

THE DIALECTIC OF THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS
IN J. M. COETZEE'S FICTION

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Abstract

This study provides a dialectical alternative to poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of J. M. Coetzee's fiction, on one hand, and Levinasian interpretations of his works, on the other. Drawing on Hegel and Adorno, I explore the subject position of the Unhappy Consciousness in three of Coetzee's novels: *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *Elizabeth Costello*. Specifically, I argue that the women characters in these novels can be understood through the lens of the Unhappy Consciousness, that is, the "dual" consciousness of mastery and slavery. As such, they are obsessed with questions of freedom (mastery and slavery), forgiveness, love, salvation, and evil, among others. Women who bear the wounds of history, I believe, occupy the ideal subject position as mediators through which we can relate to the suffering of the other, including the animal others, without assimilating the other's difference. This study attempts to understand the nature of this relation with the other without sacrificing "nonidentity" to the language of mastery. Susan Barton in *Foe* is a white woman whose voice has been silenced by white men and the literary canon. She locates herself as the master to Friday and the slave to Cruso, who is replaced by Foe later in the novel. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, likewise, is an ailing white woman situated in late-apartheid South Africa and as such she occupies the position of mastery with regards to the black population and a position of slavery with regards to men in general. Elizabeth Costello is both animal and human and as such mediates our relation with what she calls our "slave populations," i.e., animals (104). As I show, all three novels can be read as adhering to but at the same time writing back to and revising the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. Drawing on Adorno, I regard the primacy of the bodily and the somatic, i.e. physical suffering, to be central to the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness in these novels. Ultimately, animals and nonhuman others appear as figures of "nonidentity" crawling through the surface of Coetzee's fiction, plaguing the consciousness of his works and their breeding ground, i.e. culture.

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Introduction

This study provides a dialectical alternative to poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of J. M. Coetzee's fiction, on one hand, and Levinasian interpretations of his fiction, on the other. These approaches have been among the dominant frameworks within which Coetzee's works have been received. At the heart of these approaches is the question of the relationship with the other of discourse. Postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee's novels ask us to adopt, in the words of María J. López, a position of radical "blindness" with regards to an other that functions, in the final analysis, as a figure of ultimate difference (189). This figure resists, and, in fact, thwarts all our attempts at interpretation. In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on Coetzee's rendition of Friday's silence in *Foe*, which set the tone for the paradigmatic interpretation of the novel and postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of otherness in Coetzee's fiction at large, Friday is read as "the subaltern" figure par excellence, as the "wholly other," in other words, as "the curious guardian at the margin" (4 & 16). In postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee, the position of the narrators, the characters and, by consequence, that of the reader in relation to the figure of the other is perceived mainly, though not exclusively, as that of a dummy whose persistent attempts at deciphering the other merely highlights one's own dumbness. This position, however, is not without insight. The insight in postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee lies in the recognition of the fact that the contestation of meaning, in fact, unravels or reveals the master's blindness and its pathological symptoms. Nevertheless, in postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee, the other appears as the figure of mystery or the unknown, in other words, as the Kantian "in-itself" whose relationship to the other characters or the reader is that of pure distance and difference. In postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee's novels, meaning is purely conceived as one of constant fall within the incomprehensible and the inauthentic. In their relationship with the

other, the narrators, the characters and the readers cannot get much beyond their own starting point. They are pinned down to their own frustrations with meaning and mastery. In these readings, meaning is stalled at every point and the result of the negation of meaning is always already the stasis of meaning. While I strongly agree with postmodernist and poststructuralist prohibition on assimilating the other to the discourse of the self, which is, in fact, the master's discourse, I do not believe our relationship with the other or the dynamics of the novel falls solely within or remains trapped within this rhetoric of blindness. Postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee cannot adequately explain the transformations, movements, and metamorphoses of meaning and characters which, I believe, are a decisive feature of Coetzee's fiction. One of the challenges of Coetzee's fiction is to be able to explore these transformations and movements of meaning without sacrificing difference or, to use Adorno's word, "nonidentity" to the master's discourse.¹

In Levinasian readings of the novel, on the other hand, the other appears as a figure of radical alterity. In contradistinction from postmodernist and poststructuralist interpretation of Coetzee, the other is seen as the very ground of subjectivity, responsibility, and transcendence. In Levinasian readings of Coetzee, what is at stake in Coetzee's fiction is the phenomenological description of intersubjective relations at a precognitive level. Coetzee's fiction in these readings

¹ My critique of Spivak and the other scholars here should not be read as an indication of these scholars' apoliticality. Spivak, for example, has been among the most radical thinkers of our time. Moreover, it is not possible to categorize their scholarship under the general banners of the postmodern or the poststructural. Needless to say that neither of these two terms can ultimately be subsumed under the other. In addition, the implications of these terms are much more diverse and complex than I have the space or intention to explore here. My critique is rather geared against these scholars' specific reading of Coetzee's fiction. I believe that their readings of Coetzee's novels are, nonetheless, subsumed within a certain inscription of postmodern or poststructuralist discourse for two specific reasons: a) they posit the figure of the other purely as the ultimately unknown or unreadable and, as a result b) they cannot adequately account for the movement, mutation and metamorphosis, i.e. dialectic, of meaning and characters in Coetzee's narrative.

invite us to host the other, which includes the literary work as well, as a pre-rational or non-rational decision. In these readings, dialectics is absent in Coetzee's fiction and a dialectical engagement with Coetzee's novels is nothing short of misleading. Setting aside the contentious question of Levinas's account of ethics as first philosophy and its problematic relation to his understanding of aesthetics, Levinasian readings of Coetzee's fiction remain too general and abstract and cannot really explain the literary merit and quality of Coetzee's language. They cannot account for the specific encounters established between characters in the novels or explicate the dynamics between characters and readers. Pulling everything into a language of radical alterity, Levinasian readings of Coetzee elide, in the final analysis, the differences between Coetzee's narrators'/characters' specific subject positions/subjectivities. These narrators or characters become, in one way or another, versions of the same repetitious Levinasian figure of subjectivity. Dismissing the question of intentionality entirely, Levinasian readings of Coetzee's fiction, furthermore, cannot account for the characters' obsession with the questions of freedom, salvation, forgiveness, and evil, questions which are intentional categories, among others. These questions, I believe, are tied to and, in fact, are indispensable from the aesthetic politics of Coetzee's fiction.

Despite various references to Hegel and his master/slave dialectic in Coetzee scholarship, Coetzee's relationship to Hegel and the dialectical tradition that follows from him is still unexplored. Postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee, of course, have made references to Hegel. But these readings see Coetzee's Hegelian twist non-dialectically and exclusively in the master/slave dyad. In fact, the dialectical approach to Coetzee's fiction occupies a minority position in Coetzee's scholarship. The first extensive essay on the connection between Coetzee and Hegel was written in 1996 by Barbara Eckstien "Iconicity, Immersion, and Otherness: The Hegelian 'Dive' of J. M. Coetzee and Adrienne Rich." In this essay, Eckstein

positions herself against Spivak and those that follow her paradigm. Drawing mainly on Hegel's "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Eckstein explores the ways the "conceit" of immersion and diving into the wreck provides a dialogic link between Coetzee's postcolonial *Foe* and Adrienne Rich's collection of poems, *Diving into the Wreck*. Drawing upon Hegel's emphasis upon immersion as a means of comprehending "an/other," the essay explores the possibility of "getting past representation to the thing itself" as a "limited yes" (57-77). One can also see noteworthy examples of dialectical engagement with Coetzee's fiction in the works of Robert Pippin. A prominent Kantian/Hegelian scholar, Robert Pippin, in a number of essays on Coetzee, has endeavored to provide a dialectical account of Coetzee's writings. In his first essay on the author's early fiction, for example, Pippin explores the forms of physical and psychological disintegration in the early novels of Coetzee in what he sees to be linked to, in Hegelian terms, "the failure to achieve any mutuality of recognition and so the perpetuation of the relations of mastery and servitude" (26 "The Paradoxes of Power in the Early Novels of J. M. Coetzee"). In "Traverses: J. M. Coetzee in the World," an international conference held in Adelaide to honor Coetzee's work at his 75th birthday, Pippin explicitly, albeit summarily, positioned his reading of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* against postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of Coetzee's novels.

This study attempts to provide the first extensive dialectical engagement with Coetzee's fiction. In my reading of Coetzee, I have mainly drawn upon the works of Hegel, Marx and, most extensively, Adorno. For reasons that will become clear, I have focused mainly on *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *Elizabeth Costello*. In distinction from the Hegelian readings of his fiction which focus exclusively on the moment of the master/slave dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, I regard Hegel's dialectics of the Unhappy Consciousness as primary to the dynamics of these novels and, in fact, to a majority of Coetzee's works. It is through the dialectic of the Unhappy

Consciousness that we should approach the question of mastery and slavery in these novels. A somewhat detailed exploration of this dialectic in relation to the novels is presented in the following chapters. Nevertheless, a few notes on Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness might be helpful here. In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness follows the master/slave dialectic, and the movements of Stoicism and Skepticism in the section titled "The Freedom of Self-Consciousness." The resolution of the dialectics of the Unhappy Consciousness, in fact, grounds the proof of freedom in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The two poles involved in the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness are as follows: a) an infinite, unchanging, substantial, universal consciousness; b) a finite, changeable, insubstantial, particular consciousness. It is only the unity of the universal and particular that is the goal of this consciousness. The free universal consciousness that existed in the figure of the master and the particular consciousness that existed in the figure of the slave in the prior moments of the *Phenomenology* now coexist in the same consciousness: "the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one" (126; par. 206). Roughly put, it is this "dual" consciousness of mastery and slavery lodged in a single consciousness, best exemplified in Coetzee's female narrators/characters, that I believe holds the key to the aesthetic politics of these novels and the various frustrations, mutations, and transformations of meaning. This study, I should add as an aside, is by no means a conceptual or thematic analysis of Coetzee's fiction. The movement of meaning, as I will explore, shows itself in the mimetic contortions of language at every turn in these novels. Coetzee's novels, in fact, attempt to transcend the dialectics of desire which characterize the moment of the master/slave struggle in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In other words, Coetzee's language does not remain confined or imprisoned within the language of mastery and slavery. Its desire is to step beyond the bounds of mastery and slavery. These novels, I believe, seem to struggle with the very

question that bothers Susan Barton in *Foe*: “Without desire how is possible to make a story?” (88)

The dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness finds its best home in women characters in these novels. Magda, the heroine of Coetzee’s second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, expresses a wish which comes to full fruition, even though perhaps inversely, in the language of Susan Barton, Mrs. Curren, and Elizabeth Costello and in the corresponding novels in which they appear. After making a specific reference to a passage from Hegel’s master/slave section, Magda declares: “I am gagging on a diet of universals” (142). Finally, she declares her wish as follows: “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!” (145) This “language of the heart,” in fact, finds its true voice in these women characters. Women who bear the wounds of history, I believe, occupy the ideal subject position as mediators through which we can relate to the suffering of the other without approximating or assimilating the other’s difference. It is the burden of this study to understand the nature of this relation with the other without sacrificing “nonidentity” to the language of mastery. Susan Barton in *Foe* is a white woman whose voice has been silenced by white men and the literary canon. Early in the story she locates herself as the master to Friday and a slave to Cruso, who is replaced by Foe later in the novel. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, likewise, is an ailing white woman situated in late-apartheid South Africa and as such she occupies the position of mastery with regards to the black population and a position of slavery with regards to men in general. Elizabeth Costello is both animal and human and as such mediates our relation with what we she calls our “slave populations,” i.e., animals (104). These positions, I emphasize, have been acknowledged in the scholarship, but they have never been dialectically explored.

The dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness in these novels, however, cannot be read merely as a seamless replica of the Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. These novels can be read to adhere but at the same time to write back to or revise the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. Drawing upon the works of Adorno, for example, I regard the valuation or the primacy of the bodily and the somatic, i.e. physical suffering, to be central to the dialectic worked out in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* so much so that Elizabeth Costello can be read as an inverted Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness and the novel as to bring about an inversion of the Hegelian dialectic. Nature and animals appear as figures of nonidentity crawling through the surface of the text and, thus, plague the consciousness of the work of art and its breeding ground, i.e. culture.

This study falls into seven chapters. The bulk of my discussion (chapters III-VII) is devoted to the study of *Elizabeth Costello* with the study of its "Postscript" serving as my concluding chapter. The occult nature of the novel, which is offered as a series of lessons, imposed itself on me and, in fact, demanded this extensive treatment. For the first time as a critic, I was ultimately incapable of conceiving even a most general outline to embark on drafting a most tentative response even after having read the novel numerous times. My notes would only return my blank gaze. I literally had to engage in the act of writing about the novel and only reflect afterwards. I had to rewrite *Elizabeth Costello*. It is, indeed, in the nature of Coetzee's fiction to place the ultimate responsibility on the shoulders of the reader. In the first chapter, I have tried to understand *Foe*. In the second chapter, I have attempted to explore *Age of Iron*.

Chapter 1, "Unhappy Consciousness and the Dialectic of Freedom in *Foe*," explores the aesthetic implications of the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness embodied in its female narrator, Susan Barton, in its relation to the dialectics/problematics of freedom in *Foe*. As such, this chapter will be the first extensive engagement with the question of freedom in Coetzee's *Foe* and, in fact, Coetzee scholarship. This chapter can be characterized as a Marxist-Hegelian

reading of Coetzee's narrative. *Foe* is interesting in that one can observe close correspondences between this text and Hegel's exploration of the Unhappy Consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. In her attempts to understand freedom (her own as well as Friday's), Susan Barton often draws upon the very moves, gestures and strategies that the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness engages with in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Being the paradigmatic novel which sealed the discussion of otherness in Coetzee's oeuvre, I engage most extensively and in more detail with a critique of postmodernist and poststructuralist as well as Levinasian readings of Coetzee in this novel.

Chapter 2, "Unhappy Consciousness and Forgiveness: The Ethics and Politics of Love and Freedom in *Age of Iron*," examines the ethics and politics of love and freedom in Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and will follow the itinerary of these concepts to the question of forgiveness. To do so, I investigate the centrality of the questions of reading and writing for the Unhappy Consciousness of the novel, i.e., Mrs. Curren, on the one hand, and for us as readers of the novel, on the other. The questions of love, freedom and forgiveness are of prime importance in this novel as *Age of Iron* is the only work in Coetzee's oeuvre that makes explicit references to the context of late-apartheid South Africa. Again, I am not concerned merely with a thematic or conceptual analysis of these questions. What is of its prime importance to me is the aesthetic politics of the novel and how these concepts are explored or actualized through various narrative techniques, in particular, through the main focalizer of the story, i.e., Mrs. Curren.

Chapter 3, "*Elizabeth Costello's* Unhappy Consciousness: Theoretical Outlook or Afterthoughts," lays out the general theoretical contours within which I have tried to explore the subject position/subjectivity of the Unhappy Consciousness in terms of its relationship with nature and animal others in *Elizabeth Costello*. The language I have used to explore the problems in question has literally emerged in the process of engaging with the novel rather than being

imposed on the novel from without merely as an interpretative framework. In this chapter, I have drawn on the works of Horkheimer and, more extensively, Adorno to explore the aesthetic and conceptual constellation within which the question of nature and animal others are situated especially with respect to Elizabeth Costello's subject position/subjectivity. Adorno's theoretical insights, in fact, serve as a major inter-text in my analysis of the novel in the chapters that follow. Chapter 3 will also serve as springboard for a more detailed account of Adorno's aesthetic theory as a way of exploring the aesthetic politics of the novel. It is in this spirit that I decided to devote a chapter to the study of Adorno's theoretical insights.

Chapter 4, "Moving beyond the Page: The Confines of Realism and the Truth of the Oral, *Elizabeth Costello's* Lessons I & II," reads Elizabeth Costello's lessons I & Lesson II as the novel's first attempt in laying out the problematics of the real and of realism, on the one hand, and in negating and moving beyond the context of real (the merely given) and of realism, on the other. Realism appears as more than a literary genre or a mode of writing. The concepts of the real and of realism, their limits, and their shortcomings are conceived within and, in fact, seen as a constellation of meanings, ideas and concepts that go beyond the confines of the literary text. To contest the context of the real and the discourse of realism, Lesson I & II, in fact, lay the ground for the truth of the physical and the somatic that speaks throughout the lessons. Lesson II, in particular, tries to capture what it calls "the truth of the oral" (54). This truth will be the ground through which the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative mediates our "kindness to animals," i.e., "being of one kind, one nature," with the animal others in the following lessons (106).

Chapter 5, "Giving Voice to Suffering: From the Truth of the Oral to the Truth of Animal Body, *Elizabeth Costello's* Lessons III & IV," explores the attempt at connecting "the truth of the oral" and the human body to the truth of the animal body in Lessons III and IV. These lessons highlight our "kindness to animals" via giving voice to their suffering and the suffering body at

large. On the one hand, Lessons III and IV negate the anthropocentric conception of the animal and, by consequence, human subjectivity. On the other hand, they call for a specific mode of “poetic engagement” which takes its direction from what Elizabeth Costello refers to as “sympathetic imagination” (95 & 79). Opposing the Cartesian notion of the human and the animal, this “engagement” can mediate an utterly unique relationship with the animal others. In Elizabeth’s words, it makes possible the experience of “inhabiting another body” (95). Through the agency of the novel’s Unhappy Consciousness, Lessons III and IV, in fact, contest the taboo that keeps watch over animals and the animal body. This contestation, as I will explore, is made possible through highlighting the historical juncture where the human meets its animal other.

Chapter 6, “From the Truth of the Body to the Ban on Images: The Suffering Body and the Question of Evil, *Elizabeth Costello*’s Lessons V & VI,” follows upon lessons III’s and IV’s emphasis on “sympathetic imagination” and “poetic engagement” only to delve into the dangers or limitations immanent in those lessons. If “poetic engagement” is the gateway to a different understanding of/relation to the suffering body and the animal others, then aesthetics of representation, as an element in the kind of engagement Elizabeth has in mind, has a certain urgency for the question of suffering at stake in the novel. Drawing extensively on Adorno’s aesthetic theory, I have tried to show that lessons V and VI can be read as bans against reducing suffering to an image or abstraction of the mind. While Lesson V highlights the inadequacy of literary or aesthetic representation (conceived as the image of suffering) to the task, Lesson VI takes a step further by positing the realistic (imagistic) rendition of suffering as plainly evil. These questions are mediated via the bodily and the somatic sensibilities of the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative. The somatic and the bodily, in fact, function as viable modes of knowledge in these lessons.

Chapter 7, “From the Ban on Images to ‘Inwardness’ and ‘Special Fidelities’: The Possibility of Eros and the Inevitability of Sacrifice, *Elizabeth Costello*’s Lessons VII and VIII,” reads Lessons VII and VIII as equally engaged with the problematics of aesthetic representation. Yet, these lessons take a step further. They can be read as attempts to get beyond aesthetic figurations that reduce suffering or evil to an image or a set of abstractions. To do so, they endeavor to resuscitate, redefine, and reimagine the qualities that have been the very targets of modernity, its culture industry and other societal forces of abstraction. These qualities are, in Elizabeth’s mind, “inwardness” and “Eros,” on the one hand, and “the special fidelities” of the artist, on the other (183-192). These lessons can be read as part and parcel of a desire that is central to the dynamics of the novel, i.e., the attempt to get beyond the logic of sacrifice immanent in the historical trajectory of the subject. They pay homage to the incommensurable in a world which tends to reduce all qualities to a series of images or, differently put, digests and transforms all qualities to a set of abstractions or series of credos. Lesson VII and VIII ultimately emerge as worthwhile and necessary, yet, insufficient attempts at bypassing the logic of sacrifice. Lesson VIII eventually ends on a surprising note of failure. As perceived by the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, the sacrificial figure of the animal emerges once again at the margins of literary discourse.

The concluding chapter, “The Incommensurable as Suffering Nature, *Elizabeth Costello*’s Postscript,” studies the postscript with which the novel ends. The reading of the postscript, likewise, concludes my study of Coetzee. In the spirit of Coetzee and Adorno, I have refrained from ending my thesis with a totalizing conclusion, which would be inconsistent with my reading of Coetzee and Adorno throughout this study. With Coetzee and Adorno, I believe, we remain in the dialectic of the finite. Every interpretation, including my own, remains partial. The term conclusion in the title of this chapter, therefore, is solely used in a provisional sense. The

postscript, after all, can be read as one more attempt to get beyond the logic of sacrifice, particularly in terms of aesthetic and literary representation. Against conceiving the incommensurable as the merely subjective category or the merely sensuous entity (as in Lessons VII and VIII) or the merely abstract concept (as in philosophic discourse), the postscript attempts to get beyond art's imagery/"*imagerie*" or symbolic immanence by making suffering nature the very index of the incommensurable.² It is not realism or symbolic allegiance that is the target in the postscript as such, but here, to use Adorno's words, the target is art's "semblance character," i.e. art's attempt to resemble its own elements (*Aesthetic Theory* 100-118). The postscript can be read as an attempt to outstrip the bounds of the merely sensuous and the merely beautiful and its corollary. i.e., the merely technical. It makes suffering nature the index of the incommensurable through a language that attempts to replicate mimetically this very suffering. This language comes to us through the corporeal mental suffering of an Unhappy Consciousness who, nonetheless, fails to express itself/its suffering at every turn.

² Adorno uses the term *imagerie* on numerous occasions in *Aesthetic Theory*. He does so, among others, to wrest aesthetic images and the conception of the artwork from a) the term imagery as perceived within ahistorical categories such as form and content b) "the artist's psychological repository of representations," roughly put, intentional fallacy (85), c) neo-romantic conceptions of art and imagery and d) art and imagery interpreted within the paradigm of empirical historiography. Art's *imagerie* is, on the contrary, to be understood as the historical and social processes "congealed" in artworks (85 & 131), hence an echo of Adorno's idea of "natural-history." I will address Adorno's idea of "natural-history" and his conception of the artwork and aesthetics at some length in this study.

Chapter 1

Unhappy Consciousness and the Dialectic of Freedom in *Foe*

J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* is primarily a dialectical critique and a philosophic rewriting of Daniel Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe*.³ It is, in a sense, the *Bildungsroman* of its narrator's and its readers' consciousness. It is the story of a woman, in her words, a "castaway" named Susan Barton who finds herself on Cruso(e)'s island (5).⁴ As she puts it in her memoir, in search of her abducted daughter she arrives in Bahia, where she loses all hope to find her daughter. She eventually boards herself on a ship for Lisbon. Susan, however, is hurled into the sea after the crew mutiny against their captain and slay him. She eventually swims toward the island, where she meets Friday and Cruso. Later, she manages to board herself as well as Robinson and Friday (who are reluctant to leave the island) by force on a ship back to England. Robinson dies during this voyage. In England, she feels compelled to have the story of the island told by (De)Foe in whose narration she seeks her freedom.⁵ The problem is that nothing of any significance has ever happened on the island. Neither is it possible to tell the story of the island without including Friday's story. Nevertheless, Friday, unlike his predecessor in Defoe's narrative, has lost his

³ Besides the apparent intertext which is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe*'s intertextual relationship with Defoe's other works such as *Colonel Jack*, *Roxana*, *Moll Flanders* and his writing on ghosts and apparitions have been acknowledged and explored in the scholarship on Coetzee. For the purposes of this chapter, I mainly focus on *Foe*'s rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Following Dominc Head's and María J. López example, however, I also discuss the significance of Coetzee's indebtedness to his predecessor as the author of ghost stories. For a comprehensive study of *Foe* as a ghost story see López's *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J. M. Coetzee* (202-209).

⁴ *Crusoe* is written as "Cruso" in Coetzee's novel. In the rest of the argument, I use "Cruso" in distinction from Defoe's "Crusoe" or the historical individual the name "Crusoe" may stand for in Defoe's novel. In *Foe*, furthermore, the ownership of the island by Cruso is merely Susan's assumption.

⁵ *Foe* was Daniel Defoe's original surname. He added "De" to his name at the age of forty. The author-figure in Coetzee's novel is named Foe. In the rest of this essay, I will use the name Foe to refer to this author-figure.

tongue or, more precisely, is silent throughout the narrative.⁶ Thus Susan is compelled to experience herself as unfree. *Foe* is, in a sense, also the story of Susan's/readers' trials and attempts to understand and to overcome her/our state of un-freedom.

My aim in this chapter primarily is to provide a dialectical alternative to postmodern and poststructuralist readings of the novel. In the postmodern and poststructuralist tradition of reading Coetzee, Friday's silence is primarily read as providing an unsurmountable resistance to the colonial discourse of the West, or, as David Attwell rightly insists, the post-colonial nationalism and its failures, with which I concur (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-face with Time* 124-136). Postmodern and poststructuralist readings of *Foe* then proceed to read Friday merely as the incomprehensible and the marginal that is, in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "wholly other" or "the curious guardian at the margin" (4 & 16). In this tradition, the silence of Friday is solely read to underwrite the impossibility of understanding the other. This position leaves us with a relative logic of constant fall within the inauthentic and the incomprehensible. Friday, I believe, is more than that. He appears as the figure of identity and difference rather than solely and only a figure of otherness, difference, or alterity. In the course of the story we, in a sense, identify with Friday in that we realize that our freedom is tied to Friday's freedom. To use the pervasive metaphor of the novel, our freedom is tied to Friday's freedom in a really "substantial" way. Nevertheless, the language available to us or Friday (even if he had a tongue) is incapable of commenting on how to actualize this freedom. To explain the nature of this identity, difference, and substantiality will be the burden of the present argument. I should

⁶ As María J. López (196-97), Lewis MacLeod (1-18), and Derek Attridge (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* 81) emphasize, we do not have any solid proof that Friday's tongue has been cut off or that he has no tongue. All we know is that he remains silent throughout the narrative. In the rest of the argument, I do not distinguish between the literal and the metaphoric meanings of the term "tongue."

add that I have formulated my argument partly in response to Mike Marais's Levinasian reading of Coetzee's novels. Looking at *Foe* primarily from a Levinasian angle, Marais regards Friday as figure of radical alterity and the writer, in Elizabeth Costello's words, as "a secretary of the invisible" (199).⁷ This alterity, in Levinas, in contradistinction to the poststructuralist tradition, is the very ground of subjectivity, responsibility, and transcendence. In Marais's reading, the text, the writer, the writerly inspiration, and the writing process all merge into the following description: "to be the secretary of the invisible is precisely to become a home for the other and then try to make for it a home in language" (xvi). Although I agree with the general description presented here by Marais—and our arguments may merge at various points—I disagree with Marais's ultimate Levinasian stance on the novel, i.e., that the dynamics at work in the novel are non-dialectical. Despite apparent Levinasian overtones of the text, Coetzee's *Foe*, while being distinct and singular in its position, I believe, still falls within the dialectical tradition.

