interpretations of the meaning of Michael K's story parallel the Afrikaner writer's portrayals of the South African landscape because by attempting to capture his essence in language the officer "transforms K into a new myth" (90). Wright concludes his analysis by expanding his indictment of the medical officer to include both the reader and Coetzee himself on racial grounds, noting that Michael K perceives "time [as] ever geared to the fruitful eventfulness of nature in ways inconceivable to the white characters, as to the white author and reader" (91).² Coetzee, however, argues writing should not insist "that everyone is born into a certain race," noting this sort of thinking supported the apartheid-era Population Registration Act, which divided South Africans into "racial group X, Y, or Z" (91). In light of Coetzee's comments, then, Wright's reliance on racial thinking in his critical assessment of the novel proves disconcerting if not harmful.

Contrastingly, Michael Marias, in his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Coetzee, notes not only that K resists racial categorization but also situates this resistance in relation to the novel's metacommentary on interpretation. Marais argues that *Life and Times of Michael K's* "episodic design is informed by a recurring pattern of events in which Michael K is first colonized and then escapes" (139). Each instance of this "pattern of linguistic appropriation followed by escape" involves a symbolic birth followed by a "rebirth and renaming" in which "acts of domination [...] attempt to annul Michael K's separate identity by imposing a new one on him" (139). Michael always avoids this

² Wright's repeated insistence on identifying Michael, the officer, and the reader racial terms ignores what Dick Penner correctly identifies as the "exclusion of] racial references from the novel" (91). Penner quotes Coetzee as claiming that he "very consciously" excludes such references in *Michael K* because of "the oversimplicity of the black/white dichotomy" (91).

imposition, however, and Marias uses the example of Michael's escape from the camp as a reassertion of his otherness in the face of attempted appropriation, in this case the camp medical officer's attempt to "possess" Michael through "linguistic colonization" (139).

Marias also comments on Michael's relationship to the South African landscape, referring to it as an "analogy, verging on identity" (140). Michael's love for his Karoo farm suggests that he is "able to recognize and identify with the "true" South Africa underlying the European labels" (140). Marias links this persistent escape from imperialist labels with the fact that "Michael K's racial identity is never mentioned," an omission Marias reads as "an analogue of the ultimate failure of the colonizer to confine the other in racial categories" (140). Just as Marais cautions against reading race, Derek Attridge cautions against reading the novel exclusively as an allegory.

Derek Attridge's "Against Allegory" represents one of the most formidable entries in the recent critical conversation of the novel. Attridge begins by acknowledging reasons Coetzee's novels are often read as allegories: "Their distance!...] from the time and place in which they were written, the often enigmatic characters,[...] the scrupulous avoidance of any sense of an authorial presence, the frequently exiguous plots" (32). Attridge's self-proposed challenge, then, is to refuse this impulse and to see whether this refusal "emptie[s Coetzee's texts] of whatever political or ethical significance they might possess" (35). In answering this question he privileges a mode of reading described in his work *The Singularity of Literature* that he refers to as "literal" or "literary" reading in which rather than "treating] the text as an object whose significance has to be divined" the reader "treat[s] it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and

responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through" (39). Attridge therefore recommends that we encounter the novel as an experience rather than attempting to translate it into "political, historical, or moral truths that we can apprehend perfectly well without Coetzee's aid" (45). Attridge therefore praises Coetzee's tendency to:

[...] put his characters, and therefore his readers, in situations of peculiar intensity, stripped of the often distracting detail of historical reference. These situations are nevertheless entirely relevant to the South Africa of the time of writing, though not only to that time and place. (59) This is not to say that Attridge rejects allegorical readings of Coetzee's texts outright; rather, he merely insists we recognize that allegory is one of many valid interpretive angles from which we can approach each individual text, an insight that draws attention to the profound ability of Coetzee's texts to accommodate multiple interpretations. Attridge relates this complex assessment of what makes Coetzee's writing valuable to *Life and Times of Michael K* by producing a close reading of those passages that grant the reader insight into Michael's mental processes. Attridge argues that Coetzee's tendency to use "meditative questions" to convey Michael's subtly complex thoughts "draws the reader into a character's experience—they invite us to share a moment of uncertainty or curiosity without arriving at any conclusion" (58). Attridge does not consider this "drawing in" valuable because it enables Coetzee to more effectively communicate a moral or political message. Instead, it is a prime example of a work of literature performing that most singular of literary tasks: drawing us into the experience of another. Just as Attridge

argues for open-ended interpretation, so also Laura Wright argues for open-ended identity formation in the novel, the way Coetzee presents identity as a polymorphic phenomenon that parallels how it has been discussed in queer theory.