The question we should seriously ask is the following: are the silences and "secrets" of the novel after all, as María J. López argues, merely the categorical "demand" on the writer/narrator/reader to acquire a "position of blindness" (189)? López is right in stressing that "we must undertake a strenuous effort to avoid making Friday 'the helpless captive' of our preconceived categories or of our desire for interpretative closure" (196). But is the end-result of the chain of negations in the story simply and solely this nullity, inability, or blindness? In other words, does negation or the subtraction of meaning in the novel entail a cancelation of meaning or does it, on the contrary, generate a content of its own? I concede that Friday remains

⁷ Elizabeth Costello is a character who is a somewhat accomplished novelist in a novel by Coetzee with the same name, *Elizabeth Costello*. In the last chapter of the novel, she finds herself before a tribunal that asks her to state her belief to be allowed passage through a gate. The gate possibly stands for the gate of heaven, another world, or another life. As a defense, she states that she holds no beliefs or firm beliefs and that as a writer she has always been "a secretary of the invisible." I will explore Elizabeth's remarks in more detail in chapter 7.

absolutely unreadable, but I do not concur with the postmodernist or poststructuralist conclusion that the sole purpose of the novel is to foreground authorial limitation or the insufficiency of the language available to us to give a voice to Friday's suffering or freedom. This conclusion only states the obvious. On the contrary, I believe that Coetzee's language and politics in *Foe* incorporate a dialectical critique of capitalism, its cultural logic and aesthetics especially as developed in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. *Foe* debunks a) the economic, moral, political, and psychological myths of capitalist accumulation and expansion, on the one hand, and b) concretizes the problem of freedom, confirms the reality of freedom, and defines it as a collective project, on the other. However, it is important to note that the novel does not provide a recipe on how to actualize this freedom. To achieve his purpose, Coetzee deploys, among other things, two main textual strategies: a) in contra-distinction to Defoe's text, Coetzee excludes or rather subtracts from the story of the Island the law of commodity fetishism, the capitalist law of labor and its exchange, and the myth of primitive accumulation and b) Coetzee adopts Hegel's movement of the Unhappy Consciousness in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and dramatizes its tensions.⁸

Although there have been a few attempts to interpret Coetzee's *Foe* in Hegelian terms, no one has tried to approach the text on Marx's own terms. This may come as a surprise since the novel is primarily a critical re-writing of a classic that stands as the paradigmatic novel of capitalistic accumulation and imperialistic expansionism. To set the stage for the politics of freedom, Coetzee debunks the capitalist logic of labor, commodity fetishism, and primitive

⁸ I do not intend to say that Coetzee has either studied or even consciously adopted Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Nevertheless, the novel's heroine and narrator, Susan Barton, can be read as an almost perfect instantiation of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness.

accumulation. The text immediately problematizes the logic of labor and the violence associated with it under capitalism in the following terms:

“Once I asked Cruso whether he knew no way of fashioning a lamp or a candle so that we should not have to retire when darkness fell, like brutes. Cruso responded in the following words: “Which is easier: to learn to see in the dark, or to kill a whale and seethe it down for the sake of candle?” . . . The simple truth was, Cruso would brook no change on his island.”

(27)

Conditioned by capitalism, Susan constantly pesters Cruso for not performing any useful labor. More properly put, Susan’s concern is to maximize utility. She questions Cruso as to why he does not build a boat, keep a journal, or retrieve tools from the wreck. Cruso’s reaction to Susan is always a mixture of indifference and defiance. There are no needs for such endeavors within the political economy of the island. Answering Susan’s questions as to why there are no laws on his island, Cruso says: ““On the island there is no law except the law that we shall work for bread, which is a commandment”” (36). Susan’s desire to retrieve tools or keep a journal and her longing for adventure is, therefore, not a natural desire specific to human nature. It is rather a desire shaped by the immanent laws of capital; it is the bourgeois desire for self-expression. In contradistinction to Defoe’s convoluted plot in *Robinson Crusoe* with its consecutive chain of adventures, Coetzee’s/Susan’s narrative of the island lacks all substantial content. In fact, it lacks capitalist content. Put differently, the elimination of capitalist mode of labor in Coetzee’s island has its counterpart in Susan’s story which lacks all content. Thus, Coetzee immediately makes a direct link to Marx’s thesis of man’s productive activity shaping his world, thoughts, and values—here between the capitalist mode of labor and Defoe’s plot in *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner*.

Despite the barrenness of the island, and contrary to the paradise portrayed in *Robinson Crusoe*, there is no scarcity of food or labor on Crusoe's island. Thus, poverty and scarcity, as Coetzee lays them bare in this narrative, and Marx stresses them throughout his writings, have their roots in the capitalist mode of production, i.e., its specific exploitation of labor power. Equally, as Stephen Hymer indicates, labor has no exchange-value for Defoe's Crusoe prior to the arrival of Friday and others whom he will fully exploit to his advantage. The idea becomes clear, Hymer notes, if we pay attention to Crusoe's reference to his time and labor on the island (32): "My Time or Labour was little worth, and so it was as well employ'd one way as another" (Defoe 59). Due to the absence of exploitation, Hymer contends, the desires arising from it are equally put under erasure if not entirely absent (32):

In the first Place, I was remov'd from all the Wickedness of the World here. I had neither the *Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eye, or the pride of life*: I had nothing to covet; for I had all that I was now capable of enjoying: I was the Lord of the whole Manor; or, if I pleas'd, I might call myself King, or Emperor over the whole Country which I had Possession of. There were no Rivals: I had no competitor, none to dispute Sovereignty or Command with me. (Defoe 109)

Nevertheless, the logic of exchange defines the very logic of the novel at every point. As Karl Marx ironically implies in *Capital Vol. I*, Robinson's rigorous method of keeping an inventory of his deeds and the items he has retrieved from the ship replicate, in fact, the very logic of capitalist society, most significantly the idea of commodity fetishism, the puritan morality associated with it, and I may add, the capitalist myth of primitive accumulation (169-170). Spivak believes that in his reference to Defoe's story, Marx regards *Robinson Crusoe* as an example of "the production of use-values" since on Robinson's island commodities are not produced for exchange (6). Spivak misses the irony of Marx's remark. Marx's main point is that,

despite appearances, Robinson's use of tools to make objects of utility takes its shape from capital's imperatives that produce the novel's imagined world in the first place. The fact that Robinson does not produce commodities for exchange does not signify that the reality of commodity-fetishism or the logic of exchange is absent from the novel at any point. Use-value, in fact, is a mere pretense in the novel. The fact that Robinson keeps an inventory of the things he retrieves from the ship gives the pretense away. Under the circumstances of the island, Robinson's keeping an inventory does not really arise from a practical necessity. The truth is that Robinson keeps an inventory of those things only because he regards them as magnitudes of value, i.e., exchange-value.

The significant point here is that in the absence of "the language of commodities," (144), an expression Marx uses to describe commodity fetishism, Susan is driven to find another language to talk about the story of the island. In Coetzee's imagined world, this other language defies the language of commodities that has defined the cultural logic of capitalism, here the colonial language and its cultural-political imperatives, more specifically, the classics and the genre of the novel itself. In the course of the story, the language of the colonizer becomes mute. This language and its onto-political imperatives become absolutely inadequate as means of narration both for the narrator and the actual author of the story himself. This other language dethrones the author's position and his language. In fact, the subtraction of "the language of commodities" from the language of the novel is part of the dialectical dynamics of the novel.

Coetzee's first chapter in *Foe* and its intertextual relations to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* can be read in light of Marx's discussion on primitive accumulation. It is impossible, in a short space, to explicate fully the interrelationship between these texts and follow their implications in detail. Providing some notes on how these texts relate to each other, however, I will focus on how Coetzee, through subtracting the myth of primitive accumulation from Defoe's story, enacts a

dialectical critique of his predecessor's story. In the last part of *Capital Vol. I*, Marx explicates the historical process by which workers become "free workers" in a double sense: free from being "part of the means of production" and free from owning the means of production and subsistence: "So called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive because it forms the pre-history of capital" (874-75). The success of the bourgeois, therefore, Marx notes, has nothing to do with the qualities of diligence, intelligence, and frugality upon which the myth is predicated. It is rather the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the capitalists that eventually forces the workers into the wage-labor slavery. This dispossession from the means of production, therefore, transforms the casual wage-laborer into a wage-laborer for life. Marx relates the origins of this dispossession to the expropriation of the agricultural population and follows the formation of the industrial capital in the founding and looting of the colonies.

Despite appearances, Robinson's command over the labor of others on the island in Defoe's story has nothing to do with the qualities of diligence, intelligence or frugality ascribed to the bourgeois within the narrative of primitive accumulation. There is, likewise, nothing "idyllic" about the process through which Robinson establishes his domination on the island (Marx 873). As Hymer rightly contends, Robinson's survival and his domination over the island has its roots in the large store of materials he retrieves from the wreck (30). Even Robinson himself, Hymer emphasizes, expresses his impotence and his lack of skill in the following terms: "What should I have done without a gun, without ammunition, without any tools to make anything or work with. . . by making the most rational Judgment of things every Man may be in time master of every mechanick Art. I had never handled a Tool in my Life" (Defoe 103). In Marx's terms, these items contain the embodied labor of others. He comes into their possession for free, without the

expenditure of an atom of diligence or intelligence. His growth of barley seeds, Hymer highlights, is also accidental as he empties the bag, in which seeds are stored, to use it for another purpose. The land being arable, he is surprised to see barley growing later (32).

Coetzee, however, annuls the “idyllic” appearances or pretenses of his predecessor’s story by dismantling the utility logic of Susan’s arguments altogether. Coetzee’s island is a barren land with winds howling nonstop all year long. Crusoe does not possess any seeds. The main diet on the island is very simple, including lettuce, fish, and bird’s eggs, accounting for the exemplary health of Crusoe. Furthermore, he retrieves absolutely nothing from the ship. Coetzee’s Crusoe, in fact, points to the absurdity of recovering any items from the wreck, hence laying bare the fictional construct of the bourgeois myth worked out in Defoe’s narrative. Responding to Susan’s pleas as to why he does not dive down to the wreck to save the tools, Crusoe replies: ““The ship lies on the bed of the ocean, broken by the waves and covered in sand, . . . What has survived the salt and the seaworm will not be worth the saving. We have a roof over our heads, made without saw or axe. We sleep, we eat, we live. We have no need of tools”” (32). Through foregrounding the fictionality of Robinson’s dive into the wreck, Coetzee debunks what little semblance of primitive accumulation might be contained in Robinson’s trips to the wreck. Moreover, the only labor that Crusoe and Friday indulge in Coetzee’s version of the story is the building of terraces through carrying large stones in the vague hope that someday some people may show up on the island and happen to bring with themselves seeds for agriculture. Coetzee, in truth, excludes all notions of utility or exchange. The narrative of the island is, indeed, caught within a Beckettian gesture of formal repetitions. Despite all this, there is no scarcity of food or labor. Through expunging the myth of primitive accumulation, the narrative compels us to seek a different narrative to explain and interpret the story. In fact, there is only one story: “In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force play the greatest

part. In the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial” (Marx 874).⁹

Susan gradually realizes that her freedom and our freedom are not bound to the story of the island and its narration, but it is strictly tied to the story of Friday. However, the only person capable of telling this story is Friday himself. But Friday, unlike his counterpart in Defoe’s narrative who acquires the language of the colonizer in an act of submission, has lost his tongue.¹⁰ Friday’s silence, therefore, furnishes the dialectical ground and the dialogical limit of the narrative. The dialectical urgency of the narrative is partly established through a typical Beckettian technique. The story foregrounds the abject absence of Friday’s tongue without providing an explanation for its absence. Its absence/presence is a mystery. In this way, the story foregrounds colonial violence and aggression:

“Indeed, it was the very secretness of his loss that caused me to shrink from him . . . I saw pictures in my mind of pincers gripping his tongue and I shuddered. I covertly observed him as he ate, and with distaste heard the tiny coughs he gave now and then to clear his throat, saw how he did his chewing between his front teeth, like a fish.” (24)

⁹ In fact, Coetzee has consistently written against the grain of the idyllic and the pastoral conventions of South African fiction, most distinctively, perhaps, in his second novel *In the Heart of the Country*. For a contextual analysis of Coetzee’s antipastoralism in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Foe* see David Attwell’s seminal work *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the politics of Writing*. In a nonfictional work, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Coetzee criticizes the pastoral tradition for its “occlusion of black labor from the scene,” whereby “the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal” (5).

¹⁰ “[I]n a little Time I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his Name should be Friday, which was the Day I sav’d his Life; I call’d him so for the Memory of the Time; I likewise taught him to say *Master*, and then let him know, that is to be my Name; I likewise taught him to say Yes, and No, and to know the Meaning of them” (Defoe 174).

The main impulse of the dialectical process, however, lies in Coetzee's choice of a woman-narrator and in her compulsion to have the story told. Coetzee locates his female protagonist and his readers within the heart of what Jean Hyppolite, following Jean Wahl, regards as the "fundamental theme" of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, i.e., the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness (190). A few expository notes on Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness might help to clarify the specific dynamics at work in the novel. This will take us on a detour, but it is also necessary in understanding the narrator's, i.e., Susan's, specific subject position and what it holds for Coetzee's narrative. In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness follows the master/slave dialectic, and the movements of Stoicism and Skepticism in the section titled "The Freedom of Self-Consciousness."¹¹ The resolution of the Unhappy

¹¹ In *Secretary of the Invisible* Mike Marais rejects the dialectical dynamic of Coetzee's novel on a somewhat common misreading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* dominant in literary circles, a reading that primarily rests on a specific interpretation of the master/slave section in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Marais bases his Levinasian engagement with the novel partly on the grounds of this rejection (see, in particular, pp. 5-8, 69-72, & 82). Having a Levinasian perspective, Marais endeavors to rest his interpretation on a non-reciprocal relation of responsibility in Coetzee's novels—against Coetzee's numerous references to the problem of reciprocity that plagues his characters (see the section, "Poetics of Reciprocity" in Coetzee's *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* 55-100). Marais's reading of the master/slave dialectic can be summarized as follows: having asserted their independence against nature, the two self-conscious individuals find their autonomy challenged each by the other. In this challenge, they seek their "legitimacy" (6). In his reading of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, Marais argues that "the relational modes depicted in the novel are not dialectical or, more accurately not dialectizable" (7). Setting aside the questions of what exactly Marais means by the term "legitimacy" within the moment of the struggle or by the term "dialectizable," as nothing is more foreign to Hegel's dialectic than the addition of the suffix "able" to dialectics, Marais's reading at its best falls within a tradition that bases its interpretation of Hegel as a philosopher of recognition solely on this specific passage. Yet an alternative reading of the passage might be as follows: it is because self-consciousness cannot "supersede" nature or life that it seeks another self-consciousness (109; par. 175). As Hegel puts it, "self-consciousness, by its negative relation to object [nature or objects in nature or the life process], is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relationship that it produces the object again and the desire as well . . . [thus] *self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (my addition, 109-110; par. 175). Initially, therefore, it is not the other that becomes an obstacle to one's autonomy. On the contrary, self-consciousness needs to find another self-consciousness in order to recognize itself as one, i.e., to become self-certain. Marais's reading is even wrong on a recognitive model of reading of Hegel. It is important to

Consciousness, in fact, grounds the proof of freedom in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Emerging from the master/slave struggle, the consciousness of the slave is the consciousness that carries the burden of freedom and its actualization in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In his labor, in its creative activity, the slave discovers himself essentially as a consciousness "which *thinks* or is a free self-consciousness" (120; par. 197). It becomes a thinking consciousness. This modality of consciousness is what Hegel refers to as Stoicism. Simply put, in the stoic mindset, the object is nothing but what it makes of it in its thinking: "[i]n thinking I am *free*, because I am not in an other, but remain simply and solely in communion with myself, and the object which is for me the *essential* being, is in undivided unity with my being-for-myself" (120; par. 197). The Stoic mindset, thus, represents the abstract, universal side of freedom. Its freedom lacks reality simply because it exists in thinking alone. It has no empirical manifestations. Skepticism, however, is the particular empirical use of this freedom. While retaining the truth of Stoicism as a "thinking

note that If the individual, as Marais suggests, had autonomy prior to the struggle, it would never enter the struggle in the first place. What eventually unfolds in the encounter, of course, is the struggle and the failure to get recognition through the struggle. This is not a place to further elaborate my specific position on this question, but I believe Marais's reading to be very problematic since it does not really specify what he exactly means by the dialectic of recognition in Hegel. Does he, in particular, refer to the master/slave passage in the *Phenomenology*? Does he refer to the concept of recognition in the *Phenomenology* as a whole? If so, why does he not clarify his position regarding the dialectic of recognition with reference to Hegel's system or his other philosophic works? Here, I would only stress that in my reading, after all, I locate the dialectic at work in *Foe* after the dialectic of desire, i.e., certainly after Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which obviously does not imply that the dynamics at work in the novel is undialectical because it does not incorporate the specific moment of the struggle. Moreover, by using the term "after," I do not imply that the dialectic of desire is cancelled in the *Phenomenology* after the moment of the struggle. However, If Crusoe, as Marais rightly holds, "is not in possession of himself, and is thus incapable of possessing or transforming the island," (71) it is because *Foe*'s dialectic is situated after the dialectic of desire in the *Phenomenology*, i.e., in the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Susan's speculation on why Crusoe did not sleep with her more than once, I believe, is not irrelevant here: "Is the answer that our island was not a garden of desire . . . ?" (86) Respectively, as Marais also suggests, it can be said that it is an island from which capitalist desire is absent.

consciousness,” it exercises “a negative attitude toward otherness” (123; par. 201). The Skeptic consciousness consists in the concrete negation or annihilation of “the being of the world in all its manifold determinateness” into thought (123; par. 202). It is, however, nothing but a ceaseless series of particular negations. Being itself the ground of “the *absolute dialectical unrest*,” it posits and dissolves sameness (the unchangeable) and difference (the contingent and changeable) (124; par. 205):

This consciousness is therefore the unconscious, thoughtless rambling which passes back and forth from the one extreme of the self-identical self-consciousness [the moment of the unchangeable, i.e., the universal abstract side of freedom] to the other extreme of the contingent consciousness [the moment of the changeable i.e., the particular empirical manifestations of this freedom] that is both bewildered and bewildering. (*my additions*, 125; par. 205)

Here we are at the threshold of a consciousness Hegel refers to as the Unhappy Consciousness. The Unhappy Consciousness brings together these two thoughts that exist separately in Skepticism. The Unhappy Consciousness knows itself to be “the dual consciousness of itself,” as “self-contradictory,” but it cannot understand how these two poles relate to each other (126; par. 206). The two poles involved in the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, therefore, are as follows: a) an infinite, unchanging, substantial, universal consciousness; b) a finite, changeable, insubstantial, particular consciousness. It is only the unity of the universal and particular that is the goal of this consciousness. In other words, the Unhappy Consciousness is the consciousness of the necessity of such a union. John Russon rightly indicates that the Unhappy Consciousness marks the completed Hegelian gestalt of self-consciousness in the following syllogism: “(i) an empirical ego, or an apparent (*für sich*) self (the moment of the changeable); (ii) a transcendental ego, or a real (*an sich*) self (the moment of the unchangeable); (iii) their

relation” (23). The free universal consciousness that existed in the figure of the master and the particular consciousness that existed in the figure of the slave in the prior moments of the *Phenomenology* now coexist in the same consciousness: “the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one” (126; par. 206).

On her arrival to the island, Susan, likewise, immediately locates herself in a middle position, in Hegel’s term, as a “dual consciousness,” as the consciousness of the particular and the universal, as a slave to Cruso and a master to Friday (126; par. 206). It is important to note that prior to the introduction of the second term of the dialectic, the master/Cruso—i.e., in her encounter with Cruso—Susan can merely experience Friday, in Hegel’s term, as an object of “sense-certainty.” Friday is out there only as an object, and what remains is only the task to apprehend his truth immediately as a sensuous entity. In what follows, I will argue that as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative Susan’s discourse necessarily transcends the language of mastery and slavery, indicative of prior moments in the *Phenomenology*, i.e., the dialectic of desire. The aesthetic or ethical question of the story is put forth by Susan: “‘Without desire how is it possible to make a story?’” (88) *Foe*, in other words, is not just a story about the author’s or the narrator’s complicity or doubts in the act of narration, as postmodern critics unanimously emphasize, nor is it just about the indeterminacy, unreadability or dissemination of meaning. It is also about the movement of transcending the economy of desire. In *Foe* the deployment of Unhappy Consciousness necessarily expunges the colonial language and dismantles the position of the author (Coetzee) and his language while shaping the specific direction and movement of the narrative. The author, like his own readers, therefore, is compelled to follow his narrator’s temperaments, thoughts, language, and, in one word, consciousness. The author, with whom we share the same position, loses its authority and his language simply because in following his

female narrator he is compelled to become the very loci of the contradictoriness inherent in the duality of the Unhappy Consciousness.¹²

Having thus located his character and his readers within the complexities and the contradictory movements of the Unhappy Consciousness, Coetzee follows the evolution of Susan's trajectory of values. The structural logic of the text also follows the same evolutionary logic, similar to Hegel's immanent logic in *Phenomenology* and his *Aufhebung*. The book is

¹² Sue Kossew and David Attwell, despite their distinct positions, rightly refer to Susan's subject position as a white woman who is, in Sue Kossew's words, "both colonizer and colonized" (*Pen and Power* 134). The result, to quote Attwell's words, is "a self-consciously marginal, and feminist colonial discourse" (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 108). On the one hand, Susan has a desire to have her story told, by asking Foe to author her story, fill in Friday's silence, and finally teach Friday to learn written English. On the other hand, she is wary of her desire and complicity in appropriating Friday's silence while equally alarmed by her reliance on Foe as the man of letters and of Foe's attempts to appropriate her story. Kossew and Attwell rightly conclude that in the final scene, Friday's voice overrides any attempt at appropriating the black voice. Thus, the ending foregrounds the authorial limitation to give a voice to Friday or speak on behalf of "the wholly other." These readings, however, do not take into account the specific dialectical movements that are made possible by Susan's unique subject position/subjectivity. Despite using a different vocabulary, Marais ends up with the same conclusion. Conceiving the narrators' and the characters' relation with their objects/others in Coetzee's novels as a relation "between separated beings" or as an 'unrelating relation," (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 295) Marais, in fact, elides, in the final analysis, the differences between these narrators'/characters' specific subject positions. These narrators or characters become in one way or another versions of the same repetitious Levinasian figure of subjectivity. But it should be stressed that to take such a position, in the context of the Coetzee's novels, which obviously belong to the aesthetic domain, is tantamount to saying that these narrators or characters share the same persona. Marais's reading, in fact, contains an anti-Levinasian sentiment. His reading does violence to the alterity of the narrators or characters and their distinct subject position/subjectivity. Marais's undialectical position resonates ironically with Levinas's disparagement of art in his early writings as art's imprisonment in its own time and its lack of a future as art's "fixity" or "fate": "By its reflection in a narrative, being has a nondialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time" ("Reality and its Shadows" 139). Levinas, thus, describes the character of novels as "beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway. The novel shuts being up in a fate despite their freedom" (139). One might have a certain notion of subjectivity in mind in her discussion of ethics, literature or philosophy, but in a work of fiction this subjectivity has also a certain particularity, i.e., a distinct personhood, persona. In *Foe*, it is, in fact, the narrator's unique subject position/subjectivity that lends the story its dialectical and dialogical urgency.

divided into four sections: the first two sections come to us through a single consciousness (Susan's) bracketed completely within quotation marks in the form of memoir (section I) and letters (section II) addressed to Foe. In the first section, Susan sees her salvation in the narration of the story of the island and regards Foe as the sole agent capable of this narration. Foe is the author. In the second section, Susan gradually shifts her attention to Friday and his story, and she experiences the act of writing and authorship herself. The third section is also narrated in the first person by Susan but this time with a decisive change in the form of a dialogue and an argument with Foe. Foe is no longer the sole author and the sole arbiter of the narrative. Susan figures as the co-author and as a forceful voice in the narrative. Here, Friday is the sole point of contention in the narrative and Susan realizes that our freedom is tied with Friday's and his story. Finally, the last section comes to us as a first-person narration ("I") that belongs to no particular person, with the quotation marks entirely removed. Here the particular consciousness is, at the same time, the collective universal consciousness. Only at this point, the reader will really overcome the separation between the master and the slave. Contrary to interpretations that endorse a postmodern rhetoric in interpreting the text, I believe that the story, in a sense, has an endpoint.

The Unhappy Consciousness, Hegel explains, can only experience itself as perpetual unrest, as the passage from the universal to the particular and vice-versa. Since the Unhappy Consciousness cannot think of the two as a unity but as opposites, it regards the unchangeable side as essential and the changeable side as unessential. Since it cannot experience itself as the former, it naturally identifies itself mainly with the latter and posits the unchangeable mainly as an alien being, as something external.¹³ Yet, it still cannot be indifferent to the unchangeable; its purpose is to set aside the unessential. Since it has its essence in the unchangeable, it endeavors

¹³ As Kant made it clear in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the empirical ego can only experience itself as unfree: as a bundle of contingent desires, habits, needs, and interests.

to rise to it. But inasmuch as the consciousness of the unchangeable is distinguished from the consciousness that regards itself as a particular, the more the Unhappy Consciousness tries, the more it discovers itself as a particular consciousness.

Foe's narrative logic, in fact, follows closely the Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness to the extent that it makes a comparative study of the two texts plausible.¹⁴ As the Unhappy Consciousness, Susan, likewise, posits *Foe* as the unchangeable, universal, and the essential consciousness and regards herself as a "being without substance," i.e. as changeable, particular, and unessential (51). *Foe* is the god-head that holds the key to her truth and salvation, which she thinks resides in the story of the island and *Cruso*. Susan addresses *Foe* in the following terms:

"return to me the substance I have lost, Mr *Foe*: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give *the substance of truth* (I see that clearly, we need not pretend it is otherwise). To tell the truth in all its *substance* you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through; and then the knack of seeing the waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. *I have none of these, while you have all.*" (my emphasis, 51)

¹⁴ Of course, Coetzee's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness does not include the initial mode in Hegel's dialectic commonly regarded as indicative of Judaism in the literature, i.e., the positing of the Unchangeable (god) as the "pure *formless* Unchangeable (129; par. 213). This is because *Cruso* is an actual living individual, and, thus, figures as, in Hegel's words, the Unchangeable in "its embodied or incarnate form" indicative of Catholicism and contemporary Protestantism (129; par. 213). In Judaism, the unchangeable exists simply as the alien formless beyond who passes judgment on the individual. Since it only exists in the changeable consciousness, and since, for the changeable, the knowledge of the unchangeable does not come from its own side, the unchangeable, as Hegel puts it, is "affected with individuality" (127; par. 209). In order to sublimate this contradiction in its next move consciousness posits the unchangeable as the [external] unchangeable individuality.

Foe is the author-figure that has all the powers at his disposal. In other words, Foe is revered as an idealized author, i.e. as an alien or outsider. Foe is a solitary individual, i.e. a bourgeois author, who, as Wordsworth later formulated it, possesses more sensibilities. In broad terms, the proper mode of expression for this author is the lyrical mode, the author's inner space itself being the expression of sincerity and truth. It should be noted that Susan's desire for "the substance of truth," at this point, she contends, is tied to her desire for fame and wealth. Foe is the man that can make them wealthy and famous by narrating their story. Hence, she shares with Defoe's Robinson Crusoe the same desire that animated Defoe's story, on the one hand, and motivated his hero in his acts of violence, on the other. The literary cult of literature as expression, with its pretense to sympathy, sublimity, sincerity, and truth, shows its true mode as violence. It is no surprise that Coetzee defies acts of sympathy for his characters as well as his readers throughout the narrative. Therefore, the alienation of subjectivity unto something external here has its roots in the desire for money. Capital, therefore, has a metaphysical substance; in fact, it functions as a religion.

Nevertheless, as in Hegel's narrative, the consciousness of the unchangeable being formless, Susan can only experience Foe as a particular individual, in the words of Hegel, "as an opaque sensuous *unit*" (129; par. 212). She imagines Foe "as a beast of burden:" "In the throes of a chill you plod on, wrapped in scarves, blowing your nose, hawking, spitting. . . . Your mouth sags open, you snore softly, you smell . . . like an old man" (52-53). As in Hegel's narrative, Susan, as the unessential consciousness, makes three distinct attempts to relate to the universal consciousness. Initially, as Hegel explicates, this consciousness tries to relate to its object through regarding itself as "pure consciousness" as "thinking individuality" (131; par. 217). The Unchangeable consciousness as "unchangeable individuality," (as a Christ-figure) (132; par. 217) also is naturally seen as "pure *thinking*," or "pure heart" (131; par. 217). Since the Unhappy

Consciousness considers itself as pure thinking and its object is one of pure thinking as such, it can only manifest and experience itself as “a movement toward thinking, and so is devotion” (131; par. 217). As Hegel puts it in parentheses, “*the relation* of the one to the other is not one of pure thinking” (*my italics*, 131; par. 217). Despite the movement, the two are still apart. Because their relationship is lacking, the incarnate individuality remains “the unattainable beyond which, in being hold of, flees, or rather is already flown” (131; par. 217). Therefore, consciousness is compelled to experience “its own separate existence” (131; par. 217). On the other hand, when it seeks the other not as a beyond but as particular individual, it can only conceive it as an object of the senses (132; par. 217). Simply put, the movement fails because consciousness, instead of resolving the tension, simply alienates its own essence as a particular individual possessing universality into some other individual embodying the universal.

Susan similarly posits herself as “pure *thinking*,” in other words, as “pure consciousness,” capable of rising into a universal narrative, and conceives her relationship to Cruso in terms of pure feeling and “devotion.” The letters addressed to Foe in the second section are letters that are mainly devotional in tone: ““Can you not take us into your house? Why do you keep me apart? Can you not take me in as your close servant, and Friday as your gardener?” (49) Foe, Susan believes, is the consciousness who will bring ““the particulars”” of Susan, Friday, and Cruso together by ““weaving them into a story,”” which will make them rich and famous (58). She then goes on to name a Mrs Veal that Foe ““has made famous”” as an example to Friday (58). Foe, therefore, is the master artisan of universality or the universal artisan whose labor on the ““particulars”” of Cruso, Susan, and Friday, Susan hopes, will connect them to the universal stream, which she takes to be money and fame at this point in the narrative. Knowing that Foe no longer receives her mails, she implores him in the following terms: ““Will you not bear it in mind, however, that my life is dreadfully suspended till your writing is done?”” (63)

Susan's consciousness is only, in Hegel's words, "a movement toward thinking," making guesses and speculations about Foe's life, writing prowess, whereabouts, morals, engagements, and problems. Interestingly, the figure of Foe as the unchangeable consciousness, like its parallel at the exact same moment in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, is a figure "already flown," disappearing in his escapades from the bailiffs. Foe's escapades, in fact, refer to Defoe's actual bankruptcy in his life. Defoe was a merchant who dealt mainly in hosiery, woolen goods and wine. He was rarely out of debt. Once more the text provides clues to read the fictional content of Defoe's classic in relation to the logic of the market. The elaborate content of Defoe's story originates from his debt. In his compulsion to pay his debts, he has to transform Susan's story into *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, of *York, Mariner*. Having lived with Friday for a while, Friday's loss of tongue and speech begins troubling Susan more than ever. She takes steps to equip him with the power of language for the purpose of recovering his story. Her attempts are doomed to failure. Nevertheless, this is a clear indication that even at this stage she is partially (implicitly) aware that her freedom is tied to Friday's story and his freedom.

Having failed to relate to the unchangeable through a given "actual existence," Hegel holds, consciousness reverts to a different strategy (132; par. 217). The result of the previous attempt consists in the fact that consciousness has felt itself, that its feeling has been the "feeling of *self*": "thus it comes forward here as a self-feeling, or an actual consciousness on its own account." The second move in order to connect with the unchangeable, Hegel maintains, is the attempt to transform, through "desire and work" the merely given in accordance with what consciousness considers the unchangeable demands of it. Correspondingly, consciousness desires and works according to the dictum of its "self-feeling," trying to experience itself as an "independent consciousness" (132; par. 218). The feeling of the self is actualized as "an external action and enjoyment" (135; par. 223). But as Hegel indicates, "the Unhappy Consciousness

merely finds itself *desiring* and *working*.” Consciousness fails to understand that “its feeling of the alien existence is a self-feeling,” that is, in fact, what it feels is itself as a particular embodied individual who also possesses universality (132; par. 218). In other words, the very possibility of this activity rests upon this lack of realization. Consciousness, therefore, cannot experience itself as free.

Equally, Susan strives to relate herself to the essential consciousness, i.e. Foe, through what Hegel refers to as “desire and work.” Consequently, she tries to work on the merely given with respect to what she thinks the essential consciousness demands of her. Her task at this stage consists in doing what Foe would have demanded of her now that he is gone. After lodging in Foe’s house, she takes on the act of writing as Foe would have done were he still in his house: “I write with your pen on your paper, and when the sheets are completed they go into your chest. So your life continues to be lived, though you are gone” (65). Susan’s role as a “self-feeling” subject—actualized in “external action and enjoyment”—is manifest in her attempt at the act of authorship. She tries to perform Foe’s role by contributing to the story: “your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine when I write with it, as though growing out of my hand” (66-67). Her life, as in Hegel’s dialectic, is one of constant “devotion.” Setting herself and Friday to work on Foe’s garden, she describes herself, in Hegel’s terms, as “the merest particular” (136; par. 225). She addresses Foe in the following words: ““We live here like the humblest of poor relations. Your best linen is put away; we eat off the servants’ plate. Think of me as the niece of a second cousin come down in the world, to whom you owe the barest of duties”” (65). No matter how much she tries, she remains befuddled by the mysteries of the island. She is soon confronted with a living mystery, the girl who claims to be her daughter, which she suspects to be Foe’s invention. Susan later compares, in a Beckettian fashion, her act of writing to Cruso’s absurd habit of dispersing ““stones over the face of the island”” (87). The

metaphor corresponds to Hegel's statement that consciousness at this stage can only find itself "*desiring and working*." This labor and desire are not, to use John Burbidge's terms, "that which will immediately satisfy the senses, but consume the natural world to appropriate the unchanging," (112) here, corresponding to Susan's attempts to meet "the taskmaster's", i.e., Foe's demands. Susan addresses Friday in the following terms:

"You thought that carrying stones was the hardest of labors. But when you see me at Mr. Foe's desk making marks with the quill, think of each mark as a stone, and think of the paper as an island, and imagine that I must disperse the stones over the face of the island, and when that is done and the taskmaster is not satisfied (was Crusoe ever satisfied with your labors?) must pick them up again (which in the figure, is scoring out marks) and dispose them according to another scheme, and so forth, day after day; all of this because Foe has run away from his debts. Sometimes I believe it is I who have become the slave." (87)

Committing herself to the act of writing, her preoccupation with Friday and his loss of freedom are no longer marginal to the story but become matters of paramount importance. She, likewise, no longer talks about the story as Crusoe's story but considers it to be hers: "To tell my story and to be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost!" (67) The fact is that there is no language capable of capturing the truth of Friday's loss, no language capable of communicating Friday's suffering. More properly put, the language of the colonizer, being the language of capital and its truth, cannot comprehend the truth of Friday's loss and suffering.

Having failed to relate to the unchangeable in the previous moves, Hegel continues to add, consciousness finally tries to unite with the unchangeable through a "middle term," a

mediator who is “a conscious Being,” (136; par. 227) i.e., “a priest” (136; par. 228). This mediator relates the two extremes, namely the inessential consciousness to the essential consciousness. In this action, consciousness extinguishes its own individuality, “its own freedom of decision, and herewith the responsibility of its own action” (136; par. 228). Through surrendering its desires, habits, properties, actions, and by practicing what the mediator demands of him, consciousness “has the certainty of having truly divested of itself of ‘I’, and having turned its immediate self-consciousness into a *Thing*, into an *objective existence*” (137; par. 229). Hegel concludes, “the surrender of one’s will is only from one aspect negative . . . it is at the same time positive, viz. the positing of the will as the will of an ‘other’, and specifically of will, not as a particular, but as a universal will” (138; par. 230). Jim Vernon stresses that this “I” or “*Thing*” is now “any particularity anyone could be, the body anyone could act through, the habits anyone could possess, the intentions anyone could take up.” Put differently, the individual’s will is no longer bound to her habits and desires. Vernon rightly emphasizes that when “everyone’s will could equally be anyone else’s will, the capacity of your individual will can be any and all particular will, and, therefore, truly infinitely universal.”

Susan, likewise, tries to relate to the unchangeable through a mediator, where in her dialogues with Foe in section three, she substitutes different subject positions for each other. In other words, different characters and their positions function as each other’s mediators or substitutes. The fact that the characters can be anyone else proves that one is not fettered to her contingencies, habits, and desires. The root of the move lies in the previous section where Susan acquires the role of the writer: ““somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it”” (66). At this point, Susan regards Foe as her equal discussing and co-writing the story of Friday. Foe, therefore, is no longer regarded as the one and the only essential consciousness. Later on, she describes herself as the “father” of the story, and Foe as a “muse,” a “mistress” and a “wife.”

Foe also describes himself as Susan's "old whore." Friday is also described sitting at Foe's table inscribing "rows of the letter *O* tightly packed together," an act that might be, as Foe puts it, "a beginning" (152). She also refers to Friday as a "tyrant," to herself as "slave," (148) and to Foe as "a captive" (151). Therefore, unlike what Teresa Dovey (128-29), Attwell (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa* 110-111) and Michela Canepari-Labib, hold to be the case (46), what happens here is more than a case of gender reversal. The chain of substitutions goes on, but it is made possible by making Friday, his silence, and his loss of freedom the essential subject of the story and the center of the argument. He is, as Susan puts it, "the hole in the narrative" to which they are compelled to return constantly (121). The chain of substitutions also depends on Susan's absolute identification with Friday and his history of subjection. Friday's desire, like hers and everyone else's, Susan thinks, is to be free (148-49). She later remonstrates with Foe for his ignorance: "As long as you close your ears to me, mistrusting every word I say as a word of slavery, poisoned, do you serve me any better than the slavers served Friday when they robbed him of his tongue?" (150)

It should be evident by now that the chain of substitutions here does not refer us to a Levinasian phenomenological description of an intersubjective relation at its precognitive level. Neither are the chain of substitutions, i.e., substitution in the plural, premised on the face-to-face encounter. The novel does not give itself to a Levinasian reading all the more so since Susan's obsession for her deliverance and freedom all throughout the narrative and, at this stage of the narrative, her obsession for everyone's freedom never fade away. Susan does not endeavor to escape but to discover her freedom. What comes to the foreground at this stage in the narrative is the interrelation between human agents made possible partly through refashioning the Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness within Marx's terms. Instead of the object being entirely "annulled" by the subject, as Marx puts it ("Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic"), or, to use a

metaphor by Adorno, “swallow[ed]” by the subject (“On Subject and Object” 246), the dichotomy of the subject and the object collapses or rather becomes inadequate.¹⁵ It is clear that the narrative resuscitates the “social relation between persons” at the expense of the “social relation between things.” (Marx, *Capital* 166). Here, human freedom and responsibility is defined in terms of this intersubjective relationship. The novel, thus, demystifies the logic of commodity fetishism. Put differently, it demystifies the “metaphysical subtleties” surrounding Defoe’s *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* (163). The novel debunks within the economy of the Unhappy Consciousness the coordinates of colonial narratives wherein the solitary individual appropriates space and nature within the economy of desire.

¹⁵ Marx criticizes the process as well as the result of the Hegelian dialectic in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*—the result being, of course, immanent in the process (“Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a whole”). Marx believes that since the object of consciousness for Hegel is self-consciousness, self-consciousness as object, the transcendence of this object is the annulment of objectivity itself: “because it is not the *determinate* character of the object, but rather its *objective* character that is offensive and constitutes estrangement for self-consciousness.” Transcendence, therefore, equals the loss of objectivity. Man, thereby, figures out as a “non-objective” entity, i.e., as spirit. Since, in Hegel, “man equals self-consciousness,” the alienation of self-consciousness, its attempt to comprehend itself as its own object, i.e., its attempt to find a mode of objectivity proper to itself, is always “*alienated self-consciousness*, and *thinghood*.” Its return of this content into self-consciousness is, therefore, the expropriation of this self-alienated consciousness. Self-consciousness, thus, cannot break the spell of this abstract objectification of itself. According to Marx, that is exactly why Hegel needs the concept of spirit to move outside this chimera. In other words, Hegel’s concept of spirit as the totality of these alienated or “vanishing” modes of consciousness, Marx believes, is not a logical necessity but indicative of an endeavor to escape the inadequacy of his own discourse. The subject-object relationship, consequently, remains one-sided. The subject is merely the sum total of its own objectifications or abstractions. Hence, the subject is a nothingness. Hegel, thus, subtracts from particularity only to return to it. For Marx, man is an “objective being” and “acts objectively: “For as soon as there are objects outside me, as soon as I am not *alone*, I am *another*—*another reality* than the object outside me. For this third object I am thus an *other reality* than it; that is, I am *its* object. Thus, to suppose a being which is not the object of another being is to presuppose that *no* objective being exists.” Here, I refrain from elaborating further on Marx’s refashioning of the Hegelian dialectic. However, it would perhaps suffice to pay attention to the fact that the placement of the island story as the first section in Coetzee’s novel is not accidental.

Yet as Hegel puts it, there is still a problem. For the consciousness involved in the act cannot still comprehend its own freedom. Hegel maintains that consciousness does not take itself to be this “essential will” precisely because the unity of the in-itself and the for-itself, object and essence, does not directly proceed from its own action (138; par. 230). This unity is still the action of an other. In other words, the unity of the particular and the universal is the action of the mediator. According to Hegel, “action is really action when it is the action of a particular consciousness” (138; par. 230). Therefore, unlike what Hyppolite implies, this consciousness does not retain “the fruit of its labor, and enjoyment” (214). Nevertheless, in this mediator, it finds its own action and being as “being and action *in themselves*” and has “being absolutely *in itself*” (138; par. 230).

The dialectical movement at work in Coetzee’s novel at this stage is very similar to Hegel’s, but it has its differences too. The result, however, is, in a sense, the same: “consciousness itself [here Susan] does not take itself to be this essential will” (*my addition*, 138; par. 230). On the one hand, the present reality or the historical time of the novel denies the reality, if not all, but most of the substitutions. Susan cannot “father” her story precisely because the capitalist patriarchal order and the cultural institution she inhabits does not allow it (140). Moreover, the universal mediator, i.e., Friday, remains utterly without speech, utterly unreadable, despite Susan giving it another try to educate Friday by the end of section III on Foe’s recommendation. Thus, neither Susan nor Foe can evacuate their own particularity to take up Friday’s as a positive entity. On the one hand, the chain of substitution speaks to the concrete reality of freedom, despite the fact that the characters fail to comprehend their freedom under the present circumstances, or that they cannot find any way to actualize their freedom. On the other hand, Susan, and we as the readers of the story, are compelled to take up Friday’s subjectivity which for us is the “hole in the narrative” (121). We come to occupy this space, and, thus, come

to identify ourselves with Friday in the sense that Friday's loss and suffering, his lack of freedom, and his silence becomes equally ours. We become silent on Friday's silence. It is in this sense that Susan refers to herself as Friday's "slave." She has become a slave in Friday's silence. In other words, we come to identify our freedom as Friday's freedom and his suffering as ours on an existential level, even though the precise nature of his suffering remains foreign to us. As the readers of the story, we undergo a process of being emptied out. We become un-substantial, in other words, ghosts in the shadow of Friday. Here lies the uncanny nature of this identification with Friday. Once more the novel draws our attention to its investment in this dialectic of substantiality and insubstantiality, i.e., the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Despite its Levinasian resonances of our subjectivity being emptied out, or becoming insubstantial, processes not foreign to dialectic as I have hoped to have demonstrated, the aesthetic question of the novel, I believe, is once again formulated within dialectical terms.

The chain of substitution, thus, bring us both to the aesthetic question and partial resolution (though negatively resolved) of the text at this point. The dialectic of substantiality and insubstantiality is, in fact, the text's aesthetic question. The tension or desire of the text becomes apparent in Foe's reference to Dante's *Inferno*: "I read an old Italian author of a man who visited, or dreamed he visited, Hell, said Foe. There he met the souls of the dead. One of the souls was weeping. 'Do not suppose mortal, said this soul, addressing him, 'that because I am not substantial these tears you behold are not tears of true grief' " (138). As Dominic Head (117-118) and, more comprehensively, López (202-209) have argued, *Foe* makes numerous allusions to Defoe's writings on ghosts and apparitions, underlining Coetzee professed indebtedness to his predecessor.¹⁶ Head reads Foe's reference to the apparition of Mrs Veal in the third chapter of the

¹⁶ See Coetzee's "An Essay in the History and Reality of Apparitions." I concur with López's position that Coetzee's rewriting of his predecessor's classic should not be read as an outright

novel as a “redemptive” gesture: “it is through the dismissal of the narrative artifice of the story. . . that representation of the author and character are united at the same plane of ontological uncertainty, an equality figured most clearly in their sexual union” (118). Head rightly alludes to the substantial tension of the novel. Nevertheless, the point of contention in the story is just the opposite of Head’s conclusion. On the contrary, I believe that the author and the character belong to “the same plane” of ontological certainty precisely because each is as substantial as the other. The text, in fact, attempts to transcend the duality between the substantial and the insubstantial, between real and fictional characters. This transcendence is the desire of the text. In fact, Coetzee introduces Susan’s daughter and the motif of dreams into the narrative to dissolve the very tension between the real (substantial) and the fictional (insubstantial).

In a different vein, Marais draws a parallel between Levinas’s reference to the state of insomnia in his *Existence and Existents* and the motif of sleeping and dreaming in *Foe* as the “ebbing of subject centered consciousness” or projective intentionality (Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible* 80). Marais’s invocation directly contradicts Levinas’s consistent phenomenological bracketing of the notions of psychological unconsciousness or the act of dividing up the psyche into a consciousness and an unconsciousness throughout his writings. Levinas emphatically refuses the Bergsonian and Freudian notion of temporality and subjectivity in *Existence and Existents*, *Totality and Infinity* as well as in his attack on art in his early writings on the topic.¹⁷ In

rejection of Daniel Defoe’s literary heritage altogether and that Coetzee’s relationship with Defoe’s classic is more complex than postcolonial scholarship has allowed in its reading of the novel. In fact, I am incredibly indebted to López’s remarkable argument on Coetzee’s indebtedness to Defoe as the author of ghost stories, even as I deviate from her conclusion and its bearing on the novel’s aesthetic dynamic.

¹⁷ In *Existence and Existent*, Levinas, in fact, explicitly distinguishes between the state of sleeping and insomnia: “[in the state of insomnia] the *there is*, the play of being, is not played out across oblivions, does not encase itself in sleep like a dream. Its very occurrence consists in an impossibility, an opposition to possibilities of sleep, relaxation, drowsiness, absence” (*my*

“Reality and its Shadows,” his early essay on aesthetics, dreaming is explicitly treated as a negative state. In this essay, he likens the dynamics of the spectator in the relation to the work of art as one in a dream devoid of being, of consciousness or unconsciousness. The spectator, in this account, becomes “a thing” of the spectacle: “the subject is among things not only by virtue of its density of being, requiring a ‘here’, a ‘somewhere’, and retaining its freedom; it is among things as a thing, as part of the spectacle” (133). Being remarkably obsessive with his style and vocabulary, Levinas would have used the concept of sleeping and dreaming if he saw them fit to describe the state of openness to the other, alterity, infinity, and transcendence. Yet, the point of the story is the very opposite of Levinas’s account. The point of contention in the story is that dream-figures or fictional figures, what we usually take to be the ghosts of the living, are as real and substantial as figures we confront in reality. Their suffering is as real as ours. The point is to transcend the distinction between a Dante who “visited” and a Dante who “dreamed he visited” Hell. In her discussion over the question of animals and aesthetic representation with her son, likewise, Elizabeth Costello, the heroine of Coetzee’s later novel *Elizabeth Costello*, refers to Kafka’s Red Peter as being “embedded in life,” as having become substantial or in better terms still, part of the life and the reality we live (32). Here lies Kafka’s achievement.¹⁸ This embeddedness, I believe, is at the very least the text’s desire if not its achievement. Thus read, the novel’s desire or tension is to make Friday as substantial or even more substantial than anyone we confront in the real world. This tension is perhaps at odds with Levinas’s ethics. The question of aesthetics has always been formulated as the tension between the substantial and the insubstantial, i.e., here between the living humans and their paper substitutes whether the

addition 66). Marais is, undoubtedly, an informed reader of Levinas. Here, my objection is directed against Marais’s extension of Levinasian terms in their application to Coetzee’s text.

¹⁸ I will explore this point in more detail in my discussion of *Elizabeth Costello*.

substitute falls on the side of transcendence or on “hither side” of reality, as Levinas disparagingly puts it in “Reality and its Shadows” (136). Despite his praise of poetic language in Blanchot and especially Celan in his later writings, Levinas does not clarify how his definition of ethics as first philosophy, which is premised on the face-to-face encounter, is to be accounted for in light of his praise for the language of Celan and Blanchot. What I try to put forth here is that the desire of the text consists in making the insubstantial and fictional substantial and real, and not just part of a lived reality in a general sense but of a reality that is not reduced to the reduction ad absurdum of the capitalist world and the desires it generates. In fact, Coetzee’s phantoms and apparitions stand opposed to what Marx regards as the “phantom-like objectivity” of capital (121, *Capital Vol. 1*). This is the desire to which Levinas’s philosophy never responds. The aesthetic question in the novel remains a dialectical question.

What remains is the tension between an idealized world of fiction or art and what passes as reality. In its assimilation of the real, the work or art transcends the real. In and through works of art, the artist can and may create, imagine and think what is unimaginable. But in doing so, the work of art at the same time distances itself from this reality. It distances itself from the real, and thus ceases to relate to the real or to effect any “substantial” change in the world. It comes to exist in a realm of its own. In other words, the work of art becomes ineffective. This tension or contradiction is what Herbert Marcuse refers to as the Unhappy Consciousness of art in his chapter on aesthetics in *One-Dimensional Man*.¹⁹ The question Coetzee has had to struggle with

¹⁹ In the chapter titled “The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation,” Marcuse argues that the art of the past era entailed an incentive or a space for resistance. It retained the dynamics and memory of what was repressed or denied and upheld the desire for heroism and change. This art was the Unhappy Consciousness of its own time. He, in fact, criticizes contemporary art and literature for flattening out the Unhappy Consciousness of art into the one-dimensional sphere of technological rationality, which is the sphere of fatal ignorance, forgetfulness, complicity, oppression, consumerism, and entertainment. This art

as the author is the following: how is it possible to transcend the real, yet somehow relate to it. How in its distance from the real defined by the economy of desire, the imagined content can yet return to it? Is not Coetzee's Nobel prize lecture "He and His Man" an attempt to address this very question? Coetzee's narrator (his man) is as much a character (determined/written) as he is the author (determining/writing) the story. "His man" is the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. In this sense, "his man" is as substantial as the actual author, Coetzee, equally both a figure written (determined by the narrator among other things) and as figure writing (determining). Coetzee, thus, like his readers, substitutes and gives up his subjectivity to adopt his narrator's; here lies the dialectical impetus of the novel. It is in this sense that we should understand Coetzee (He) and his personae (his "Men" or Women) as "secretar[ies] of the invisible."