Laura Wright describes how Michael K's character challenges multiple identity categories. For Wright, the text achieves this effect through its complex representation of K's body:

The body of Michael K, as a result of its emaciated androgyny, refuses to signify via familiar markers that denote masculinity and femininity as well as race and age[...] His unreadable body allows Michael a subject position that straddles binary oppositions by representing at once a declining South African patriarchy and unformed or suppressed femininity. (85) Wright further extends this refusal to adopt a stable "subject position" to Michael K's relationship to the civil war that defines his times, claiming that he and the Magistrate from *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

[...] plac[e] themselves at odds with the discourse of war[...] by refusing to signify either as active participants or as conscientious objects. Michael K, always attempting to escape, exists outside of such categorizations. (89) Wright champions Coetzee's protagonists' daring refusals to grant legitimacy to dominant discourses, such as history and politics. For Wright, Coetzee's novels search for what Gordimer denies: a space "between camps" where political commitment defies the either/or.

While most recent academic discussion of Coetzee's works centers on more recent texts such as *Disgrace*, *Age of Iron*, and *Elizabeth Costello*, many critics still have not sufficiently addressed the considerable interpretive challenges presented by *Life and Times of Michael K*. While Coetzee's texts indisputably address a variety of critical, theoretical issues, the desire to situate *Life and Times of Michael K* within a pre-existing theoretical system fails to recognize the novel's self-inscribed commentary on the dangers of the colonizing impulse inherent within the interpretive process. This is not to say, however, that critics have failed to produce worthwhile insights in their endeavors: Helgesson's observations on the changed, elusive nature of meaning produced from our encounter with the text, Attridge's insistence that we resist the urge to reduce the text to a discursive "message," and Marias' emphasis on the implied relationship between colonization and interpretation are all useful insights gleaned from appropriately close and thoughtful analyses of the text. To rely on any one theorist's system or critic's work on *Life and Times of Michael K* in an attempt to "unlock" its "true meaning," however, would be to fall into the same trap as the camp's medical officer, who, in the novel's second section, does not recognize the gaps in Michael's story and fails to understand Michael K will forever escape being "pinned down." These gaps or "blanks"³ not only foiled critics but also confound Michael himself, who stands as both an object that cannot be known and also as the reader herself.

³ Reception theorist Wolfgang Iser describes the blank as a place within a literary text where "Instead of being able to grasp meaning like an object, the critic is confronted by an empty space. And this emptiness cannot be filled by a referential meaning, and any attempt to reduce it in this way leads to nonsense" (*The Act of Reading* 8).

The blanks continually frustrate Michael's attempts to "explain himself to himself" as when Michael assesses the "lesson" his journey has taught him in the text's conclusion: "[...]if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything" (183). The reader may recognize Michael has here "revealed" a "lesson." Immediately following this statement, however, come the following crucial lines: "(Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them?)" (183). Similarly, the text dramatizes this connection in its second section, which chronicles Michael's stay at the Kenilworth Rehabilitation Camp. Until this point the text's narration has occurred from a limited third-person perspective focalized through Michael K's consciousness; as Michael enters the camp, however, the text switches abruptly to the first person perspective of the journal kept by the camp's medical officer. The officer's first entry begins as follows: "There is a new patient in the ward, a little old man who collapsed during physical training and was brought in with very low respiration and heartbeat" (129). The combination of incorrect guessing and truth in this statement immediately signal to the reader that this new narrator will be, at best, unreliable. The officer confirms this by continuing to refer to K as "Michaels" despite K's claims to the contrary. The officer also refuses to accept K's assertion that he is "only thirty-two," as he responds by only half-heartedly admitting, "Perhaps it is the truth" (130, 131). The officer here colonizes Michael by appropriating his right to determine his own subjectivity and placing him in a definitive interpretive framework.