The question of substantiality is tied to the concept of freedom in the last section of the novel. Seen in this light the question of aesthetics is, in fact, inseparable from that of freedom and ethics. If the characters fail to comprehend themselves as free, the last section of the narrative, however, defines freedom as an unavoidable project for its readers. Having thus concretized the reality of freedom in the previous section, as Hegel puts it, as a moment "for-us," the text, in a prominently Hegelian gesture, invites us to "slip overboard" and "descend" into the wreck (155 & 156).²⁰ It is the narrator in the last section who in a dreamlike state is enabled to dive into the wreck. This section is narrated in the first person, but all quotation marks that confine the reader to a single consciousness are eliminated. This "I" in its particularity is now an "I" anyone could take up. It is a collective, universal "I," an "I" that is a "we," the consciousness of freedom.

repressively de-sublimates our existence, desires, and hopes into the technological ratios of which it is a part (59-86).

²⁰ For an analysis of the significance of the conceit and act of "immersion" as a dialectical move in Coetzee's *Foe*, see Barbara Eckstein's excellent essay "Iconicity, Immersion, and Otherness: The Hegelian 'dive' of J. M. Coetzee and Adrienne Rich."

Friday is no longer only the incomprehensible and the marginal that is “wholly other,” nor merely “the guardian at the margin”, as Spivak contends (4 & 16), and Attwell (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa* 114), López (189-219), and Amy J. Elias (547), among others, argue to be the case.²¹ Rather, Friday functions as the absolute mediator, as the figure of sameness and difference. Friday’s freedom or the recovery of his story becomes, therefore, our freedom and our story. Friday, thus, functions as the suffering universal while remaining a particular concrete individual. We, thus, identify with the other’s suffering, but without appropriating the other’s difference. Without this identification, Friday may have risked figuring as a sheer blank or nonentity in the novel. It is in this sense that I think the narrative, in Derek Attridge’s words, “attempt[s] strenuously to avoid both terms of the colonizer’s contradiction . . . : that the other is wholly knowable, and that the other is wholly mysterious” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 89). Contrary to what Spivak holds, Friday’s body is its own sign, more properly put, “this is a place where bodies are *their* own signs” including the body of the narrator (*my emphasis* 157). In Friday’s home, everyone becomes substantial, even those who are dead. More precisely put, if there is any hope for genuine substantiality, it is only to be sought in Friday’s home. This is the positive result of the concluding section. Advocating the concept (or reality?) of substantiality over the separation of the sign and the body, the text vehemently rejects a poststructuralist/postmodernist interpretation.²²

²¹ In a key-note address at a symposium on Coetzee, *Reading Coetzee’s Women*, Attwell departed from reading Coetzee’s figures of alterity exclusively and solely as these figures of alterity. In the “ambiguity” of the other’s look, respectively, he argues, we or, to give examples from Coetzee’s novels, the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarian* and Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, become both subject and object (2016). In fairness to Attwell’s critically rich and nuanced address, I refrain from summarizing his arguments further at this point.

²² I agree with David McNally’s argument in *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation* that “postmodernist theory . . . is constituted by a radical attempt to banish the real human body—the sensate, biocultural, laboring body—from the sphere of language and social life” (1). For an emancipatory politics in the age of capitalism, McNally argues, we must

Yet, Friday is beyond all concepts, beyond conceptuality, beyond language itself. Does this mean that text is beyond dialectics too? Does it mean that Friday falls outside all aesthetic and cognitive categories? Does it mean that all we can achieve is to read Friday as a figure of alterity? My answer is an emphatic No. It is true that Friday is and does remain a figure of radical alterity; nevertheless, our mode of relating to him will remain dialectical throughout. Friday is beyond all words, but Friday does exist for us only in words. The contradiction can be seen in Foe's response to Susan as to "how can Friday know what freedom means when he barely knows his name?" Foe responds: "There is no need for us to know what freedom means, Susan. Freedom is a word like any other word. It is a puff of air, seven letters on a slate. It is but the name we give to the desire you speak of, the desire to be free. What concerns us is the desire, not the name" (149). It is the desire that matters, yet all we can afford is to talk about it in words, as "the desire to be free." Where would Friday be if there were no representation of Friday by Coetzee?

Let us not forget that the narrative is as much about Friday as it is about Susan/us engaged in the reading process. It is with Susan's words and on the shoulders of the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative that we start our journey into the narrative. This fact becomes apparent if we ask why the last section of the narrative is itself divided into two visitations. The

begin with the laboring/suffering/maternal/female body that is degraded and forgotten by the abstract universalizing powers of capital and its dominant mores, i.e., exchange value and commodity fetishism. Any conception of language must, likewise, McNally holds, be sought through a return to its "origin," in a phrase he borrows from Bakhtin, to a return to the "bodies of meaning" (9). McNally, in fact, shares Marx's Hegelian conception of the laboring body as both subject and substance. The postmodern/poststructuralist scholarship on *Foe* as I have tried to show thus far, in fact, validates McNally's critique. Despite its claim to the contrary, the postmodern scholarship on *Foe* fails to comprehend Friday as a sensate living laboring body. This scholarship ultimately reads Friday as an undecidable, unreadable or, at its best, a mysterious sign, i.e., as a mere fetish. In Hegel's and Marx's spirit, I believe, the laboring body in *Foe* appears both as subject and substance, i.e., as the suffering universal in the body of Friday.

first visitation is staged in Foe's house where pressing his ears to Friday's mouth, the narrator listens intently: "from his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (154). The encounter yields only very limited knowledge, i.e., Friday embodies the sounds of the island or that the island story is Friday's story. Friday here merely stands as a figure of difference, an other. This is the level the novel could have stopped at if Friday had to be read as a figure of difference in its poststructuralist or postmodernist sense. In the second visitation to Foe's house, the narrator comes across Susan's words. It is upon reading Susan's words that the spatial dimension is magically transformed. The narrator is now able to enter a different dimension consisting of a movement from Foe's house to the wreck. It is with Susan's very first words at the beginning of the narrative that the narrator of the last section dives overboard and into the wreck from Foe's house "With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (155). The narrator intends to swim to the island—in my reading to uphold his poststructuralist responsibility—to retrieve the island story, but she is summoned by the deep where she enters the wreck and there eventually discovers Friday's home. Thus read, the last section of the narrative can be read as an allegory of the whole novel. The relationship with the other, therefore, I believe is dialectical and not phenomenological or poststructuralist. Despite its complexity, the ending holds the key to the story. As a writer infamous for his perplexing endings, Coetzee, however, never hides his cards. Here Friday figures as a forceful presence that covers all the corners of the earth. Friday remains alive. He is the only living body in the last section, the body whose presence covers the corners of the earth and, hence, demands our constant responsibility and commitment:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and

southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

The text, in fact, enacts what Adorno refers to as negative dialectics. Friday as the so-called object of the narrative or, metaphorically put, as the “in-itself” of the Kantian system, compels his reader to engage in a never-ending process of meaning-making. The discourse or the dialectical process, hence, gets its direction and directionality from its “object.”²³ The narrative’s aesthetic make-up compels the reader to take a stance, to change, and to effect such a change. The aesthetic question of the novel is, indeed, inseparable from its ethical stance. Despite the commonplace idea of Adorno’s aesthetic, he never divorces the aesthetic object/response/participation/relation from the ethical. Coetzee’s novel remains autonomous, i.e., it cannot be appropriated, while it categorically demands our ethical responsibility and participation in the political realm. This consciousness impinges itself on the consciousness of the reader long after she has finished reading the novel. The reader’s experience of her own nullity and loss compels her to identify with Friday’s loss and suffering. Nevertheless, the reader will forever remain in the dark with respect to the precise nature of this suffering. The uncanny nature of the narrative consists precisely in our identification with a person of whose subjectivity or story we are to remain forever in the dark. The novel, therefore, resists its own death, including the death of its characters. In other words, Coetzee’s *Foe* annuls the act of consumption characteristic of our contemporary culture.

In *Foe*, therefore, Coetzee enacts a Marxist dialectical critique of capitalism through his rewriting of its most well-known classic, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. He subtracts from the story of the island the very coordinates of capital, i.e. commodity fetishism, commodified labor,

²³ For all its differences from Hegel’s dialectic, Adorno’s negative dialectics follows from Hegel’s dialectics, i.e., it belongs to the dialectical tradition.

exchange value, and the myth of primitive accumulation. Through dismantling the language and “metaphysical subtleties” of capital, he compels the narrator of the story as well as the reader to seek a different language to think about colonialism and its violence. To provide a space for thinking about colonial violence, Coetzee further positions his narrator/heroine within the dynamics of the Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. This gesture naturally positions the Hegelian moment within Marx’s dialectical materialism. Through dramatizing the complexities and tensions involved in the “dual consciousness,” of the Unhappy Consciousness, of its female character, Coetzee depicts the evolution of this being/consciousness and, consequently, the concept of freedom. Coetzee is now able to foreground the question of freedom, confirm its reality, and specify it as a collective/universal project. The aesthetic desire of the text also is driven by the question of freedom. It is a desire that seeks to transcend the fictional in order to return to the real. The text is, thus, marked by a double transcendence: A) transcendence from the real to the fictional in order to imagine, create, and posit a different reality and B) transcendence from the fictional to the real to bring the imagined content to our world or reality. This is all done by making the insubstantial substantial, i.e., through transcending the economy of desire. Friday, thus, is not merely an other, as postmodern and poststructuralist readings treat the oppressed individual, nor merely a figure of alterity in its Levinasian sense. Friday’s history of oppression and subjugation becomes equally ours. The home of Friday “where bodies are their own signs,” if not a “place for words” is, undoubtedly, a place for freedom (157).

Chapter 2

Unhappy Consciousness and Forgiveness: The Ethics and Politics of Love and Freedom in *Age of Iron*

J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Age of Iron*, is set in the context of late-apartheid South Africa between 1986-1989. The narrative unfolds during the second State of Emergency (1986-1990), a period in which the madness of the old regime reached an unprecedented height. *Age of Iron* is narrated as a "long letter" addressed to an absent daughter who will know about its contents after her mother's death only if the letter is ever delivered (137 & 139). The story is focalized through the perspective of a white woman, a retired teacher of classics named Mrs. Curren, who is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Mrs. Curren shares similar characteristics with her counterpart, Susan Barton in *Foe*. She is a mother who engages in the act of writing wherein she seeks her salvation. She is, likewise, burdened with conflictual feelings toward her daughter. Similarly, she dies or is supposed to die by the end of the narrative. She is dead by the time we read her words.²⁴ Most importantly, however, Mrs. Curren, like her counter-part, Susan Barton, suffers from a sense of insubstantiality. She is similarly obsessed by, in the words of Susan, her "freedom," (149) or in her own words, "salvation" (136).

My purpose here is to discuss how Mrs. Curren's specific subject position and subjectivity enables her to exercise, albeit partially, an ethics and politics of love and freedom given the condition of the late-apartheid South Africa and her particular position in it. Like Susan Barton in *Foe*, I would argue, Mrs. Curren occupies the position of the Unhappy Consciousness in the narrative. Mrs. Curren is, in Hegel's terms, the "dual," "self-contradictory consciousness"

²⁴ Similarity, however, is not sameness. Readers familiar with the narrator of *Foe*, Susan Barton, immediately realize that the similarities I refer to immediately point toward difference.

of mastery and slavery (126; par. 206). As in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Coetzee's *Foe*, the problem of freedom in *Age of Iron* is, in a sense, to understand our universality (substantiality) and particularity (insubstantiality) together. As the holder of this subject position, as this double consciousness of mastery and slavery, I would argue, Mrs. Curren is compelled to address the questions of love and freedom in the narrative. To read the ethics and politics of love and freedom, I will particularly explore the relationship between the female narrator's singular subject position and subjectivity and the acts of reading and writing. To address the concepts of love and freedom, I will also have to examine the concept of forgiveness and its significance for the narrator's subjectivity, the reader's responsibility, the acts of writing and reading, and the aesthetic ideal of the novel. I will end my discussion on the significance of forgiveness and its relation to the themes of love, freedom and salvation worked out throughout the narrative. The question I will try to answer is the following: Does Mrs. Curren "standing on the riverbank" of Hades succeed in finding "the way across" (179)?

Throughout the story, Mrs. Curren suffers from a sense of insubstantiality. Her feeling of insubstantiality is associated with a sense of being judged by the gaze of history and the gaze of the other, on the one hand, and her inability to have a voice, on the other. Mrs. Curren is "rob[bed]" of her "soul," i.e., her substantiality, by the gaze of the camera that took their family photograph in their family garden when she was not yet two years old (110-111). Her remembrance of the family photograph is instigated by her feeling of shame and insufficiency after her visit to the township. There she meets Florence, her domestic, learns about the death of Florence's son, Beki, and suffers from an inability to provide any answers to Mr Thabane's questions, Florence's brother. She fails to withstand the black rebels' judgments and questions regarding her moral standing in the face of the turmoil and bloodshed she witnesses. Like Susan Barton, she fails to speak in her "own words" which is another name for her insubstantiality, or,

what amounts to the same thing, her state of unfreedom (99). Put differently, her inability to make meanings of her own is that which defines her state of unfreedom. After her visit to the township, she conceives of her subjectivity as she has always felt and conceived it, as the existence of a doll: “From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and the doll is what I call I” (109).

Her feeling of insubstantiality, thus, happens in the context of her meditation on South Africa’s troubled history and her relationship to it. Looking at her family photograph, she raises the following question: “Year after year fruit and flowers and vegetables burgeoned in that garden But by whose love tended? Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to open the sluice and lead water into the garden. If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully?” (111) The main actors, Mrs. Curren acknowledges, lie outside the frame.

Nevertheless, the photographs and their negatives now reveal what has been subjected to absent.

Dies Irae, dies illa when the absent shall be present and the present absent. No longer does the picture show who were in the garden frame that day, but who were not there. Lying all these years in places of safekeeping across the country, in albums, in desk drawers, this picture and thousands like it have subtly matured, metamorphosed. The fixing did not hold or the developing went further than one would ever have dreamed—who can know how it happened?—but they have become negatives again, a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame. Occulted. (111-112)

“Dies Irae” is a Latin poem commonly attributed to the ambiguous authorship of the Franciscan monk Thomas of Celano in the mid-thirteenth century. It was officially used as a sequence for the requiem mass in the Roman funeral liturgy before finally being eliminated from the practice by the Second Vatican Council. Borrowing from the “medieval Sibyll tradition,” “Dies Irae” is a meditation on the Last Judgment where the Judge, no longer granting mercy, will part the saved

from the damned, casting the latter into Hell and welcoming the former to eternal bliss (Chase 509). Mrs. Curren, therefore, conceives of her situation to the South Africa of late apartheid as the Day of Judgment. For an old white woman who lives with a cancerous body and for one who lives to witness the cancerous society of late apartheid, there seems to be no escape from the damnation of the Last Judgment. Her world is beyond mercy and forgiveness. In fact, Mrs. Curren's eternal damnation, her sense of insufficiency, her inability to have a voice, and her cancer are the results of the culture she has inherited from the colonial fathers. It is a culture she has been complicit in and to which she has contributed as a white person pulling up defenses around her house (27-28). Her sense of insubstantiality also has its roots in her state of being a woman, in her subjection to the discourse of patriarchy, in general, and the rule of the colonial fathers, in particular. The hymn, however, closes on a supplication for mercy before the coming of the woeful day. Mercy and forgiveness are Mrs. Curren's other concerns to which I will return later.²⁵

Nevertheless, she attempts to find her own voice, meanings, and throughout the novel engages herself, despite her scruples, to acquire a judging agency. She judges, often harshly, herself, her domestic, the black rebels, and her daughter. Her judgment reverberates throughout

²⁵ Mrs. Curren's reflection on her family photograph, I believe, holds the key to the aesthetic dynamics of the novel. For Mrs. Curren, this photograph and "thousands like it" have now acquired new meanings (112). As she puts it, they have become "negatives again," have "subtly matured, metamorphosed" (112). What we see is a maturation, metamorphosis, and, in one word, an *Aufhebung* of meaning rather than a postmodern poetics of "dissemination," "undecidability," or "indeterminacy." These lines suggest a link between Coetzee's fiction and the dialectical tradition of Hegel's. *Age of Iron*, I believe, does not give itself to a postmodern aesthetics of undecidability or dissemination, neither to a Levinasian ethics of alterity nor, of course, to a strictly Hegelian interpretation. Coetzee's stance is, in fact, unique. In this chapter, however, I intend to argue that Coetzee's *Age of Iron* falls within or is closer to the dialectical tradition of Hegel.

the whole novel by her constant reference to South Africa of late apartheid as the age of iron. In her judgment, even the black rebels follow the logic of the age. Where does the split in Mrs. Curren's subjectivity reside? On the one hand, she has a sense of being severely judged as to be almost deprived of humanity, subjectivity, or meaning. On the other hand, she exercises a judging agency that reprimands the very logic of the age. Mrs. Curren is, in fact, caught between her activity of judging as well as a state of being judged, each of which undermines the other at every stage in the narrative. This split or divide is representative of "the dual," "self-contradictory consciousness" to which Hegel refers to as the Unhappy Consciousness. Mrs. Curren, therefore, is a determined/determining subject: "the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one" (126; par. 206). As a white person, she occupies the position of mastery with regards to the black population, and as a woman a position of slavery in relation to the colonial fathers and men in general. Once again we are within the dialectics of the Unhappy Consciousness. The two poles involved in the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness are at work: a) an infinite, unchanging, substantial, universal consciousness; b) a finite, changeable, insubstantial, particular consciousness. As with Susan Barton, the goal of this consciousness is to resolve the tension between the two poles and to bring about their unity. Mrs. Curren's desire, likewise, in Hegelian terms is to become "substantial," in her words, "to rise above my times" (116). As in *Foe*, it is, in fact, this subjectivity/subject position that enables an ethics and politics of love and freedom.

Yet, few would disagree that this position, burdened as it is with its doubts, pains, and ambivalences, is still, undoubtedly, a position of privilege. My argument, however, is that she is not simply born into this subject position, and that she also, somehow, even though partially, acquires this subject position. This earning is what I would like to ascribe to the term "subjectivity," which I associate with the politics and ethics of love and freedom in the novel. In

words similar to mine, Sue Kossew describes Coetzee's female narrators as white women who are "both colonizer and colonized" (*Pen and Power* 134). As Kossew rightly puts it, "[t]his double-bind in the speaking subject . . . is used to interrogate structures of power, language/voice and authorship/authority" (" 'Women's Words': A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's Women Narrators").²⁶ My intention is to bring Kossew's terms within Hegel's dialectical language in order to discuss this subject position in more detail. More specifically, I intend to explicate what this subject position holds for Mrs. Curren's subjectivity. My argument is that she is not simply born into this subject position, and that she also, somehow, even though partially, acquires this subject position. This earning is what I ascribe to the term "subjectivity," which I associate with the politics and ethics of love and freedom in the novel. It is important to distinguish the term subjectivity from the more banal term subject position since the latter has the contingent ring of what one is born into. Hereby, I will try to explain what I mean by Coetzee's unique stance in the novel. Coetzee, in fact, rewrites Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness.

In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the position of the Unhappy Consciousness develops dialectically from the slave's labor that follows the master/slave struggle—i.e., from the desire and struggle of the two self-consciousnesses for mutual recognition. However, in the colonial context, as Frantz Fanon makes it clear in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, the white man does

²⁶ Many scholars have addressed this junction/tension in various terms without using a specifically dialectical language. Addressing the novel's inter-texts, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Richardson's *Pamela*, Patrick Hayes sees Mrs. Curren's language, her relationship with the other characters, and, in fact, the novel's dynamics itself as "the complex back-and-forth" between "the serious and the comic" (120). This "back-and-forth" is precisely the feature that characterizes Hegel's style and the various movements of the Unhappy Consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. Irony and repetition, in fact, are characteristic features of Hegel's dialectic. Marais, in a similar vein, describes Mrs. Curren's subjectivity in the following words: "Although described as a doll, a puppet, she is more like an author who acts in being acted upon, and who is therefore never quite an agent in full control of his or her actions" (*Secretary of the Invisible* 101). Nevertheless, Marais tries to avoid a dialectical language in favor of a Levinasian reading of the novel.

not consider the black man as “man,” both prior to and at the moment of the encounter. In fact, Fanon contends that the struggle for self-consciousness, i.e., the master/slave dialectic, does not apply to the dynamics of colonialism and its ideology. As Fanon states, “[t]here is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave” (169). In other words, without the conflict there cannot be a genuine position of slavery that can attain an independent self-consciousness as it does in Hegel’s narrative. Put differently, within the colonial context, the slave does not achieve a consciousness of his freedom through his own labor. The slave is simply dominated or oppressed by the master’s values and ideology. Under the dehumanizing judgment of the colonial discourse, in a world without forgiveness for the black man, the black man is deprived of having a genuine sense of subjectivity. The conceptual world of the black man is not his own, and, therefore, Fanon explains, any attempts at upheaval or liberation will necessarily recreate the violence immanent in the colonial logic.²⁷ Resonating with Fanon, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, Coetzee refers to the condition of life under colonialism as follows: “The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under . . . apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity” (98).

Through a reading of Fanon against the thinkers and philosophers of alienation, Kelly Oliver questions the philosophical, psychological, or sociological approaches that base the ground of subjectivity on theories of alienation. Oliver makes the contentious claim that alienation is, in fact, “the perverse privilege of the modern subject” (3). Not only does the

²⁷ See Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.

concept fail to explain the subjectivity of the colonial subject or the psychology of the other-ed subject, but, in fact, the concept covers up and, in fact, grounds the suffering specific to the oppression of black people and other marginalized subjects. Oliver further tries to bring in, redefine, expand, and, thus, transform the psychological language of Freud and Kristeva into a sociological language. She argues that under the judging gaze of the other, in a society that hinders and that does not forgive the psychological revolt of the colonized subject, the colonized subject cannot idealize and sublimate his/her psychic energies into meaning. The colonized fail to generate meanings of their own; consequently, they fail to develop a genuine sense of subjectivity or self-hood. The colonized psychic space, therefore, is already set and defined by the colonized discourse as a non-dynamic static entity. Under the dehumanizing conditions of colonialism, in a world without forgiveness for the black man, the black man is deprived of having a genuine sense of subjectivity or meaning. She eventually bases the ground of subjectivity on forgiveness, i.e., not on alienation, and defines the task of social political transformation on providing a dynamic and a space for this practice of forgiveness.

My main point in following Oliver's argument is that Mrs. Curren as a woman, as the negative of the concept "man," specifically as a mistress to the white man, similarly, albeit differently, is subjected to this same state of meaninglessness and deformity that characterizes the colonial logic. She lives in a world without forgiveness. "Hell" or "Hades" is another name for the world wherein there is no forgiveness, whose other name, according to Mrs. Curren, is the age of iron (110). Throughout her life, she has lived under the judging gaze of the other. She is judged by colonial masters and is now being judged by the black rebels. In a sense, her world is not of her own making. As a result, she has a strong sense that her subjectivity was stolen from the cradle. Her present state obviously has its roots in the negligence and indifference of the colonial fathers. In an ironic allusion to Freud's account of a father's dream of his burning child,

Mrs. Curren seems to attribute her Hellish doll-like existence as well as the Hellish condition of South Africa to the negligence, indifference, and dreams of the colonial fathers: “ ‘Father, can’t you see I am burning?’ implored the child, standing at his father’s bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see” (110).²⁸ Therefore, within the colonial context, one cannot develop a subjectivity of one’s own, or attain to one’s sense of freedom. Thus read, as a stunted consciousness, oppressed and dominated by the values, meanings, and ideologies of the colonial fathers, Mrs. Curren must not have been able to occupy the critical position of the Unhappy Consciousness. In other words, it does not dialectically follow from the fact, i.e., simply from being born into that position. Yet, how is it that she comes to occupy this position? How is that she is able to pass judgment on her own insubstantiality, on her identity, and on the world she inhabits. She is a colonizer who has been colonized, but what really enables her to construct her

²⁸ Mrs. Curren’s Hell, which is equally her sense of shame as it is the South Africa she has inherited, is a dominant motif in the novel. Hell is the overwhelming reality that defines her waking as well as sleeping life. The lines quoted allude to Freud’s account of the dream of the burning child. Freud attributes the account to a female patient of his who has heard about it in a lecture on dreams. The dream is an account of a father dreaming of his deceased child. The child is in the adjacent room with tall candles burning at his side. In the dream the child approaches the father imploring his father reproachfully as if he is still alive: “ ‘Father, don’t you see I am burning.’ ” The father wakes up to notice a bright light and discovers that the lighted candle has fallen on the child, burning the wrappings and one of the hands of his child. According to Freud, the father eventually wakes up due to the external stimuli. Freud relates the meaning of the dream primarily to the psychic mechanism of wish-fulfillment. The purpose of the dream, Freud contends, is to enable the father to sleep “a moment longer” to fulfill the wish, even if for a minute longer, that the child is still alive (*Interpretation of Dreams* 509). Lacan questions Freud’s interpretations of dreams as wish-fulfillments. He argues that dreams are primarily imaginary representations that work alongside the real. The reason the father wakes up, in fact, is to escape a confrontation with the real/the unconscious (56-60). In Ellie Ragland’s reading of Lacan’s interpretation of the same passage, “dreams are imaginary scenarios that, nonetheless, move alongside the unspeakable real which causes one to awaken in order not to know it” (193). Slavoj Žižek reads the passage along similar lines: “the very reason that we wake up is so that we can continue dreaming, in order to avoid having to encounter the Real” (148). In any case, Mrs. Curren’s situation is unique. Hell seems to be the prevailing order of her dream-life as well as her waking-life. As such, the question is the following: “standing on the riverbank” of Hades, does she succeed in finding “the way across” (179)?

subjectivity as the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness, is, what I believe to be, the result of a mix of contingencies, decisions, and resolutions. For the sake of convenience, I present this mix as a list.

A. Mrs. Curren's confrontation with death

In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it is the fear of death and annihilation that brings home to the slave the power of negativity that then he will put into the formative activity of labor and through which he carries the burden of freedom.²⁹ It is only in light of our mortality that perhaps we can come to have a sense of life. Mrs. Curren's confrontation with death serves a similar function as the slave's confrontation with its death in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Death's "annunciation," in Mrs. Curren's case, provides the condition for the character's sense of urgency, and, consequently, her exercise of freedom (5). It is important to note that the only way by which Mrs. Curren can distinguish herself from having an entirely doll's existence is her acknowledgment to herself that dolls cannot "know death" and that "they do not die" (109). A doll cannot "recognize a doll," or, in Hegelian terms, does not have a self-consciousness because a doll does not "know death" and does not "die" (109):

A doll? A doll's life? Is that what I have lived? Is it given to a doll to conceive such thought? Or does the thought come and go as another intimation, a flash of lightning, a piercing of the fog by the lance of an angel's intelligence? Can a doll recognize a doll? Can a doll know death? No: dolls grow, they acquire speech and gait, they perambulate the

²⁹ The significance of death and its relation to one's life, existence, or freedom is not unique to Hegel's philosophy. There is a long precedent for it in Western thought. Neither is it specific to Western philosophy or to the philosophic discourse, in general. I do not intend to discuss the concept of death across the philosophic traditions or disciplines. What is important for our discussion here is that in the absence of the struggle and in the context of this novel Mrs. Curren's confrontation with death serves a similar function as the slave's confrontation with its death in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Death's "annunciation," in Mrs. Curren's case, provides the condition for the character's exercise of her freedom (5).

world; they age, they wither, they perish; they are wheeled into the fire or buried in the earth; but they do not die. They exist forever in the moment of petrified surprise prior to all recollection when a life was taken away, a life not theirs but in whose place they are left behind as a token. Their knowing a knowledge without substance, without worldly weight. Like a doll's head itself, empty, airy. As they themselves are not babies but the idea of babies, more round, more pink, more blank and blue-eyed than a baby could ever be, living not life but an idea of life, immortal, undying, like all ideas. (109-110)

This "idea of life" is that which she immediately connects with "Hades" and "Hell," which is the current South Africa (110). Hell, thereby, is the realm of abstractions and ideas. Hell is the place wherein there is no real understanding of death and mortality, or, in strictly Hegelian terms, "particularity" which is essential to a genuine sense of self-consciousness. The confrontation with death, Mrs. Curren believes, is a condition of all truth and a condition of having a life at all. Put differently, it is the very condition of having a genuine subjectivity. In other words, any genuine recognition of the other is always premised upon an awareness of one's mortality. For Mrs. Curren, death is the whole truth now. Everything else is a falsity: "Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth" (26). Mrs. Curren's meditation on a different photograph, the picture sent by her daughter who lives in the States with her family, underlines the same theme. It also follows and expands on the metaphor of the doll to describe the subjectivity that is devoid of life precisely because it lacks the knowledge of death. The photo depicts the two boys in a recreation area on a canoe wearing life-jackets.

Why is it that this material, foreign to me, foreign perhaps to humankind, shaped, sealed, inflated, tied to the bodies of your children, signifies so intensely for me, the world you now live in, and why does it make my spirit sink? . . . [L]et me say, in all tentativeness,

that perhaps it dispirits me that your children will never drown. All those lakes, all that water: a land of lakes and rivers: yet if by some mischance they ever tip out of their canoe, they will bob safely in the water. . . . Even I, who live on shores where the waters swallow grown men, where life expectancy declines every year, am having a death without illumination. . . . Do I wish death upon my grandchildren By no means do I wish death upon them. No, I wish your children life. But the wings you have tied on them will not guarantee them life. Life is dust between the toes. Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust. (194-195)

Furthermore, Mrs. Curren's orientation towards her death and mortality allows her to transcend and contest the spirit of individualism that is the condition for the spirit of Thanatos. The spirit of individualism is, in fact, the spirit of colonialism and its heritage, i.e., late-apartheid South Africa. In the scene where she visits Bheki's friend in the hospital, she finds the boy resistant, flinching from her touch: "I felt him stiffen, felt an angry electric recoil" (79). As a result, she meditates on her own conception of being "white" in the following words:

I, a white. When I think of the white, what do I see? I see a herd of sheep I see a drumming of hooves, a confusion of sound that resolves itself . . . into the same bleating call in a thousand different inflections: "I!" "I!" "I!" And, cruising among them, bumping them aside with their bristling flanks, lumbering, saw-toothed, red-eyed, the savage, unreconstructed old boars grunting "Death!" "Death!" Though it does me no good, I flinch from the white touch as much as he does. (79-80)

The master's ideology, i.e., the liberal ideology by which the individual conceives itself exclusively as a discrete "I," is characterized here as ignorance towards death. In order to break out of the spell of individuality, out of an "innocence" that does not know death or ignores it,

perhaps the first step is to take note of our own particularity, i.e., our own death.³⁰ If there is any hope for transcending one's blindness, or for any kind of social order whose principle is Eros rather than Thanatos, perhaps the first step to break away from "the different inflections of the 'I,'" which is only possible if individuals take note of their own mortality. In other words, any genuine recognition of the other is always premised upon an awareness of one's mortality, i.e., one's own particularity. Mrs. Curren's orientation towards death enables her to write from a position beyond her own particularity and historical conditioning. It is this position that enables her to orient herself towards the other, and, thereby, practice an ethics and politics of love and freedom. This brings us to the dialogic encounter with the other in the act of writing.

B. Mrs. Curren's Letter

Writing is the form of labor through which she puts into work the negativity of death which is now entirely hers "alone" (6). Through the labor of writing, she aspires to gain her independence or substantiality. Writing then is substituted for the slave's labor in Coetzee's version of dialectic. The decision to write in the face of her impending death and in the absence of her daughter necessarily sets the practice of writing as a dialogic process. Writing becomes necessarily tied to the actualization of genuine love and freedom. The mother's love has to move beyond the biological blood-tug. Mrs. Curren must love Vercueil, Bekhi, and John only to be able to love her daughter again. The subject, as well as the discourse of the novel, is already in a transcendent position. *Age of Iron* is, in this sense, a story about how to love more fully.

³⁰ The concept of innocence is invoked at various places in the novel to invoke ignorance, lack of life, cruelty, and inhuman existence. I will elaborate on the concept of innocence later in the discussion.

Writing is an intersubjective dialogic process oriented to the other and to the self. It is a constant reaching to the other and a return to the self. Through writing, she gets some sense of substantiality or freedom of who she might be or what she might become:

Why do I write about him? Because he is and he is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog, I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you. (9)

It is through writing that she can fashion a genuine sense of subjectivity/substantiality, and she can best do so through writing what appears to be ultimately other: “I must love, first of all, the unlovable He is part of my salvation” (136). For Mrs. Curren, the acts of writing and loving are indissociable from each other. By means of language, what Hegel in *The Elements of the Philosophy of Right* refers to as “the most spiritual existence of the spiritual”, in Mrs. Curren’s words to her daughter, by writing to the “you in me,” she places and produces her subjectivity in language (204 & 6). Writing opens a space where she can suspend the oppressive judgment of colonial history. As Oliver argues, the colonization of the psychic space works precisely through denying the oppressed, i.e., the sexualized and racialized others, the very agency of meaning which is central to the development of subjectivity. If colonialism is that which destroys meaning and subjectivity, writing, by contrast, produces meaning and subjectivity. Through language, therefore, Mrs. Curren endeavors to transcend the “stupidly unchanging” discourse of the apartheid regime (29). In language, she is free to create herself.

Mrs. Curren eventually associates the practices of writing and reading with the concepts of metamorphosis, transformation, truth, love, *Bildung*, and eventually with the practice of emerging or comprehending oneself as “spirit” (130). She gives back the power ascribed to

mythological gods and goddesses to its true heir, i.e., humans. Correspondingly, and contrary to the aesthetic dogma and practice of the age, the signifier is once again wedded or becomes tied to the concepts (realities?) of soul and body. Writing counts more than the practice of undecidability, unreadability or dissemination.³¹

In this letter . . . truth and love together at last. . . . It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed. This struggling with sickness . . . all part of the metamorphosis, part of shaking myself loose from the dying envelope It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold. (130-131)

³¹ Coetzee resists, even as he borrows extensively from, the two dominant aesthetic or literary traditions of his time: a) social realism and b) poststructuralist/postmodern tradition. The former risks reproducing the dominant cultural dogmas or the master's discourse which it tries to criticize while masking itself as progressive or revolutionary. The latter tends to dissociate the body from the sign or the signifier. It risks relegating the suffering body to the text, and, thus, irrelevant to the reality of the suffering bodies in South Africa. Even if the latter tradition has ontological or linguistic validity/truth and is not just a specific historical understanding of textuality or the sign, it is, nevertheless, irrelevant or even detrimental to the politics and reality of late-apartheid South Africa. Even though Coetzee borrows extensively from poststructuralist and postmodernist techniques, he resists, and, in fact, rejects poststructuralist or postmodernist mores and aesthetics. If the time is "not hospitable to the soul," (139) what is the use of arguing for the primacy of the signifier over what is signified by such terms as "soul" or "the body." Coetzee's aesthetic practice is not tied to the truth of theory. After all, Coetzee deals with fiction and not truth in its theoretical or historical forms. The purpose of a genuine work of art should consist in its desire to transcend the onto-political horizon of its time and that includes the various theoretical discourses or conceptions of textuality and history. I will return to the question of Coetzee's aesthetics in *Age of Iron* later in this discussion.

It is in this sense that her writing is as much an exercise of ethics as of politics of love and freedom. If the colonial history is that which has robbed her and others of their souls, writing is the vehicle through which she can metamorphose a soul. Writing, therefore, is Mrs. Curren's way of getting away from the whites' "spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons" (7). This is the subjectivity that speaks and haunts the text and will speak to us from beyond the grave. She emerges not simply and solely as determined by the contingency of the colonial history she is born into, but also as a being who can determine her own meanings, albeit partially, by means of a writing conditioned by this very history, but, of course, empowered by the knowledge of her mortality. This is the locus of the determined/determining consciousness that constitutes the Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. But if late apartheid is the "madness in the air," (117) if "expressions of that inner life" is, in Coetzee's words on South African culture and literature, characterized by this "stuntedness and deformity," (Jerusalem Speech 98) and if Mrs. Curren's very sense of selfhood and identity is constructed by the colonial discourse and history, how is it possible to find a position from which to write? What guarantee is there that one does not end up reproducing the same discourse simply coated with new metaphors? This brings us to the encounter with Vercueil and the question of Mrs. Curren's laying her absolute love and trust in him.

C. The Encounter with Vercueil

Mrs. Curren initially describes her encounter with Vercueil as "this reconnaissance, this other annunciation" (5) and later, in retrospect, comes to describe their relationship, in words not dissimilar to Hegel's, as '*mutual* election,' (*my italics*, 196) "conjoined," and "conjugal" (189). Her action of laying trust in him eventually leads to the elimination of doubt and her absolute confidence that he will deliver the letter by the end of the novel: "When it comes to last things, I no longer doubt him in any way" (196). OED defines the term "reconnaissance" as "[t]he action

or an act of examining or surveying a tract of country with a view to ascertaining the position or strength of an enemy, or to discovering the nature of the terrain or resources of a district before making an advance” (“Reconnaissance, n1. a”). The term “reconnaissance,” thus, carries the sense of threat or encounter with the enemy. It also serves as a root word for the term “recognizance” which stands for “a bond or obligation by which a person undertakes before a court or a magistrate to perform some act or observe some condition, such as to pay a debt, or appear when summoned” (“Recognizance, n1”). In Old and Middle French, the word “reconnaissance” signifies, among others, “something which enables recognition,” “offering,” “token of gratitude,” “action of showing gratitude,” “recognition,” “admission,” “acknowledgement,” and “the process of recognition” (“Recognizance, etymology”). In modern French, the term is often used as an equivalent for the German word, “Anerkennung” rendered as recognition in English. The senses of an encounter with an enemy, imminent threat, recognition, indebtedness and obligation are, in fact, integral to Mrs. Curren’s dilemmas and to her development of identity. Therefore, the senses of impregnation, incarnation, metamorphosis and salvation in the term “annunciation,” are not dissociable from, if not limited to, the concept of recognition.³² In fact, Vercueil is not entirely a stranger to Mrs. Curren. She gives us a very lucid description of Vercueil at the beginning of the novel.

³² The idea of being intruded upon in *Age of Iron* has received much attention in the scholarship. See, for example, Johan Geertsema’s essay “‘We Embrace to be Embraced’: Irony in an Age of Iron,” Sue Kossew’s *Pen and Power*, and María J. López’s *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J. M. Coetzee*. López reads the concept of intrusion in terms of the “traditional host/white and parasite/black identification” and its reversal/subversion in the context of novel through which the novel undermines “the apartheid logic of confinement, racial separation, and blood purity” (112). López regards the Old Testament, particularly the text of the Exodus, and Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* as sub-texts to the novel (130-150). While I agree with López’s insightful observations, I will argue that the novel’s engagement with the biblical text is far more extensive. In its inclusion of the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness and the concepts/acts of confession and forgiveness, the novel moves beyond the text of the Old Testament. Coetzee’s novel, in fact, narrates the transition from the narrative of the Old Testament to the New

the first of the carrion birds, prompt, unerring . . . scavengers of Cape Town whose number never dwindles. Who go bare and feel no cold. Who sleep outdoors and do not sicken. Who starve and do not waste. Warmed from within by alcohol. The contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame. Cleaners up after the feats. Flies, dry-winged, glazen-eyed, pitiless. My heirs. (5)

What remains to be set as a task, in Mrs. Curren's words to Vercueil, is "to see you as you really are" (179). Mrs. Curren, indeed, has to negate Vercueil's constructed colonial identity and see Vercueil in his true light. In his true light Vercueil is neither a scavenger, neither merely an angel. He is rather an ordinary man who in his ordinariness is rather an extraordinary hybrid figure standing selectively for various mythical figures and their attributes. He is the "letter A" of Coetzee's fiction (114). Despite the fact that many readers have speculated about his identity as a black man, his race is ultimately not identified in the novel.

But what does Vercueil's peculiar position hold for Mrs. Curren's subjectivity and her writing, in particular? Vercueil is, of course, associated with Mrs. Curren's ultimate ethical act. But again, what does this association really have in store for Mrs. Curren? Mrs. Curren's wager of trust in Vercueil, obviously, does not follow any logic or necessity. Mrs. Curren's choice seems illogical not only because Vercueil, as Attridge rightly contends, is supposedly "outside the normal codes which govern interpersonal relations" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 95), but also because we do not usually put our most essential inheritance, which for Mrs. Curren is her letter, in care of any random individual who comes around and in what seems to an utterly

Testament. This transition is characteristic of the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness as well as the movement from the "moral view of the world" (365) to "Conscience" (383) and the concept of forgiveness in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. This transition in both Hegel and Coetzee, I believe, is eventually cast within a secular economy, one that places the burden of responsibility entirely on us.

arbitrary choice. Neither do we entrust our inheritance in care of a drunkard or a vagabond. The question is, therefore, why does Mrs. Curren choose Vercueil as her trustee and not anyone else? According to Samantha Vice, “[the fact] that Mrs. Curren’s growing intimacy with Vercueil is based on no rational ground is central to *Age of Iron*, which enacts a form of love and engagement with another person that is ethical precisely because of this” (305). This type of engagement or irrationality, I believe, cannot always guarantee such an ethics. Mrs. Curren’s decision is, in fact, a specific response to a specific society and a specific problem. If the spirit of Thanatos is the spirit of the age and if this spirit is the very absolute that determines the rationality of the age and the subject in their entirety, then the only way to resist this spirit is to make a totally irrational decision. In this context, to root one’s actions in the ethical, to be able to love or trust, love and trust must follow from no causal or logical necessity. Put differently, any action that derives its logic from the iron-rule of late apartheid would only constitute a state of slavery and unfreedom precisely because it would take its lead from the rationality of Thanatos. Therefore, to be able to transcend her pre-given colonial identity, i.e., her unfreedom, she must ground her decision on something other than the colonial rule. Since there is no alternative to the colonial rationality in the society of late apartheid, then love, trust, and freedom must follow from ground zero, i.e., from a totally arbitrary and contingent decision. In this way, Mrs. Curren hopes to open a space for constructing an ethics and politics of love and freedom. Mrs. Curren’s relationship with Vercueil, thereby, enables her to find her own voice, to enact an ethics of love and freedom through the construction of novel meanings that are geared toward the other. Thus, Mrs. Curren’s choice enacts an ethics as well as a politics of love and freedom. These two otherwise different domains of the ethical and the political, while retaining their tensions, are reconciled in Mrs. Curren’s gesture.

Age of Iron is characterized by an oppressive sense of judgment and lack of forgiveness. It is interesting to note that Vercueil generally exercises a non-judgmental attitude and, in a sense, does not entirely follow the logic of the age.³³ If as Oliver argues, the colonialization of the psychic space is characterized by the oppressive judgment of the master's rule and rationality, and, thus, sustained by the lack of social forgiveness for the psychic revolt of the oppressed other, then Vercueil's nonjudgmental attitude towards Mrs. Curren can provide a space for the generation of meaning and subjectivity. Mrs. Curren describes Vercueil in the following words:

He watches but does not watch. Always a faint haze of alcohol about him. Alcohol, that softens, preserves. *Mollificans*. That helps us to forgive. He drinks and makes allowance. His life all allowances. He, Mr. V., to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write. While to the rising generation, who do not drink, I cannot speak, can only lecture. . . . The new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule. Abhorring alcohol, which softens the rule, dissolves iron. Suspicious of all that is idle, yielding, roundabout. Suspicious of devious discourse, like this. (82)

This relationship, thereby, enables Mrs. Curren to find her own voice, to enact an ethics of love and freedom through the construction of novel meanings that are geared toward the other. Despite its significant differences from Friday in *Foe*, Vercueil serves a similar function as the mediator in Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. In the resolution to the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, consciousness tries to unite with the unchangeable through a "middle term," a mediator which is "a conscious Being," (136; par. 227). This mediator relates the two extremes, namely the inessential consciousness to the essential consciousness. In this move, consciousness "divest[s] itself of 'I,' " i.e., its desires, habits, and intentions, and posit[s]

³³ At times, Vercueil does make judgments or comments on Mrs. Curren's attitude, actions or decisions. But he does not generally exercise a judgmental attitude.

its will “as the will of an ‘another’ ” (138; par. 230). The very ability to do so grounds the proof of freedom in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as in this novel.

Similarly, Mrs. Curren surrenders her letters, her soul and body to Vercueil. Through this act, she gives up her desires, habits, and intentions that are shaped by colonial history. Vercueil is the one who connects Mrs. Curren’s lived experience, i.e., her particularity, to the world beyond, with its claims to universality. Like Charon, the ferryman of Hades, he carries her soul across the river. In his role as Hermes, he is the one who brings into communication Mrs. Curren’s consciousness with the consciousness of her daughter and the readers. More properly put, he connects Mrs. Curren’s consciousness with acts of reading and writing. It is in this sense that Mrs. Curren can evade, and, in fact, transcend the contradictions of secular confessions. Coetzee’s words on what he regards as Dostoyevsky’s skepticism about secular confessions are particularly pertinent here: “True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self, or the dialogue of the self with its self-doubt . . .” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 231). Through Vercueil, therefore, Mrs. Curren transcends the “monologue of the self.” Furthermore, If, as Kossew rightly indicates, Coetzee in *Age of Iron* foregrounds the fact that “all discourses within South Africa are operating in isolation, without communicating and as a source of divisiveness,” then Mrs. Curren’s wager of trust on Vercueil shatters this isolation and “divisiveness” (*Pen and Power* 195). Without Vercueil, there is no text; there is no love. It is his role as the mediator that should warn us against reading him strictly as a figure of radical alterity or otherness in the Levinasian sense. Were he a figure of radical otherness and alterity, he would not be able to function as this mediator.³⁴

³⁴ Moreover, as Marais points out, Mrs. Curren’s acts of writing the letter to her daughter and entrusting it in Vercueil’s care are directly related to her desire for self-redemption (105). Therefore, I believe, this writing and entrusting cannot be divorced from the subject’s conscious intentional acts and decisions.

Like his counterpart Friday, Vercueil, as the mediator, takes us to the aesthetic question of the text which is also the fundamental question of the history of aesthetics, i.e. the problem of the substantiality of the real vs. the insubstantiality of the aesthetic, and the corresponding tensions of the real vs. the unreal (fictional), the literal vs. the allegorical (figural), the mundane and the ordinary vs. the extraordinary and the mythical. The question is not whether we should read the novel or its characters within the terms of the literal or the allegorical. The choice is a false one. On the contrary, the question is how should we account for the tensions between the literal and the allegorical. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the South Africa of Mrs. Curren, the borders between reality and allegory or reality and dream/nightmare do not hold. These distinctions certainly do not hold for Mrs. Curren's waking and dream life. In other words, the reality of South Africa constantly negates the tensions inherent in the conceptual domains of the literal and the figural, the real and the nightmarish, without really overcoming these tensions entirely. How does Coetzee respond to these tensions that are constantly being undermined?

All these tensions are now cast within the fields of the classics, of classical mythology. The two pictures in Mrs. Curren's study, "Sophie Schliemann decked out in Agamemnon's treasure hoard" and "the robed Demeter from the British Museum" are, in fact, the allegorical representations of these tensions in the novel (13). As J. U. Jacobs points out, *Age of Iron* can be understood in terms of the "ekphrastic dialectic that is established between these two pictures" (63). The first picture is a portrait of Heinrich Schliemann's Greek wife wearing the jewelry supposedly discovered at Hisarlik and advertised as having been worn by Helen of Troy. The second, however, makes reference to the myth of motherhood and that of rebirth by the Greek goddess Demeter. Mrs. Curren, Jacobs argues, can "deconstruct the disabling discourse of apartheid" by acknowledging the degree to which the onto-political discourse of apartheid has been constitutive of her subjectivity and by recognizing that this discourse, and, in fact, her

being, has its roots in the mytho-political discourse of the classics, which is “symbolized by the portrait of Sophie Schliemann” (63). The same tension exemplifies Mrs. Curren’s later dream of herself as paralyzed against Florence walking down Parliament Avenue, whom Mrs. Curren regards as “Aphrodite” read as a “figure of urgency” (178).³⁵ As Jacobs underlines, the first picture alludes to the meaningless cycles of theft, colonialization, war, death, betrayal, and revenge. The second, however, makes reference to the images of motherhood and rebirth. The dialectic or conflict is, in Freudian terms, between Eros and Thanatos.

The aesthetic question of the text is, therefore, a dialectical one. The question is whether the discourses of the classics and classical mythology have within them the potential to transcend Western discourse and rationality, complicit as they have been in constructing that very same rationality or discourse? Or are the discourses of the classics and of Western mythology entirely meaningless and doomed enterprises?³⁶ This question takes us to the enigma of Vercueil and its role in the context of classical mythology and the novel.

³⁵ Jacobs reads Florence in Mrs. Curren’s dream as Demeter. The text of the dream can also be read as a plea for feminine power and energy represented by the Greek goddess Medusa: “Though I peer and peer into the vortex from which visions come, the wake of the goddess and her god-children remains empty, the woman who should follow behind not there, the woman with serpents of flames in her hair who beats her arms and cries and dances (178).

³⁶ In an interview with David Attwell in 1990, Coetzee expresses reservations about commenting on *Age of Iron* because he is “still too near its writing—too near or too raw—to know what to think of it” (*Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* 250). Nevertheless, he alludes to a staging of the contest between “historical judgement” and “the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics” in the following words: “Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and faraway. . . . What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position” (250). While my purpose here is to address precisely this tension here, I differ from Coetzee’s idea that Mrs. Curren’s death is a private affair in the novel. In what follows, I will suggest that if the contest has any significance, it is because this contest involves more actors than the actual participants in the novel. Put differently, should this contest have any purchase in this or the other world, this contest must be able to problematize the very concept of the private. In fact, it is the concept of the private and its

Vercueil is the “letter A” of Coetzee’s fiction. He is a hybrid dynamic figure that in his ordinarieness combines various characteristic of diverse mythological figures such as Odysseus, Hermes and Charon, literary figures such as the angel in Tolstoy’s short story “The Old Shoemaker,” and the biblical figure Gabriel.³⁷ Mrs. Curren identifies Vercueil as a hybrid figure. She writes to her daughter that she would have liked to send her a photo of Vercueil, had Mrs. Curren not lost her camera in a burglary. Nevertheless, she refers to his identity-card picture in the following words:

In any case, he is not the kind of person who photographs well. I have seen the picture on his identity card. He looks like a prisoner torn from the darkness of the cell, thrust into a room full of blinding lights, shoved against a wall, shouted at to stand still. His image raped from him, taken by force. He is kind of like those half-mythical creatures that come out in photographs only as blurs, vague from disappearing in the undergrowth that could be man or beast or merely a bad spot on the emulsion: unproved, unattested. Or disappearing over the edge of the picture, leaving behind in the shutter trap an arm or a leg or the back of a head. (193)

The question of Vercueil’s half-mythological status or hybridity is, in fact, the fundamental question of Hegel’s dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. In other words, it is the fundamental problematics for the deduction of the “[f]reedom of [s]elf-consciousness” (119). The problem is

various inflections—private language, private ownership, private space—that are put under question.