The attitude the officer adapts towards K's "story" proves even more revealing, however. To his credit, the officer refuses to accept the "official" version of Michael's story, asking the camp's director Noel "If this Michaels was running a flourishing garden, why was he starving to death?" (131). The officer's primary concern now becomes ascertaining the "true" version of "Michaels'" story. The officer and Noel, the camp's director, confront K to this end, telling him "you've got a story to tell and we want to hear it" (139). When K responds with silence, the officer concludes that "there is no story to be had[...] there is nothing there, no story of the slightest interest to rational people" (141-142). Yet Michael refutes this by telling the story of his mother's death; the officer refuses to accept the story, claiming that "you have not told the full story and I'm sure you know that" (142). He quickly appropriates the story he has just denied, however, telling Noel that Michael K "quakes in his pants when he thinks of a mother with flaming hair who visits him in his dreams"⁴ (142). The officer responds to his increasing obsession with Michael by composing a letter which attempts to convince K that the officer is concerned about K's welfare and is the only person who truly understands him and can be entrusted with K's story: "I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as [...] a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history (151). The officer's relentless attempts to define what Michael "is" close off his potential to "be" something different than what the officer understands or declares him to be. The officer's plea to Noel that he

⁴ K's mother was cremated, a fact he relates to the officer by saying that "When she died they threw her in the fire" (32, 136).

"close the story of Michaels/' by "concoct[ing] a death report" continues this practice of attempting colonization via closure, as it quite literally seeks to "close" K's story (1 55).

In the closing pages of the novel's second section, however, the officer realizes that Michael cannot be reduced to the meaning(s) he attributes to him, recognizing that "Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me" (1 65). The officer further observes that Michael's meaning is not a result of a personal lack within himself or the lack of meaning engendered by the novel's titular "times." He also recognizes that this meaning escapes his attempts to use or describe it, noting that it is not "something like a ray that I project to bathe this or that bed, or a robe in which I wrap this or that patient according to whim" (165). This inspires the officer to imagine an encounter with K in which he can reveal his final interpretation of K's stay in the camp:

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed [...] you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees. (1 66)

The medical officer here finally recognizes that K's refusal to remain imprisoned physically parallels his resistance against the officer's attempts to "pin him down" through reductive, colonizing interpretation.

The medical officer's understanding corresponds with perhaps the most significant passage in the book dealing with interpretation, one often overlooked by critics:

Between this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110) This passage shifts the episode's conceptual focus from the necessity of revolutionary praxis to the textual blank that resides within both Michael and his story, forever "eat[ing] up" the interpretative language that both he and the reader attempt to fill it with. These blanks seduce the reader into making meaning from the text.

But the question remains, both for readers and critics, how can we seek the greatest understanding and avoid what for Coetzee is the fatal interpretive mistake: reducing a story to "a message with a rhetorical or aesthetic covering"—a thing that has been colonized ("The Novel Today" 3)? Yet no critical consensus exists when dealing with the question's answer. More importantly, many critics intent on making Coetzee relevant in a hyper-political age, engage in the very colonizing act Coetzee warns against. Rather than merely suffusing the text with a variety of voices, moral lessons, and political perspectives, Coetzee creates blanks within Michael K's own interpretive process, forming a commentary—perhaps even a commentary on commentary that we can call "metacommentary." This self-reflexive movement in the text also comments upon the way the novel can be read and also the way literary criticism, at its best, operates: as a way of opening the text for readers and generating many possible meanings.

Life and Times of Michael K deals with interpretation: the way we encounter imaginative works of literature as well as different cultures. In these parallel encounters we meet an "Other"—whether it be a disparate culture or a difficult-to-decipher text. In honoring texts and peoples we strive to meet each on their own terms. While the novel does highlight numerous, seemingly insurmountable obstacles to gaining understanding of the Other, its final image suggests that at least a limited potential for such understanding exists within the practice of storytelling itself. All attempts to "extract" meaning from both Michael and his story in the form of a "message" prove unsuccessful. The "reason" for this resistance to definitive interpretation lies in Coetzee's awareness of the connections between reductive interpretation and colonization, both ill-informed ways of appropriating an other. Both stand just outside of reason's reach, defying our attempts to connect things and make meaning from the situation into which we are thrown, one that may not have a definitive moral stance but that cultivates, like Michael's gardening, a "way," as in the book's closing line, "one can live" (184).

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