³⁷ Kay Sulk notices Vercueil ordinary extraordinariness early on in the fiction. She contends that the verb “to visit” or “to visit on,” used by Mrs. Curren to describe Vercueil’s entrance into her life, is not normally used in a reflective sense precisely because in doing so the subjective and the objective sense of the verb would conflate. But this very conflation is what characterizes Vercueil. Sulk, thus, concludes that Vercueil appears both “worldly and supernatural” (324).

to understand our particularity (ordinariness) and universality (extraordinariness) as a unity. As the Hegelian mediator, as Mrs. Curren's messenger, this ordinary man, Vercueil, is most pronouncedly associated with the Greek god, Hermes. Like all figures of mythology, Hermes is already a hybrid figure combining various characteristics and, often, contradictory ones. In Greek mythology, however, Hermes the messenger is more specifically associated with mediation, transition, and the crossing of boundaries. He moves between the underworld, the world of mortals, and Olympia with ease. He is the messengers of the gods and is, likewise, the messenger between gods and mortals. He is the agency that brings these different worlds/orders and their inhabitants into contact or communication with each other. In other words, he is the one that connects the literal with the figural, the real and the mythical. He is, in a sense, that to which the term hermeneutic owes its soul if not its etymology. He is, likewise, the patron of travelers and commerce. He is also a conductor of souls into the after-life. As a psychopomp and a guide of souls, his role is not to judge the deceased but to provide safe passage. He delivers the soul of the dead to Charon to be ferried across Acheron to Hades. But he is also associated with rebirth. He is the figure who brings back Persephone from the underworld to her mother Demeter. Hermes is associated with fertility and impregnation. Vercueil can definitely be said to fit the profile of a god in the context of this novel. He is the one who, in his role as the Hegelian mediator, mediates not only between this world and the other world, but also is the one who makes possible the transition or movement of meaning across time, i.e., past, present, and future. Coetzee's Hermes, in fact, like its classical counterpart, mediates between the literal and the allegorical, the literal and the figural, the real and the mythical.³⁸ If he is an angel, he is the angel of "annunciation"

³⁸ As Laura Wright also contends, the fact that we read the story might serve as proof that Vercueil has delivered Mrs. Curren's letter (70). Nevertheless, the reality of love and freedom, does not, strictly speaking, depend on Vercueil's actual delivery of the letter. In fact, the very

pronouncing Mrs. Curren's impregnation with new thoughts and new beginnings. He is also the messenger who gradually becomes the angel wearing "letter A." In a sense, he becomes an angel by the end of the novel. As the most ordinary presence in Coetzee's fiction, Vercueil emerges as an extraordinary figure. He is the one who carries Mrs. Curren back home on his shoulders, stays with her during the worse moments of her life, tries to cheer her up, and is the one who eventually delivers the letter.

Vercueil, therefore, is rather an ordinary figure. He is human. This is what we get at the resolution of the Unhappy Consciousness. i.e., the ability to think of the two, "the Unchangeable" and "the protean Changeable," the universal and the particular, as a unity (127; par. 208). In his ordinariness, he is, in fact, extraordinary. The ultimate tension of the text leads us to the Hegelian idea that as humans our quality or capability of being extraordinary is premised upon our body and on what we commonly recognize as the ordinary in us. The prime Hegelian lesson, what in my reading of Hegel counts for a robust understanding of Hegel's absolute knowledge, is that our reality or what passes as knowledge is always already a human one. In other words, there is no external measure by which we can assess or know this knowledge. Our knowledge, scientific, moral, ethical, political is always already a human knowledge, historical, and therefore, a collective one at that. In aesthetic terms, as humans our capability to create myths or fictional constructs is a) what makes us human b) is not dissociable from what we commonly refer to as our reality, and c) tells us about or reveals what is (ir)rational about us.

On Vercueil rests, thus, Mrs. Curren's salvation. Mrs. Curren's proper burial, in Hegelian terms, that which restores "the right of consciousness," in fact, depends upon Vercueil's delivery of her letter (270; par. 452). The fact becomes clear in Mrs. Curren's deliberate mistranslation of

possibility/ability to entrust one's soul in this context proves the reality and the possibility of actualizing freedom.

Virgil's *Aeneid* where Aeneas enquires about and laments the fate of the unburied dead. The lines describe Sibyl's explanation to Aeneas on the dead who are given no respite from wandering the shores of the underworld. Charon is not allowed to ferry those who have not received a proper burial or fail to pay a fee. As a result, they are doomed to wander on the shores of the underworld.

I recited Virgil, Virgil on the unquiet dead:

Nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluenta

Transportare prius quam sedibus ossa quierunt.

Centum errant annos volitantque haec litora circum;

tum demum admissi stagna exoptata revisunt.

"What does it mean?" he said.

"It means that if you don't mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery."

"It doesn't."

"Yes, it does. *Ossa*: that is the word for a diary. Something on which the days of your life are inscribed." (192)

Mrs. Curren's mistranslation, in fact, holds more truth for Mrs. Curren's situation than what could pass as the accurate or the literal translation. The tendency to privilege the literal over the fictional, rhetorical, or the allegorical is annulled in the name of truth. The mistranslation is made possible by means of a metaphoric transition: "*ossa*" for "diary." Throughout the novel, Mrs. Curren intends to sell, and, thus, salvage whatever has remained of her. The letter, in fact, is the currency she has to pay in order to be ferried across Acheron to Hades.

Yet the ending of the novel complicates the reading by which the heroine of the novel can gain salvation only by virtue of writing letters to her daughter through choosing a mediator. If

this was the whole story, Coetzee's fiction would perhaps still risk collapsing within the aesthetics of a bourgeois novel, i.e., private pardon and private salvation. The novel ends in an "embrace from which there is no warmth to be had" (198). If Vercueil is associated with Hermes the guide/guardian, the angel, he is also associated with the cold indifferent demon of the underworld Charon. In the novel, he is described in terms of his "crooked fingers," "long dirty nails," and "the smell of his dirty feet" (11, 166 & 185). He can also stand for the stern, cruel, un pitying god of the underworld Hades characterized by his guardian dog. The last lines of the novel echoes Aeneas's visit to the underworld.

Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridge of his spine. Through chattering teeth, I spoke: "what are you looking at?"

He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen of leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness.

"Is it time?" I said.

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.

Laura Wright contends that a "sea of shadows" stands for the river Styx in Virgil's text (72).

More precisely, however, Virgil initially describes the dead flooding the shores of the underworld in the following terms: "as thick as leaves in autumn woods at the first frost/that slip and float to earth" (192. 352). The term "scale" may refer to the scale of birds which serves as another metaphor for the swarming dead at the shores in Virgil's *Aeneid* (192. 348-355). But more

properly, it reminds the reader of Mrs. Curren's account of colonial identity as "evolution backward" when she comments on the face of the woman she sees in a car.

Not a face but an expression, yet an expression worn so long as to be hers, her. A thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside, a thickening become thickness. Evolution, but evolution backward. Fish from the primitive depths . . . grew patches of skin sensitive to the fingerings of light, patches that in time became eyes. Now in South Africa, I see eyes clouding over again, scales thickening on them, as the land explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep. (127)

In its use of the expression of the "screen of leaves" by the end of the novel, Mrs. Curren, in fact, conceives of late-apartheid South Africa as the shores of the underworld and as the rivers of Styx and Acheron. Earlier in the novel, Mrs. Curren associates South Africa with "Hades" and "Hell." She also conceives the hospital wherein Bheki is treated as "the house of shadow and suffering" and conceives herself as "a fugitive shade" (70). South Africa, therefore, is the underworld whose shores she wants to cross. "Is it time?," thus, is the question she asks Vercueil the Charon for the passage across the rivers of Acheron and Styx to Hades where she has yet to be judged by the gods of the underworld. In other words, Mrs. Curren cannot escape the scene of judgment through her writing even after her death. Even if she escapes the cold judges of the underworld, she cannot escape the bulk of literary scholarship that has to judge her character and her times. Mrs. Curren's standing at the threshold of death or on the shore of the underworld, therefore, is a predecessor to Elizabeth Costello's attempt to justify her writing career and herself before the panel of judges as "a secretary of the invisible" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 199). *Age of Iron*, therefore, does not entirely end on an optimistic note of salvation. Neither does it end on a pessimistic note of deprivation and utter loss. Mrs. Curren's salvation, I would suggest, relies upon how her writing is received by her contemporary fellow-citizens and by posterity. After all,

Age of Iron is “a letter.” As with every genuine work of art, the novel puts the burden of responsibility on the reader. This takes us once again to the theme of forgiveness and its relation to the act of reading in the novel.³⁹

Mrs. Curren’s salvation rests in how her words are received. The narrative’s prime Hegelian lesson is that one’s salvation can always only be a communal collective effort. One’s salvation is not a private affair subject to the currency or the logic of exchange. *Age of Iron*, indeed, can be read as a secular liturgy asking for our communal participation and intervention in the divine, i.e., our own divinity, both inside and outside the text. There is, indeed, a transition from the harsh language of “Dies Irae” to a language of forgiveness in the novel. This is the point at which the novel really moves beyond the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness to Hegel’s dialectic of forgiveness. In this sense, the novel is not only about the society of late apartheid or the past, but perhaps more prominently about the future. The question is whether we should simply repudiate Mrs. Curren for her morals and her shortcomings and, thus, deny her a sense of agency, or are we invited to exercise an ethics and politics of forgiveness?⁴⁰

It is important to note that the novel is written on the days when apartheid is on its last legs. One way to approach her and her words is to comply with the heteronormative discourse that characterizes the language of the colonial fathers and the black rebels alike and to join the chorus with the “man” from the township: “this woman talks shit” (99). To do so, we would only

³⁹ There is a much-deserved emphasis on Mrs. Curren’s responsibility and her ethical response in the scholarship. Mrs. Curren, however, has passed away. The burden of responsibility, I believe, is on us. In *Age of Iron*, as in Coetzee’s other fictional works, the reader enters the story. In this story, the reader’s role is as substantial as Mrs. Curren’s. It is in this light that I consider the concept of forgiveness. There is perhaps a logic of return and reciprocity in our consort with the novel and its heroine, but this logic is not subdued to the logic of private ownership or exchange.

⁴⁰ Here, I use the term “ethics” in its general sense. For the purposes of this argument, I do not distinguish between the terms “ethics” and “morality” or the “ethical” and the “moral” as Hegel does in the *Phenomenology*, *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights* and elsewhere.

foreclose the possibility of meaning and agency. It is equally possible to read her as a woman of privilege who, despite her scruples, does not know what she writes about or should forever lack a voice for her complicity with colonialism and its rules. But if forgiveness is that which makes the hermeneutical process possible, if it is the very possibility of meaning and subjectivity, and if its lack is what characterizes the master's ideology or the rule of Thanatos, the question of forgiveness then becomes of paramount importance in the context of the novel, in the context of late-apartheid South Africa, and in the context of the world we live in.

The question of forgiveness is obviously posed for us in relation to the acts of reading and writing. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, forgiveness entails the cancellation of the master's discourse and the master/slave relationship, and, thus, points toward the recognition proper in this novel. Hegel's concept of forgiveness appears at the conclusion of the "Spirit" section in the *Phenomenology*. It really evolves from the collapse of the moral view of the world, of which Kantian morality is an intertext.⁴¹ For Hegel, the concept of the good is not a mere idea to be categorically deduced from the moral law. It does not adhere to a transcendental or idealized standard of good and bad or an endpoint. Conscience, the name Hegel gives to the shape that follows the collapse of "the moral view of the world," is morality as it is practiced by dutiful agents in their lived experience.⁴² The move, in fact, locates genuine substantiality within human agency. In other words, it is by virtue of this move that we become subjects.

⁴¹ Kant's moral law appears as an intertext in Hegel's discussion on morality and conscience. But Hegel's response is not specifically a critical response to the Kantian delineation of morality.

⁴² In tandem with his dialectical practice throughout his philosophical enterprise, and here in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel repudiates any philosophy that studies its phenomena in abstraction from the world. Hegel always endeavors to return us to our actual lived experiences and practices. Thus, while some read Hegel's move to "Conscience" as a regression from "the moral view of the world," I see it as an advance on it since conscience grounds morality in the lived dutiful practice of individuals and in their engagement with the world. As Hegel puts it, "[i]t is as conscience that it first has, in its *self-certainty*, a *content* for the previous empty duty, as also for the right and the universal will that were empty of content" (384-385; par. 633). The moral view

Our conflicts, in Hegel's account, give morality content. Moral conflicts really arise because dutiful agents understand, undertake and/or judge moral actions differently. Each has a different moral language and a different account of morality. The consciousness that acts/confesses is always judged by the "judging consciousness" in reference to the particularity of its actions and, hence, by reference to its particular/evil intentions (404; par. 665). It is always possible to ascribe evil to one's action since every action is, after all, a particular action undertaken by a distinct individual in a particular situation. The one who judges, however, does not act, and treats its partial, subjective understanding as universal. However, this individuality or particularity is precisely what it shares with the consciousness it criticizes. Eventually, this contradiction is the revelation to both sides that it is forever impossible to assume a position of innocence or abstract universality, despite their best intentions. In other words, it is forever impossible to act morally without seriously taking into account one's particularity, evil, or failure. Hence, the concept of forgiveness is premised upon a genuine recognition of the self's/the other's particularity and difference: "The reconciling *Yea*, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical *existence*, is the *existence* of the 'I' which has expanded into duality, and therein remains identical with itself, and, in its complete externalization and opposite, possesses the

of the world sets up an abstract duty, and, hence, an idealized end-point. In Conscience, consciousness is confronted with the conflict of goods as opposed to moral problems in the abstract. The conflict is not between duty and nature as in Kant's version of morality. Rather the conflict is between different accounts of the good between human beings and across time. What is at stake is actualized by humanity across time. Kant's moral law which is "the mere *form* of giving universal law" does not account for the situations within which individuals find themselves, neither does it explain the situation for which individuals deduce moral actions or to which they apply a moral maxim (24). Having got rid of Kant's postulates, Hegel explains, "[d]uty is no longer the universal that stands over against the self; on the contrary, it is known to have no validity when thus separated" (387; par. 639). Conscience, thus, places the ultimate source of moral judgment back within ourselves. Conscience is the attempt to take account of one's particularity seriously, and, hence, an attempt to understand the necessity of forgiving oneself as well as the other.

certainty of itself” (409; par. 671). In Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, it is precisely this particularity that gives the concept of the universal its content. As Oliver aptly puts it, what results at this stage in the *Phenomenology* is the two consciousness’s “mutual recognition of [their] identity through limitation and difference”:

The judge and agent recognize that what they share is precisely their individuality, that is, their difference. Their individuality and concomitant particularity is what puts them at odds with one another, but it is also what brings them together and makes community possible. The universal, it turns out, is none other than this shared characteristic, individuality, which results from particularity, recognized in the Other. (182)

The shared terrain is their particularity, i.e., their difference. The master/slave dialectic fails in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* precisely because in the struggle the two self-consciousnesses try to eliminate their own particularity, their own evil. It is this emphasis on the acceptance of one’s particularity that renders Mrs. Curren’s speculations on burning herself before the Parliament buildings in Cape Town, as she herself acknowledges, comical and ridiculous. Aggression toward particularity or difference is, in fact, the madness that is immanent in the age of iron, a madness equally shared by the masters and slaves.⁴³ By adopting the dialectics of the Unhappy

⁴³ There is a common misreading that Hegel’s concept of recognition subsumes the other under the category of the same and the self. As Oliver correctly emphasizes, it is difference that is primary in Hegel’s concept of forgiveness and recognition. Hegel’s reconciliation is, in fact, reconciliation to and acceptance of difference. In quite an ironic way, Marais’s discussion on the state’s discourse on the construction of the individual’s identity resonates with my Hegelian reading of “particularity” at this point: “the self is inspired—which is to say, acted upon—by the state’s discourses to construct itself through indifference to particularity of others. . . . In turn this precludes the individual from being exposed to singularity, difference, otherness” (99). Marais also contends that Vercueil, like Mrs. Curren, “learns to love” (115). His conclusion that “it is the particularity of each that has affected the other” speaks more to a dialectical dynamic than a Levinasian one. As Mrs. Curren also affirms, their relationship becomes “conjugal,” “conjoined” by the end of the novel (118).

Consciousness and that of forgiveness, the novel, in fact, attempts to move beyond the master/slave discourse. The novel, accordingly, thematizes particularity and its analogs, i.e., guilt and evil, only to lead us to the concept of forgiveness.

Coetzee's novel, in fact, vehemently rejects any position of innocence at various points in the novel. Coetzee, like Hegel, does associate the state, concept, and assumption of innocence with radical evil, lack of substantiality, or inhumane existence.⁴⁴ Mrs. Curren often bemoans the absence of life in the colonizer's children, the teenage rebels, and her own grandchildren. This absence of life and lack of subjectivity is often associated with the concept of innocence.

It is the roaming gangs I fear, the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison house is already beginning to close. Children scoring childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other side of the great divide their white cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter in their sleepy cocoons. Swimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons; cricket on the lawn; lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bulldogs; children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light. Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. Slumberous their souls, bliss-filled abstracted. (7)

What characterizes the master's rule, this society of "the great divide" is the assumption of absolute innocence on one's part and of radical evil on the other side of the wall. This assumption is that which constitutes the master's language, conduct, and subjectivity. It is precisely this

⁴⁴ Notice, for example, Hegel's description of "the beautiful soul," "Its activity is a yearning which merely loses itself as consciousness becomes an object devoid of substance In its transparent purity of its moments, an unhappy, so called 'beautiful soul', its light dies away within it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air" (400; par. 658).

assumption of innocence that she tries to avoid in her writing. Recounting her distress at the tragic events she has witnessed in her visit to the township, she implores her daughter to forgo her sympathy for her and “attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over. Do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye” (104).⁴⁵ She also tells Vercueil her “retailing” of her dream to him is not done “innocently” (168). It is equally why Vercueil should not strictly be read as an angel, as a metaphor of innocence. To read him through this metaphor is to render him angelic, inhuman, insubstantial. Coetzee also makes it impossible for his readers to exonerate themselves from their evil. After all, as Michael Neill correctly underlines, “we ourselves are not entitled to read [the letter] since it constitutes a set of ‘private papers’ whose author declares ‘I don’t want them opened and read by anyone else’ ” (89). Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that our interpretation of “the letter” and the practice of literary criticism itself always remains subjective, partial, limited, and, hence, evil.

Is not forgiveness after all what makes the movement of dialectic possible? Is not dialectic or Hegel’s *Absolute*, after all, the art of forgiving the transgression of thought by way of capturing or preserving the rationality of this transgression? Drawing on Julia Kristeva, Elaine Miller reads forgiveness in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as the “structural, transitional phenomenon” of Hegel’s dialectic rather than merely a concept appearing in the last section of “Spirit” (153). Miller argues that forgiveness is, in fact, what makes the act of Sublation, *Aufhebung*, possible: “Forgiveness drives the dialectic and its privileged figure of sublation, the transition that preserves and lifts up one moment of human development into the next, transforming it yet guaranteeing the continuity and coherence of the process as a whole” (161). It is forgiveness as

⁴⁵ In other words, what is not be forgiven are the “lies and pleas and excuses.” What should be forgiven, however, is the subject.

this “structural, transitional phenomenon” that is staged in Coetzee’s novel throughout. The novel obviously asks us to move beyond the impasse of the master’s language. In aesthetic terms, the novel equally transcends the impasse of secular confessions characterized by Coetzee as “the monologue of the self” or as the “endless treadmill” of lies, deceits, or partial truths (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 231 & 232). Do we not become complicit in the master’s discourse or yield to the master/slave problematics if we renounce the possibility of love and forgiveness in our reading of the novel, that is, if our discourse with the novel falls within a “stupefy[ing]” command code (29)? Is not the novel asking us and the society that is to emerge from the apartheid regime to forgive the other and embrace our shared struggles despite our marked differences?

As the Unhappy Consciousness of the novel, therefore, Mrs. Curren is able to practice an ethics and politics of love and freedom. The enactment of love and freedom is achieved through various strategies. First, the novel rewrites Hegel’s master/slave dialectic and, consequently, the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Mrs. Curren, thus, genuinely earns the position of the Unhappy Consciousness in the narrative. Consequently, she is able to position and recreate her subjectivity through the acts of writing and reading. In language, thereby, she is free to recreate and forgive herself. But since the colonial rule makes an absolute and total claim for the rationality of the age and the subject, Mrs. Curren must ground her writing in something other than the colonial rule. Her wager of trust in Vercueil, therefore, is a specific response to this problem. As the various meanings immanent in the term “reconnaissance” make it clear, Mrs. Curren’s encounter with Vercueil can be read as a variant on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Furthermore, Vercueil serves the same function as the mediator in the resolution to the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Vercueil connects the consciousness of the reader with that of Mrs. Curren’s, this world with the other world, and the past with the present and the future. As a

hybrid figure, he holds the key to the aesthetic question of the text. He annuls the supremacy of the real and the literal (standing on the side of the historical presence) over the fictional, the figural, and the aesthetic (standing on the side of a possible future). Thus, he renders possible the transition from the nightmarish real of late apartheid to the real figuration of a different future. Finally, by ending the novel on an ambiguous note, the novel invites us to participate in our own salvation. The enactment of love and freedom, which is our salvation, is only possible through a supreme act of forgiveness. As in Hegel, forgiveness cancels the master/slave dialectic and makes possible the recognition proper in the novel. Forgiveness guarantees the *Aufhebung* of meaning, and, thus, annuls the “stupefy[ing]” language of the master. Forgiveness is, in fact, the only guarantor of love and freedom.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth Costello's Unhappy Consciousness: Theoretical Outlook or Afterthoughts

Elizabeth Costello is a novel structurally composed of eight lessons (instead of chapters), an excerpt from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Letter of Lord Chandos*, and a postscript.⁴⁶ Each lesson is organized around a topic, which is, in fact, to borrow Adorno's favorite term, a "constellation" of subjects, half/(ill?)-formed ideas and concepts. The *Letter of Lord Chandos* from which an excerpt appears in *Elizabeth Costello* gives an account of a fictional letter by one Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon. In the letter, Lord Chandos describes his new-found distrust in the ability of language to capture reality. This lack of trust, in its turn, has resulted in his inability to engage in literary activity altogether. The postscript that ends the *Elizabeth Costello* is another fictional letter written by Lady Chandos in which she talks about her husband's and, in fact, her own mental and emotional plight. Except for the last two lessons, all other lessons have been initially given as actual public lectures by Coetzee on various occasions wherein a fictional character by the name Elizabeth Costello takes the central stage in a polemic of some sort.⁴⁷ The novel tackles diverse, seemingly unrelated, areas and subjects such as aesthetic and literary representation and experience, the question of animals, the problem of morality and evil, Eros, and the role and history of the humanities in Africa, among others. Conceived as a novel, *Elizabeth Costello* is, indeed, a bizarre entity.

⁴⁶ The excerpt from Hofmannsthal's *The Letter of Lord Chandos* appears on the opposite page to the postscript. The novel's table of content only lists the eight lessons ("Lessons" 1-8) and a Postscript. Both letters, therefore, can be read as to constitute the postscript. Nevertheless, it is possible to read the term postscript literally in the sense of "written after." As such, "The Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon" can be read as a postscript to her husband's letter and the novel itself. The latter possibility is more in tune with Elizabeth Costello's tendency and, in fact, persistence for taking things literally throughout the novel.

⁴⁷ For the historical itinerary of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, see Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*.

The female protagonist of the story, Elizabeth Costello, is a somewhat renowned novelist of Australian descent who is mostly known for her first novel *The House on Eccles Street*, which is a rewrite of James Joyce's classic *Ulysses*. Elizabeth, however, is at odds with her career, her artistic achievements, literary culture, her colleagues, friends, and family. Except for Lessons I, III, and IV in which we are also privy to the thoughts and feelings of Elizabeth's son and which contain a few scenes of dialogue between the characters, the rest of the lessons are exclusively seen through Elizabeth's perspective often in the manner of free indirect speech. Like her predecessors, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren, Elizabeth is at odds with the world in which she lives. Above all, she is dismayed with a world in which animals are slaughtered and consumed for food or luxury, in which animal industrial complexes pass unnoticed by the public, and in which humans, including her family and friends, accept animal cruelty with indifference. Like her predecessors, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren, Elizabeth is equally preoccupied with her own salvation. What forms the central question of the novel and what ties or unties its various topics is the reality of animals, i.e. our historical relationship to our non-human others. However, the character who brings all these various shreds into dialogical encounter and communication is the main heroine of the novel, Elizabeth Costello, in whose footsteps we move through the complex multi-dimensional world of the novel. Like its predecessors, Elizabeth Costello can be read as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative. In this chapter, I will lay out the general contours of Elizabeth's subject position especially as it pertains to the questions of nature and animals in *Elizabeth Costello*. To do so, I will mainly draw upon the theoretical works of Horkheimer, and more extensively, Adorno to which, I believe, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* has very strong affinities. For its theoretical preoccupations and its invocation of Adorno's theoretical insights, in particular, the texture of this chapter may be perceived as to be unlike the other chapters in this study. Yet, my decision to devote a chapter to the study of Adorno is not without justification.

Adorno's theoretical insights can shed light on the aesthetic and conceptual constellation within which the questions of the subject, nature and animals are situated in the novel. These very questions, in fact, inform and shape the world of the novel. Adorno's theoretical insights also serve as a major inter-text in my analysis of *Elizabeth Costello* in the remaining chapters. In the chapters that follow (chapters 4-7), I will explore extensively and in more detail the connections between Adorno's meditations on the questions of animals and aesthetics and Coetzee's exploration of the same issues in *Elizabeth Costello*.⁴⁸ Chapter 3, therefore, serves as springboard for a more detailed account of Adorno's aesthetic theory as a way of exploring the aesthetic politics of the novel.

Coetzee's choice of an Unhappy Consciousness to reflect upon the question of animals and human subjectivity, as the main focalizer of the story, is significant for the aesthetic politics of the novel. It is particularly in this dialectic that the subject feels compelled to reflect upon its own subjectivity at the core of and as a result of its own objectifying activity, which includes, above all, this consciousness's awareness of its objectification at its own hands. Through its objectifying activities, in fact, the subject forms its biography and history. In other words, this consciousness posits its own nullity or nothingness at the same time that it endeavors to justify and establish itself as subject, therein lies the unhappiness of the subject. As the holder of this subject position, as a "dual consciousness" of mastery and slavery, Elizabeth is able to expose and debunk the flat, naive, one-dimensional realism of the subject and its history.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Although I refer to other Frankfurt School thinkers in my study of *Elizabeth Costello*, my main frame of reference remains Adorno, especially in the chapters that follow this introduction. The affinity between Adorno's oeuvre and Coetzee's body of work, in particular, *Elizabeth Costello*, is, indeed, very striking so much so that many of Adorno's meditations on aesthetic theory, nature, and animals can seamlessly be integrated into the text of the novel.

⁴⁹ In my discussion of realism, I have mainly focused on Adorno's invocation of the term and its place in his philosophic/aesthetic works here as in the rest of the chapters. I have only made a few references to other scholars' understanding of the term and often indirectly. What mattered to me

In *Elizabeth Costello*, however, the heroine's unhappiness is more decidedly conceived in terms of the subject's relation to our animal others. Elizabeth's unhappiness has its roots in a world that is characterized by an urge to dissociate with and dominate the animal others. Coetzee's text once again can be read as a rewriting and revision of Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness. Despite Hegel's insistence on the necessity of acknowledging more seriously one's particularity for a discourse of freedom, through which Hegel tries to overcome the limits of Kant's idealism, Hegel's concept of particularity is, after all, human particularity, and for this very reason, it is already cognized as human spirit before the dialectical process. In its attempt to relate to and rise into the universal, the Unhappy Consciousness discovers itself as an animal body. The subject's conception of itself as an animal body and its function is the source of its own suffering in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The animal body is conceived as "the enemy" by this consciousness. Hence, this consciousness tries to rid itself of this body.

Consciousness is aware of itself as *this actual individual* in the animal functions. These are no longer performed naturally and without embarrassment . . . since it is in them that the enemy reveals himself in his characteristic shape, they are rather the object of serious endeavor, and become matters of the utmost importance. This enemy, however, renews himself in his defeat and consciousness, in fixing its attention on him, far from freeing itself from him, really remains forever in contact with him, and forever sees itself as defiled.

(135-136; par. 225)

Despite Hegel's insistence on the essentiality of consciousness's "feeling of its wretchedness" or animality for consciousness's conception of "its unity with the Unchangeable" for the dialectical

most in this study was precisely the encounter/relation of the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative with realism understood as a constellation in Adorno's sense of the term. There is, indeed, as it will become clear in the remaining chapters, close affinities between Coetzee's work and Adorno's aesthetic theory.

movement and the resolution of the Unhappy Consciousness (136; par. 226), the animal body is eventually bracketed, forgotten or sublimated in/via the mediator and in the community of the individual believers (136-138; pars. 227-230). Seen from Adorno's perspective, one can argue that the animal body is sacrificed, devoured, or dissolved, i.e., transubstantiated, in the spiritual community of the believers. As such, Hegel evades the treatment of genuine particularity. For Adorno and Coetzee's character, Elizabeth Costello, I claim, this move constitutes the very pathology of the modern subject. It is, in fact, the very form of the pathological.⁵⁰ In contrast to Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness, Elizabeth Costello is often perceived in terms of animal imagery. She is always exclusively described by the narrator in terms of her old physique as a reminder of her animal body, on the one hand, and of her mortality, on the other. She is also described by her son, John, in terms of animal imagery especially with regards to her physique, gestures, and temperaments. Furthermore, Elizabeth Costello's language is replete with animal imagery. She often draws on expressions wherein animals figure predominately. Above all, she identifies herself with hybrid figures such as Kafka's Red Peter. Elizabeth pines to reconcile herself and the human species with their animal others. Like her predecessors, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren, she endeavors to get beyond the deadlock of mastery and slavery. Unlike the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness, she cannot partake in rituals or cognitive games whereby humans devour their animal others.

As the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, Elizabeth Costello unravels, contests and, in fact, negates the pathological construct that is our humanity. Before engaging ourselves with the novel, a few expository notes on Adorno's conception of this pathology will highlight the significance of the role Elizabeth Costello plays in the aesthetic politics of the novel. Adorno sees

⁵⁰ It is the very pathology Hegel's *Phenomenology* suffers from.

the root of Enlightenment's pathological identity in the historical itinerary whereby the human subject emerges as a self-identical entity via sacrificing nature and animals, expunging the consciousness of its affinity with nature and animals in the process. References to nature and animals, in fact, abound in Adorno's oeuvre from his early lecture "The Idea of Natural-History" to his later works, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, *Negative Dialectics*, and *Aesthetic Theory*. An understanding of the concept of nature and animals is, in fact, indispensable to Adorno's negative dialectics.

Robert Hullot-Kentor reads Adorno's essay, "The Idea of Natural-History" in light of Adorno's mature works. Adorno's essay, as Hullot-Kentor also highlights, discusses Heidegger's failure to reconcile the opposition of mind and body and the dualisms of nature and history. In short, the lecture highlights Heidegger's failure in solving the problem of historicist relativism, which are central to Heidegger's critique of Neo-Kantianism and the phenomenological tradition before him. Heidegger's Dasein, Adorno argues, cannot resolve the problem of "historical contingency" (256). It cannot explain particular historical events such as the French Revolution. Following Guenther Anders's critique of Heidegger and, obviously, Adorno's lead, Hullot-Kentor adds that Dasein cannot be conceived as a genuine body or has already lost its body as "Dasein is never hungry, sleepy or sexually aroused" (243). Heidegger's philosophy is, as Adorno explicates, blind to its starting point, i.e. the idealist ratio, and, thus, remains tied to it, sacrificing particularity to universality. According to Adorno, "every exclusion of natural stasis from historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, every exclusion of the historical dynamic from the unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism" ("The Idea of Natural-History" 259). Roughly put, Adorno proposes the somewhat bizarre idea of reading history into what we take to be nature and of reading nature into what we take to be historical. Following Lukács's concept of "second-nature" and Benjamin's notion of allegory, Adorno proposes his idea of

natural-history as the possibility “*to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or as it were possible to comprehend nature as historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature*” (260).⁵¹ Adorno, in fact, problematizes the commonplace conception of nature as an ahistorical entity to be the very form of historical amnesia that informs Western philosophy including its latest example, i.e., Heidegger’s philosophy.

As Hullot-Kentor rightly indicates, one can follow the itinerary of Adorno’s idea of natural-history throughout his oeuvre, most clearly in its explication of the history of subjectivity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a work Adorno co-authored with Max Horkheimer.⁵² In Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reading, Odysseus escapes death by “exploiting the difference” between the word and the thing, in the “intentional” act of reading *Udeis* as both “hero” and “nobody.” While in the order of mythical fate “the distinction between word and thing was unknown,” wherein “expression merged with intention,” Odysseus use of language captures the historical moment whereby language “pass[es] over into designation,” where it is the difference between word and the object that organizes the ethical, legal, aesthetics, scientific constitution of the subject and its relationships with its others (47).⁵³

Odysseus discovered in words what in fully bourgeois society is called *formalism*. Their perennial ability to designate is bought at the cost of distancing themselves from any

⁵¹ In the second section of the essay, Adorno makes explicit references to Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*.

⁵² Any passage from Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* can, in fact, be used to explicate the continuity between the two texts. In choosing this passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to explore the topics in question, I merely join Hullot-Kentor and a host of other scholars who regard this passage as the most illustrative example of the emergence of the modern subject.

⁵³ This is the very constellation that is the butt of Elizabeth’s Costello’s critique of what defines us as human.

particular content which fulfills them, so that they refer from a distance to all possible contents, both to nobody and to Odysseus himself Odysseus two contradictory actions in his meeting with Polyphemus, his obedience to his name as his repudiation of it, are really the same thing. He declares allegiance to himself by disowning himself as Nobody; he saves his life by making himself disappear. This adaptation to death through language contains the schema of modern mathematics. (47-48)

It is important to pay attention to the fact that Adorno and Horkheimer do not read Homer's *Odyssey* as an allegory of the modern subject in the traditional sense of the term. Homer's *Odyssey*, on the contrary, is the immanent trajectory of the modern subject and its science. Odysseus's ruse, as the paradigmatic model of the advent of the bourgeois subject, consists in making itself like amorphous nature and the animal ("nobody") to overcome nature and the animal itself. It is mimesis of external nature as an attempt to overcome amorphous nature and the animal itself. Odysseus's acts of mimesis are, of course, eventually discarded and repressed for the subject's self-identification. Adorno and Horkheimer continue to add that Odysseus' sacrifice of his own and external nature leads to the repression of the mimetic act and of mimesis. The suffering imposed on external nature and on itself for the cost of the subject's self-identification is repressed and forgotten. The result of this repression is an abstract self and a formalized universe, a world reduced to the order of the ratio. In a sarcastic reference to Kant's words, Adorno and Horkheimer describe the objectification of the self and its other in the following words: "world domination over nature turns against the thinking subject itself; nothing is left of it except that ever-unchanging 'I think,' which must accompany all my conceptions. Both subject and object are nullified. . . . The equation of mind and world is finally resolved, but

only in the sense that both sides cancel out” (20).⁵⁴ Thought reverts to nature, to an “ever-unchanging” entity, indeed, to the very fateful blindness that it has ascribed to external nature.

The human being’s mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved. (43)

In its mastery over nature, Odysseus emerges, in Hullot-Kentor’s apt words, as a “self-identical, invariable force of nature” sacrificing the particularity of the self and the other (237). Adorno contends that the very substance targeted by any fascist enterprise is “the living entity.” In this sense, the Holocaust was the logical conclusion of the pathology immanent in Enlightenment rationality. The historical cost of the domination of nature for human and nonhuman others is Elizabeth Costello’s main concern. Elizabeth Costello, in fact, draws a correspondence between the Holocaust and animal industrial complexes. As I will argue, an exploration of this pathology is the very phenomenon at stake in *Elizabeth Costello*. Put differently Elizabeth Costello’s *Unhappy Consciousness* can be read as a response to this very pathology.

Throughout Lesson(s) I-VIII, Elizabeth Costello targets the very dynamics of this pathology, what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as “false projection” (154-165). An understanding of the dynamics of this pathology will help us contextualize the problems

⁵⁴ This is obviously a reference to Kant’s principle of apperception in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “The I **think** must **be able** to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me (246).

addressed in the novel, on the one hand, and clarify Elizabeth Costello's position with respect to these problems, on the other. Kant's dictum, the " 'I think,' which must accompany all my conceptions," already contains the nucleus of the paranoid pathology of the modern subject whose most extreme manifestation defines the individual and social pathology of fascism. Fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer speculate, is the hostility and rage instigated as a result of the repression of the mimetic impulse, our resemblance to nature, and our memory of nature. "Anti-Semitism," Adorno and Horkheimer contend, "is based on false projection."⁵⁵ It is the projection of this hostility onto the other:

It is the reverse of genuine mimesis and has deep affinities to the repressed; in fact, it may itself be the pathetic character trait in which the latter is precipitated. If mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself. If, for the former, the outward becomes the model to which the inward clings, so that the alien becomes the intimately known, the latter displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe. Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim. . . . The object of the illness is declared true to reality (154).⁵⁶

Adorno and Horkheimer, however, state that "in a certain sense, all perception is projection" (154). Nevertheless, they regard fascism as a special type of projection. In line with

⁵⁵ Strictly speaking, for Adorno and Horkheimer anti-Semitism is not an event of the past or the present, neither is it specific to a historical epoch: "The blindness of anti-Semitism, its lack of intention, lends a degree of truth to the explanation of the movement as a release valve. Rage is vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected. And just as, depending on the constellation, the victims are interchangeable: vagrants, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, so each of them can replace the murderer, in the same blind lust for killing, as soon as he feels the power of representing the norm. There is no authentic anti-Semitism, and certainly no born anti-Semite" (140).

⁵⁶ This "false projection", in fact, adequately describes the mentality of master figures in Coetzee's other works such as *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Adorno's later insistence on the role of the sensory and the somatic in the production of knowledge, Adorno and Horkheimer here use the term "perception," as against cognition per se, to tie our anthropocentric enterprise to its "legacy of animal prehistory" (154).⁵⁷ What characterizes the pathological nature of fascism is the absence of what Adorno refers to as mediation. Mediation is the impassioned dialectical interplay of "sense datum" and "thought":

Only mediation, in which the insignificant sense datum raises thought to the fullest productivity of which it is capable, and in which, conversely, thought gives itself up without reservation to the overwhelming impression—only mediation can overcome the isolation which ails the whole of nature. Neither the certainty untroubled by thought, nor the pre-conceptual unity of perception and object, but only their self-reflective antithesis contains the possibility of reconciliation. The antithesis is perceived in the subject, which has the external world within its own consciousness and yet recognizes it as other. Reflection on that antithesis, therefore, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection. . . .

The pathetic element in anti-Semitism is not projective behavior as such but the exclusion of reflection from that behavior. Because the subject is unable to return to the object what it has received from it, it is not enriched but impoverished. It loses reflection in

⁵⁷ The projection of sense impressions is a legacy of animal prehistory, a mechanism for the purposes of defense and obtaining food, an extension of the readiness for combat with which higher species reacted actively or passively to movements, regardless of the intention of the object. Projection has been automated in man like other forms of offensive or defensive behavior which have become reflexes. . . . The system of things, the fixed universal order of which science is merely an abstract expression, is, if Kant's critique of knowledge is applied anthropologically, the unconscious product of the animal tool in the struggle for existence—it is the automatic projection" (154-155). Similar motifs abound Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*.

both directions: as it no longer reflects the object, it no longer reflects on itself and thereby loses the ability to differentiate. (156)

This interplay of “sense datum” and “thought” allows, in Adorno’s perspective, the reflection of the objective share in the subjective construction. This conception of dialectical mediation is pitched against the idea of the logical and the transcendental subject. Adorno’s conception of subject is, strictly speaking, empirical. For Adorno, the bodily, the somatic, and the sensory, including but not limited to one’s pain and suffering, are indissociable from one’s conceptualizations. Differently put, this reflection can be read as the subject’s ability or attempt to overcome crude idealism and crude empiricism via reflecting on the antithesis or the antinomies of empiricism and idealism. The form of critique is “self-reflective,” in that it has to use the very terms of a position to critique that position as well as to measure the affinity and difference of one position from the other. Each position eventually sees the mediating force of the other within itself. In the language Adorno uses in *Negative Dialectics*, it is to use the language of identity to reveal nonidentity in identity:

Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself. (5)

Reflection on this antithesis, what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as “conscious projection,” is telling of the truth/history of the subject/object. Dialectic as the “consistent sense of nonidentity,” nevertheless, speaks the truth of the subject/object (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 5).

For Adorno, I believe, the non-identical has close affinities to the bodily and the somatic. It is in this sense that Adorno highlights an account of somatic and physical suffering as an

element of knowledge, on the one hand, and of any moral account, on the other. An Unhappy Unconsciousness of the kind exemplified by Elizabeth Costello, which accommodates the idea of somatic and physical suffering, can be read to occupy an ideal position for the critique Adorno has in mind: “The supposed basic facts of consciousness are something other than mere facts of consciousness. In the dimension of pleasure and displeasure they are invaded by a physical moment. All pain and all negativity, the moving forces of dialectical thinking, assume the variously conveyed, sometimes unrecognizable form of physical things” (*Negative Dialectics* 202). Adorno continues to add:

It is the somatic element’s survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move, the unassuaged unrest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge.

Conscious unhappiness [Unhappy Consciousness] is not a delusion of the mind’s vanity but something inherent in the mind, the one authentic dignity it has received in its separation from the body. This dignity is the mind’s negative reminder of its physical aspect; its capability of that aspect is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have. The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering: “While there is a beggar, there is a myth,” as Benjamin put it. This is why the philosophy of identity is the mythological form of thought. (*my addition* 203)

It is this role of the somatic in knowledge that highlights the significance of the Unhappy Consciousness as the very consciousness that can contest and unravel the pathology of the modern subject. It is the somatic that moves knowledge which, nevertheless, resists conceptualization. The somatic cannot be made into a self-identical concept or an abstraction. Here Elizabeth Costello’s aesthetic role becomes most apparent: Elizabeth Costello is our “hope” of getting beyond the language of identity. What makes possible the mediation between the

subject and object, between the subject and her body, between the subject and the body it shares with the animals, in Elizabeth's words our "kindness to animals," is the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative (106). If we take seriously Adorno's wager on the Unhappy Consciousness as "the source of whatever hope the mind can have," Elizabeth as the Unhappy Consciousness of Coetzee's narrative, as I will argue in more detail in the following chapters, can be seen as subject par excellence for the kind of hope Adorno has in mind. It is no accident that Elizabeth is described throughout the novel in terms of "its physical aspect[s]," i.e., in terms of animal imagery and always without fail at the beginning of each chapter in terms of her aging body. It is also no surprise that her language is replete with animal imagery. As I will discuss later, Elizabeth relies on her bodily and sensory experiences to obtain knowledge even though that knowledge cannot be conceptualized at times. The body with its rhythms works as a source of knowledge. Through Elizabeth Costello, insects and animals, to borrow a metaphor from the novel's postscript, keep "crawling through" the body of the text and from there through us. Through Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee is able to follow Adorno's imperative, that of "lend[ing] a voice to suffering" (*Negative Dialectics* 17).

Elizabeth's hybridity, as the human/animal, in fact, ties her language further to Adorno's negative dialectics. According to Christina Gerhardt, a pivotal element in Adorno's staging of the tropes of animal and animality in his writings is, in fact, "the affinity of animals with the 'nonidentity of identity'" (160). Gerhardt rightly argues that Adorno's recourse to the tropes of animal and animality "offers an immanent critique and a correction to the dualisms of idealism, which unsuccessfully seeks to repress one half of its dualism—the animal—with nefarious consequences" (161). Following Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as in his other works, Adorno sees the repression of nature or animality in terms of the transference of omnipotence expressed in totemic taboos to the human mind. This repression manifests itself as

rage, repulsion, and disgust against the irrational/animal. Differently put, this repression expresses itself as the compulsion to project animality, incestuous desires, and evil to the other. Humanity, thus, figures as the being of reason and the animal figures as the lack thereof, a motif consistently stressed time and again by Adorno in his works and by Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello*. In the section of *Negative Dialectics* titled “Idealism as Rage,” Adorno explores the process whereby the rage which we share with animals is “rationalized by projection”:

The animal to be devoured must be evil. The sublimation of this anthropological schema extends all the way to epistemology. Idealism—most explicitly Fichte—gives unconscious sway to the ideology that the not-I, *l'autrui*, and finally all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour it without misgivings. This justifies the principle of the thought as much as it increases the appetite. The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism. It disfigures even Kant's humanism and refutes the aura of higher and nobler things in which he knew how to garb it. (22-23)

The figure that overrides this rage in the novel, highlights our “kindness to animals” and calls on us to use what she calls our “sympathetic imagination” in relation to animals is the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, Elizabeth Costello (80). Through Elizabeth Costello, we become conscious of our animality, on the one hand, and our inhumanity, on the other. As the Unhappy Consciousness of narrative, Elizabeth Costello debunks the inclination to perceive animals in terms of difference or pure alterity. The way out of this context of immanence does not consist in rejecting the system by merely pinpointing its contradictions. Fixation upon contradictions is a form of rigorism; it consists in the fetishization of difference or of casting difference or alterity as

what remains solely other or unknowable.⁵⁸ On the contrary, the key is to identify yourself with the animal others. Negative dialectics is in a certain sense, to use Hullot-Kentor's words, "the rational mimesis" of the ratio (247) via making suppressed nature and animality, as Gerhardt emphasizes, the very index of nonidentity. In Elizabeth Costello, it is precisely the animal, the somatic and the bodily that function as this very index. It is in this light that Kafka and Beckett command Adorno's adjuration both of which are prominent influences on Coetzee's work. Elizabeth Costello, likewise, is obsessed with Kafka and Kafkaesque characters throughout the novel for the very same reasons. The world depicted in the last lesson of the novel, i.e., Lesson VIII, despite its differences, as Elizabeth Costello also highlights, is not without strong resemblances to a Kafkaesque universe.

Ultimately, as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, as "the dual consciousness" of mastery and slavery, she is able to negate the one-dimensional flat realism that constitutes our world and our concepts. It is no accident that the first lesson of the novel, which, in fact, frames the whole novel is titled "Realism." Realism is the concept that is contested throughout Coetzee's book of lessons. This realism is, of course, pathological in both Adorno's oeuvre as in and Coetzee's narratives. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this realism is conceived as the subject's disability for conscious projection in terms of megalomania and persecution mania, "the subject is at the center, the world a mere occasion for its delusion" (157). Alienated from the world as from themselves, the paranoiacs weave a web of "sameness" around themselves by "endlessly

⁵⁸ Adorno's and Horkheimer's words on dialectical thinking can be helpful here: "Unlike rigorism, determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth. Language thereby becomes more than a mere system of signs (18).

repeat[ing] their own self” (157). This “sameness” constitutes the reality/realism of the paranoiacs: “The closed circle of perpetual sameness becomes a surrogate for omnipotence. It is as if the serpent which told the first humans ‘Ye shall be as gods’ had kept his promise in the paranoiac. He creates everything in his own image” (157). Power, thus, emerges as the supreme principle. It is the subjectivity of the paranoiacs. The unhappiness of paranoiacs expresses itself in aggression towards all living entities: nature, animals, and humans. There is a direct line from “objectifying thought” to its “pathological counterpart,” fascism:

Objectifying thought, like its pathological counterpart, has the arbitrariness of a subjective purpose extraneous to the matter itself and, in forgetting the matter, does to it in thought the violence which later will be done in practice. The unconditional realism of civilized humanity, which culminates in fascism, is a special case of paranoid delusion which depopulates nature and finally nations themselves. In the abyss of uncertainty, which every objectifying act must bridge, paranoia installs itself. (159)⁵⁹

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer redefine the concept of realism in literary, philosophic, and scientific discourse. In fact, Adorno’s works on aesthetics theory take a strong position against the aesthetics of realism for a variety of reasons. This realism is gained at the expense of repression of our resemblance to nature and the mimetic act. As I will explore in the following chapter in detail, it is precisely this constellation of realism that is contested and negated at every turn by Elizabeth Costello throughout the narrative. The domination of nature,

⁵⁹ Metaphors of captivity abound Adorno’s oeuvre. The following excerpt from his seminal essay “On Subject and Object” is a good case in point: “What transcendental philosophy praised in creative subjectivity is the subject’s own self-concealed imprisonment within itself. The subject remains harnessed within everything objective it thinks, like an armored animal in its layers of carapace it vainly tries to shake loose; yet it never occurred to those animals to vaunt their captivity as freedom The categorical captivity of individual consciousness repeats the real captivity of each individual” (252). It is in this sense that idealism and positivism both can be conceived as different versions of realism.

humans, and the animal others results in the formation of rigidified self that is compelled to choose between “command and obedience,” mastery and slavery (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 31). The question of mastery and slavery, in fact, cannot be resolved as a result of and as by the action of self-conscious individuals in a polity that excludes nature and the animal others. This is precisely where Adorno’s critique of Kant and Hegel and their conception of consciousness/self-consciousness resides. In Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* as in Adorno’s oeuvre, we are human to the extent that we have destroyed, manipulated, and dominated nature and the animal others.⁶⁰

Elizabeth Costello’s language, in fact, bears striking resemblances to Adorno’s project of negative dialectics for countenancing this very realism.⁶¹ Every concept/narrative is to be read as an allegory of what it has objectified in the process of its formation. Every allegory, to use de Man’s apt vocabulary, is to be read as an allegory of its own unreadability in the sense that it can never be made equal to its objects or its claims. In Adorno, however, this unreadability is to some extent readable. It is telling of the history of the subject, object, and their relationship. Adorno’s words in “On Subject and Object” can be relevant here: “Objectivity can be made out solely by reflecting, at every historical and cognitive stage, both upon what at that time is presented as subject and object as well as upon their mediations” (253). As Hullot-Kentor underlines, the historical manifests itself as a second natural immanence, as second nature, narrating the transience or the passing away of the first nature.

⁶⁰ The subjectivity of Enlightenment and its prodigy, capitalism, are premised upon, beyond and above everything else, the manipulation and destruction of nature and animals. This is how capital gains its legitimacy/realism; it does what has defined thus far and to a large degree, not exclusively, notwithstanding, the concept “human.” Capitalism gains its legitimacy/functionality for it attests its familiarity/kinship with the historical process that has defined us as human.

⁶¹ For Adorno, Idealism is either suspect of naive realism, or more precisely, supports the latter. The end result is the realism of the subject. For example, in his seminal essay “On Subject and Object” Adorno makes the following observation: “Subjectivism does not affect naive realism at the level of content but rather simply attempts to provide formal criteria of its validity, as confirmed by the Kantian formula of empirical realism” (251).

This negative dialectic is the form in which the *ratio* may continue to be pursued, albeit transformed. The allegory of the *Odyssey* is interpreted according to this intention.

Measuring the distance between what an object claims to be and is, between Ulysses as what he presents himself, that is, as the bearer of culture, and as second nature, gains the content of Ulysses' voyage: the repression of internal and external nature. (246)

Elizabeth Costello is the consciousness that measures this very distance. She highlights the historical cost we have imposed on ourselves and the animal others. In other words, realism in *Elizabeth Costello* is, in Adorno's language, tantamount to "the crude confrontation of subject and object" whereby the subject literally and conceptually "swallows the object" ("On Subject and Object" 249 & 246). By devouring the object, the subject establishes its own impoverished concepts, existence and subjectivity, i.e. its own reality. For Elizabeth Costello as for Adorno, this realism constitutes the very history of the subject. This history is symptomatic of the Enlightenment history, its philosophic discourses—be it positivistic, skeptic or idealistic—its scientific enterprises, and what passes broadly as realism in the history of aesthetics. At every turn, Elizabeth Costello as the Unhappy Consciousness of the novel strives to get beyond this very realism.

Chapter 4

Moving beyond the Page: The Confines of Realism and the Truth of the Oral in *Elizabeth**Costello's Lessons I & II*

The first two lessons can be read as the first attempts to get beyond the context of the real and the confines of realism. Coetzee has always had an uneasy relationship with realism. In *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*, a series of letters Coetzee has exchanged with the clinical psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz on a variety of literary and psychoanalytic topics, Coetzee describes himself as “attached to the notion of fantasy,” and “a trader in fictions” who does not have “much respect for reality” (156 & 69). He also describes his relationship to reality in the following words: “I think of myself as using rather than reflecting reality in my fiction. If the world of my fictions is a recognisable world, that is because (I say to myself) it is easier to use the world at hand than to make up a new one” (69). Much of the discussion in the letters, indeed, revolves around the status and the place of the fictional and the real in the literary and psychoanalytic experience. Coetzee’s words to Kurtz is merely one among numerous occasions wherein he has made comments about his relationship with reality and realism. This is quite uncommon for a writer who is often silent, reticent or, at best, laconic, about his works.⁶² Not surprisingly his fiction has often been criticized for its lack of realism and historical verisimilitude. Coetzee was often questioned for its exclusion of not only South African history—for its lack of reference to the specific time and space of South Africa in his fiction—but also for his evasive treatment of historical time and space in his novels in general. For his early fiction, in particular, he was often questioned for not giving voice to his

⁶² My intention here is not to address Coetzee’s critical commentaries on realism and its evolution in the course of his career. My sole intention is to read the question of reality and realism through the prism of *Elizabeth Costello*.

black characters and for ignoring their desires. Rejecting to conceptualize suffering, i.e., positively conceive it, he was often accused of being an escapist artist, lacking commitment. This position is, of course, understandable considering the political urgencies facing South Africa during apartheid and in light of the massacre of Sharpeville in 1960, the Soweto revolt of 1976 and the chain of apartheid laws passed since the inception of apartheid (1948), in particular, Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970. Marais aptly captures the bitterness with which *Foe*, published in 1986, was received in the following words: “While the country was burning, quite literally in some places, the logic went, here was one of our most prominent authors writing about the writing of a somewhat pedestrian eighteenth-century novelist” (“Death and the Space of the Response to the Other” 83).⁶³ In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee once again returns to the questions of the real and of realism but this time with a difference, via directly incorporating these very questions in his fiction. Coetzee does so, by adopting the role of, to borrow Elizabeth Costello’s own word, an “amanuensis” or a “secretary” to his character, Elizabeth Costello (70-71 & 199).

The novel opens with its first lesson on “Realism.” The concept of realism here is situated within, to use Adorno’s favorite term, a “constellation” of meanings, concepts, ideas, textual performances and maneuvers. More properly put, realism is no longer a concept, in a limited literary or philosophical sense of the term, “concept,” but realism is, in effect, this very “constellation.” This “constellation” negates commonplace, preconceived notions of realism in human discourses and ways of living. The dialectical movement of this “constellation,” its various connections, revisions, and intersections is not just the question of the first lesson but it is, in fact, the burden of the novel and its interpretation. The first lesson, as Stephen Mulhall

⁶³ For the contested status of Coetzee’s early fiction and its relation to the literary and political context of South Africa, see Attwell’s seminal work, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (9-34).

rightly indicates, frames the lessons that follow it (*The Wounded Animal*).⁶⁴ In this light, the novel lays out the confines of realism, highlights its various inflections and contradictions, and hints at the Unhappy Consciousness, embodied in Elizabeth Costello, as a subject position capable of seeing through and beyond realism and its confines. In doing so, Lesson I, in fact, moves beyond the concept of realism as a merely literary or aesthetic category confined to the limits of the page, and, thus, exposes its real implications.

The narrative starts with a self-reflexive narrator showing impatience or, at least, lack of concern for the problem of “opening.” The purpose of the opening is often to create the frame wherein the illusion of reality, i.e. verisimilitude, is created and sustained throughout the narrative via utilizing realistic details.

THERE IS FIRST of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.

⁶⁴ Mulhall’s brilliant work, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, constitutes the first extensive critical reading of the concepts of realism and of reality in Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Mulhall reads the whole history of modern art and its experimentation with form not as a deviation from reality but primarily as an accentuation of the problematics of reality/representation, and, thus, as an attempt to acquire a closer approximation of reality. Coetzee’s novels, in Mulhall’s reading, fall alongside these very lines, i.e., as a contestation over what constitutes the real. My reading differs from (if not opposed) to Munhall’s, which is at times colored by his Wittgensteinian stance towards reality and of language, in that it follows/witnesses a dialectical tension and a working out of the real and the ideal throughout the novel. Adorno’s commentary on Kafka’s stance towards reality and realism, in which he refers to an aphorism by Kafka, is equally applicable to Coetzee’s fiction and his stance towards reality and realism: “According to the testimony brought by Kafka’s work, in a world caught in its own toils, everything positive, every contribution, even the work which reproduces life, helps increase that entanglement. ‘Our task is to do the negative—the positive has already been given us’ ” (“Notes on Kafka” 271).

Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (1)

The narrator's opening lines imply that the very people whom the practitioners of realism take as their project to enlighten, mobilize or instruct are more practical and, in this sense, more realistic than the most ardent practitioners of realism. Furthermore, despite its pretense to the contrary, realism engages itself with the most insubstantial and irrelevant details. The narrator, in fact, shatters the illusion of immediacy with its first utterance. Nevertheless, the function of the aesthetic frame, of realism particularly, is to create a distance between the subject and the aesthetic object wherein the subject, following his/her whims and desires, derives pleasure from the fantasy world of the text while renouncing all responsibility for this pleasure and the text from which this pleasure is derived. Lesson I, indeed, problematizes this very attitude. The notion of responsibility in this reading, if the subject/reader even considers the concept of responsibility, entirely falls within, in Adorno's words, the cult of the "genius" and bourgeois etiquette. In this framework, the author is the "genius" who takes care of the aesthetic product and its content while the reader can safely put on the air of sophistication because he/she has been able to discover the "genius" and, thus, has committed himself/herself to consume the aesthetic product and its lessons (*Aesthetic Theory* 169-172). The reader, thus, encounters the aesthetic object from the safety of his/her office, home, library or the screen. Elizabeth Costello's unease in answering questions regarding her intentions or her message with respect to her own works or her embarrassment in tackling the big questions is testimony to the novel's inherent dynamic to write off the concept of genius. As Elizabeth's son, John, speculates, "[h]e has lived around her for nearly four decades, on and off, and is still not sure what she thinks about the big questions. Not

sure and, on the whole, thankful not to have to hear. For her thoughts would be, he suspects, as uninteresting as most people's" (10). The grand irony of the encounter with Coetzee's text is that the reader, if she takes the terms of this encounter seriously, has to assume a role in the world of the novel. Differently put, she has to become part and parcel of the objective world of the novel. Nevertheless, the very performance of lesson I, and, in fact, the novel itself resist the very act of critique. Put differently, the dynamics of the novel disrupts the realism of critique and the act of reading itself. To read or interpret *Elizabeth Costello*, the reader is literally compelled to start from the novel rather than from one's idea of the novel. "The primacy of the object," however, as Adorno maintains, if conceivable, is only to be attempted through a return to the subject and the subject's ability to reflect on its subjective mediations ("On Subject and Object").⁶⁵ By assuming responsibility for the content of the novel, already implicated in the phrase "let us," one is already part of the objectivity of the aesthetic product which, in fact, increases subjective participation, mediation and, in one word, commitment. The reader, thus, has the option to assume responsibility for the world of the novel.

Another idea/reality that finds its way in the constellation of realism in Lesson I is the idea/reality of commodity fetishism. The critique of realism, in fact, correlates closely with Adorno's critique of realism throughout his oeuvre.⁶⁶ Throughout the narrative, particularly in the

⁶⁵ "The primacy of the object," in Adorno, does not amount to the liquidation of the subject. On the contrary, it requires a strong subjectivity. In "On Subject and Object," for example, Adorno expresses this matter in the following words: "The primacy of the object is the *intentio obliqua* of the *intentio obliqua*, not the warmed-over *intentio recta*; the corrective to the subjective reduction, not the denial of a subjective share" (250). See also "The Object's Preponderance" in *Negative Dialectics* (183-186).

⁶⁶ In "The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence, 1981-1906", for example, Adorno explicitly repudiates the pliability of the aesthetics of realism to the dictates of the market: "The realist, in literature sworn to the palpable, writes from the mentally retarded perspective of the person whose impulses are limited to reflex actions. The realist tends to become a reporter who runs after striking events like a businessman after profit" (216).

first chapter, the concept of realism can be read as the aesthetic correlative of commodity fetishism. Describing Elizabeth Costello's physical features, the narrator acknowledges its debt to the person to whom the narration owes its description:

The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe. Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his shipmates. But there are none. 'I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them,' says he, 'except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.' Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proof of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes. (4)

In accordance with the logic of commodity fetishism, here the particular object is substituted for the situation, incident, context, and the person. The deceased and their histories are eliminated or made irrelevant to the narrative. Metonymic substitutions, in fact, eradicate considerations of sympathy and pity for the deceased. The key is the following: the cool clinical tone invested in Defoe's realism is, in fact, part and parcel of the same logic that causes havoc to the humans, animals, and nature alike.⁶⁷ The historical content immanent in the affects of pity and sympathy is to be dispensed with to absolve the subject of its guilt and its history. The feelings of pity and

⁶⁷ Thus read, the first lesson, and as I will explore in my discussion in the following chapters, the whole novel provides a serious critique of social realism whose main claim to literary merit resides in being able to withstand aesthetic reductionism, resist commodity fetishism, and reveal the realities and resistances immanent in any social context. As I discussed in my discussion of Coetzee's *Foe*, the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness in the novel has its ground in a world from which Defoe's particulars are subtracted. In doing so, Coetzee excludes from the story of the Island the law of commodity fetishism, the capitalist law of labor and its exchange, and the myth of primitive accumulation.

sympathy hinder progress. They are inimical to the logic of the colonial discourse, the logic of the market, the rhythm of work, the flow of capital and its war machinery. After all, in the overall logic of the text, Robinson's companions do not die without a reason. All existence, here Robinson's companions, are to be sacrificed for the hero's eventual success and salvation. It is the logic of sacrifice that is targeted in Coetzee's book of lessons. Robinson's satisfaction about retrieving tools from the ship has its ground in this realism. In this sense, Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* proves itself as the true heir of Homer's *Odyssey*. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the hero's homecoming is premised upon sacrificing the human and animal others. In fact, in these lines the narrator begins to unravel the ethos that is equally inimical to the human subject, the animal, and nature. The persistent burden of the novel is to prove that this realism goes beyond the page, i.e., beyond being just a specific type of literary style or function.

The link or intersection between realism and the market is further underlined by the narrator's comment on John's exchange with Gordon Wheatley, the chairman of the jury, in the gym. The exchange is about Elizabeth's concern over her literary prize and the jury's opinion of her. Both characters function exclusively as embodiments of certain ideas and interests. The following comment by the narrator sheds light on the framework within which the aesthetics of realism function:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations - walks in the countryside, conversations - in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such

debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which speakers act in the world - for instance, the son's concerns that his mother not be treated as a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer, or Wheatley's concern not to seem an old-fashioned absolutist. (9)

The text, in fact, unravels the underlying ideology of realism, i.e., liberalism. Liberalism is the ideology that conceives of individuals exclusively as bundles of interests with contending intentions and desires. Differently put, realism is the aesthetic correlative of liberalism. It is the very ideology that was concomitant with the birth, the concept, and the form of the novel. The narrator's comments on the dynamics of realism and ideas wherein ideas are "tied to the speakers" and "generated from the matrix of individual interests" corresponds to Eugen Dawn's description of his supervisor, who shares his last name with J. M. Coetzee, in *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first novel. Eugene describes his supervisor, who is modelled after Herman Khan, in the following words: "Coetzee made his name in game theory. . . . He starts with the axiom that people act identically if their self-interests are identical. His career has been built on the self and its interests. He cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding its body-parts together while inside it he burns and burns" (41). The calculation of "the self and its interests," is the imperative by which bourgeois ethics, science, and economy function. This logic is oblivious to the suffering it creates. The prime rule, as Adorno and Horkheimer underline, as Marx does before them, is the principle of equivalence or abstract equality. The equations that govern commodity exchange, they argue, govern bourgeois justice as well: "Is not the rule, '*Si inaequalibus aequalia addas, omnia erunt inaequalia*,' [If you add like to unlike you will always end up with unlike] an axiom of justice as well as of mathematics". The aesthetics of realism is

“ruled by equivalence” (4).

The narrator’s description, in fact, embodies the principles and Khan’s ideals and principles, i.e., the principles of systems theory and game theory. In Khan’s world, the subject is primarily understood as a mathematical entity. As Khan made it clear throughout his career during the Vietnam War and the Cold War, the feelings of pity and sympathy must be dispensed with, excluded or, at least, managed in the name of the functionality of the war machinery, the rationality of science and that of the market.⁶⁸ The subject is to be pulled within the matrix of numbers and within the force of Newtonian law of gravity.⁶⁹ In order to become malleable, manageable, and controllable, the subject must be reduced to a number. The subject and its universe, thus, become objects of calculation. Put differently, realism is the aesthetic correlative of this mathematical universe. The ideas embodied by individuals are fixed as the mathematical theorems from which they are derived. As such, realism is incapable of transcending the social context from which it is derived. Not only does it fail to bring about genuine change and transformation, realism, in fact, recreates, and, thus, succumbs to the existing order of reality. Realism, indeed, feeds the rationality of the market and its war machinery.

The first lesson/chapter also challenges identity politics for its ties with realism. Identity politics can be read as a type of realism. The novel criticizes the crude realism that ties one’s

⁶⁸ An excerpt from Khan’s introduction to the volume published by the Hudson Institute entitled *Can We Win in Vietnam? The American Dilemma* is the epigraph to Coetzee’s *Dusklands*: “Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize with those European and American audiences who, when shown films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Viet-Cong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet, 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” (10).

⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that Lesson VII ends with a totally different reading, in fact, subversive reinterpretation of Newtonian physics. See Chapter VII.

personality, personhood and identity to one's biology, ethnicity, nationality or biography. In her encounter with her colleagues and in her interviews, Elizabeth is primarily regarded and addressed as a woman writer rather than a writer. She is questioned about her ideas on other women writers and about her "intentions" or "message" in *The House on Eccles Street*, particularly, in reference to the novel's female heroine, Marion Bloom (12 & 10). The interviewers' inquisition about the intention or message of the text is, of course, related to the cult of the author as the genius. Elizabeth constantly feels trapped or on "trial" and on guards facing the "foe" (3 & 12). It is no surprise that Elizabeth is literally put on trial in the last lesson, Lesson VIII, where she is being asked to make a statement of belief. Here, Elizabeth has scruples about receiving the literary award and the whole literary industry for treating her, in John's mind, as "an example" of writing (8). The first "quick mouselike pounces" are from Teresa, the girl who drives Elizabeth and John back to their hotel after their first dinner (6). Teresa asks Elizabeth about her ideas on A. S. Byatt and Doris Lessing. Teresa, for her part, is "writing a book on women writers and politics; she spends her summers in London doing what she calls research." The subject of her research resembles Susan Moebius's book, *Reclaiming a History: Women and Memory* which Susan gives as a gift to Elizabeth on the last day of her sojourn at Altona College (29). Elizabeth almost leaves the book behind and tells John she wishes people would not give books as gifts. The heavy irony immanent in the line is, in fact, symptomatic of Elizabeth's resentments of her interpellation as a woman writer and in terms of the identity politics, "in general" (13 & 14).

Despite being unsure about her "message," which is irrelevant to the writer or the work itself, Elizabeth exposes the flaws of the interviewers whenever they tag her work or her heroine, Marion Bloom, as "an example" of writing or "an example" of female defiance (8). The first

interviewer questions Elizabeth whether Marion Bloom's refusal to sleep with her husband is an indication of the idea that until men have developed "a new, post-patriarchal identity" women should refuse (to sleep with) them (11). Elizabeth's first impression is one of helplessness. Elizabeth eventually responds that "[o]f course in the case of Marion's husband there would be a particular severity in demanding that he work out a new identity, since he is a man of—what shall I say? - of infirm identity, of many shapes" (11). In her second interview at the college radio station, Elizabeth is confronted with a similar situation. Susan Moebius asks Elizabeth about her "intention" for setting Molly Bloom "loose on the streets" of Dublin (12 & 13). Does Elizabeth regard Joyce's Molly Bloom and women "in general" as "prisoners of marriage and domesticity?" (13) While agreeing that women could be considered to an extent as prisoners of marriage in the Ireland of 1904, Elizabeth maintains that her "husband Leopold is a prisoner too. If she is shut into the conjugal home, he is shut out. So we have Odysseus trying to get in and Penelope trying to get out. That is the comedy, the comic myth, which Joyce and I in our different ways are paying our respects to" (13). The question again is about Elizabeth's thought on the necessity of "reclaiming of women's lives in general" (14). Elizabeth, of course, does acknowledge the history of this assimilation of the female voice, but she also underlines the stereotypical representation of male characters by female authors: "Of course fair's fair, men will have to set about reclaiming the Heathcliffs and Rochesters from romantic stereotyping too, to say nothing of poor dusty Casaubon. It will be a grand spectacle. But seriously we can't go on parasitizing the classics forever" (14). What Elizabeth's response highlights is the ease with which so-called progressive politics assimilate the dogmatism of the philosophies they criticize. The truth is that the representation of Heathcliffs and Rochesters are as patriarchal as their female equivalents. They both take their direction from the linguistic unit, "in general." What seems to be the main problem is the ideological framework of representation rather than a male writer's

intentional act of depriving a female character of her voice. To override the patriarchal discourse, one should be able to transcend the framework of this representation.

The conformity of identity politics and realism with the market comes to the fore in the text's consistent insistence on the status of art, culture, and criticism as industry. The text is replete with metaphors of the culture industry.⁷⁰ The narrator informs the reader early on that "in the past decade it has grown around her [Elizabeth] a small critical industry" and that the award "consists of a purse of \$50,000, funded by a bequest from the Stowe estate, and a gold medal" (1 & 2). She is awarded the prize partly because, as John speculates, the year "has been decreed to be the year of Australasia" (8). Her identity is part of the deal, and her worth is to be calculated in terms of monetary equivalence. In Elizabeth's and John's eyes, Elizabeth is expected to put up a "show" and a "performance" (3). If she wants the money, John points out, she "must go through with the show" (3). Likewise, the couple who sit beside John "have the look of money, old money" whom John thinks of as "[b]enefactors" (15). To describe their daughter's interest in Elizabeth, the couple uses the language of the freaks and the groupies of show business: "She's is a great fan" (15). The trial of the text consists precisely in the writer's dependence on a literary culture that takes its lead or, in Herbert Marcuse's words, "performance principle" from the market and the show business (*Eros and Civilization*).⁷¹ Elizabeth is compelled to justify her presence and literary career within a framework that glorifies the concept of the genius only to

⁷⁰ Metaphors of culture industry, indeed, persist throughout the novel.

⁷¹ Marcuse supplants the term "performance principle" for what he takes to be Freud's somewhat "fallacious" concept "the reality principle." Marcuse defines "performance principle" as the "prevailing historical form of the reality principle" (26 & 25). He, thus, proposes the term "performance principle" to explore the specific historical "modes of domination" that define the rhythm of work and that shape, control, and repress our instincts and desires (27). He specifically uses the term to explore the historical dynamics of advanced industrial societies and the power they exercise on the psyche of man.

domesticate, assimilate and bring down the literary work within the confines of identity politics. She has to comply with the terms and games of the culture industry. The text seems to imply that there is a real tension between belief in the concept of the genius and the objectivity of the literary work itself. It almost seems that the concept of the genius devours or, at least, devalues the aesthetic object itself. This contradiction explains why Elizabeth thinks, seen through John's eyes, of the very people who are to honor her as "foe" (3).

But if realism is after all indispensable to the act of writing and the literary enterprise and, as Adorno underlines, the act of conceptualization itself, how are we to deal with the domain of the real and its realization in the aesthetic product? On the other hand, but on a related note, if aesthetics of realism is no longer consistent with our ways of living, what are we to do with questions of meaning, knowledge, and aesthetic representation? Elizabeth's acceptance speech, "What is Realism?" at the award ceremony and her subsequent discussion with John on the contents of her speech, in fact, deal with these very questions.⁷² Elizabeth's fundamental concern or ideal is a literature that can debunk, transcend and, in a certain sense, reconcile the claims of idealism and realism. In her speech, she explores the concepts of art's permanence, the concept of the "now," i.e., our (post)modern condition, and the question of what it means to read a literary work in our era (19). Put differently, her question is the following: how does our lived experience affect the way we read a story like Kafka's "Red Peter"? Offering various and widely divergent interpretations of Kafka's "Red Peter," Elizabeth explores the modern predicament that we no longer believe in the "word-mirror of the text" and that we feel less certain about our meanings and, hence, our lives. The tie between the word and its meaning is broken. As a result, we feel

⁷² These are the questions that will be explored at greater length in the following lessons. The argument here merely lays out the contours of the questions and their problematics.

less certain about our identities: “There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out” (19). What Elizabeth discusses in her speech is the fact that philosophies of realism and the aesthetics of literary realism, to which we still cling and some may still defend, are no longer consistent with our ways of living. This uncertainty defines our historical predicament. The question we may ask ourselves is the following: what does it mean to write at this historical junction? And how should we proceed?

Yet, why does Elizabeth address the question of realism in an acceptance speech and why does she use Kafka to explore such a question? As Susan Moebius tells John, “the title was not appropriate” for the occasion and that Elizabeth could have chosen “better texts” to explore her theme (25). After all, Kafka does not seem to be, as John suggests, the best “fit” for a talk on realism. Being confused and, perhaps, slightly irritated, John poses the following questions to her mother: why realism and why Kafka? Elizabeth’s response is the very point of contention in the novel. It speaks to the aesthetic question, ideal, and desire of the novel. With Kafka and Red Peter, whom she later refers to as “hybrids” of “slave body and god soul” and with whom she later identifies herself, we are within the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness (75 & 185). In fact, the question or the tension between the ideal and real is cast within this dialectic.

No, Kafka didn’t write about people picking their noses. But Kafka had time to wonder where and how his poor educated ape was going to find a mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female that his keepers eventually produced for his use. Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not

there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping.

That is where Kafka fits in. (32)

Elizabeth opposes the poetics of “embeddedness” against the discourse of realism. According to Elizabeth, Kafka’s magic lies in his ability to embed his ape, a fictional construct, into our lives, into the plain of reality, into the domain of intersubjectivity, i.e. “you in me” (32). Kafka’s ape is equal to us not in a mathematical sense but in a real sense; he is as real as we are. He becomes a living being to extent that he is present in our consciousness. This conflation of the domain of the fictional and the real is, as I have also argued in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, the very desire of Coetzee’s novels. This is exactly why Kafka’s story, to use a term John deploys to describe her mother’s writing, “shakes” us (5). Realism proper, on the contrary, is poor in content and expression and is tied to our unfreedom. Chained to their speakers and their social contexts, ideas cannot move freely; they are incapable of sublation. Realism is confined to the (con)text. The politics of “embeddedness,” of which Kafka’s Red Peter is a prime example, is poised against crude realism. As Martin Woessner rightly contends, the politics of “embeddedness,” in fact, salvages the idea and the possibility of transcendence and salvation. It points beyond the reality and the realism, i.e., rationality, of the “administered world” (152-154). This is a point to which I will return time and again in my discussion of *Elizabeth Costello*.

John, however, expresses his discontent by referring to Elizabeth Costello’s ideal as “zoo keeping, not writing” (32). John’s implied contention, i.e., his version of realism, is that animals and/as aesthetic entities must not interfere with the domain of the real and that they should not move beyond the confines of the text. In response, Elizabeth unravels the contradictions immanent in John’s version of realism: “What would you prefer? A zoo without keepers, where the animals fall into a trance when you stop looking at them? A zoo of ideas? A gorilla cage with

the idea of a gorilla in it, an elephant cage with the idea elephants in it? Do you know how many kilograms of solid waste an elephant drops in twenty-four hours? If you want a real elephant cage with real elephants then you need a zookeeper to clean up after them” (32-33). Elizabeth’s answer, in fact, lays bare the contradiction in John’s argument. John’s version of realism is inconsistent with its own claims. Elizabeth’s answer unravels the aesthetics of literary realism, i.e., realism as confined to the limits of the paper. If one excludes or subtracts the animal from the domain of reality, one ends up with realism, “with a zoo of ideas,” where ideas, and in Elizabeth’s example, “elephants,” disappear when you take away your gaze. On the other hand, if the claims of realism were to be realized, one would, indeed end up, with the task of “zoo keeping.” In fact, realism is the aesthetic practice that confines the aesthetic entity within the confines of the text/paper. In doing so, it defines the subject in contradistinction from the aesthetic object. The subject lives on the plain of reality as one for whom the aesthetic object merely exists as an object of her gaze. As such the gaze of the connoisseur of art is not different from the gaze of the colonizer over his land. For both, the reality of the other evaporates as soon as they take away their gaze. The reality of the other is subject to the commanding gaze of the ruler. Nevertheless, the strict separation between the subject and the aesthetic object is an illusion. In this sense, as Adorno discusses, realism and idealism suffer from the same illusions. According to Adorno, Kantian idealism justified the realism which it criticized.⁷³ The distance between the subject and the object that posits the separation/inequality between real and fictional characters, as a consequence, is characteristic of the aesthetic realism and idealism alike. In both realism and idealism, there is a lack of equality between the subject and its aesthetic realizations. Not being able to see Elizabeth’s perspective, John chides Elizabeth for confusing the claims of

⁷³ See, for example, Adorno’s essay “On Subject and Object” or the section titled “The Object’s Preponderance” in *Negative Dialectics* (183-186).

realism and idealism: “ ‘You are off the point, Mother. And don’t get so excited.’ He turns to the fat woman. ‘We are discussing literature, the claims of realism versus the claims of idealism.’ ” (33). John, in fact, wants to hold fast to the separation of the literary field from that of reality, which in John’s parlance is “zoo keeping.” He is, thus, a firm believer in the difference between realism and idealism. He fails to see their similarity. Elizabeth is not content with the distinctions between the literary and the non-literary/real. In fact, the distinctions between the real and ideal are the very distinctions she contends with throughout the novel. In this sense, perhaps, Elizabeth Costello is an idealist. Taking Elizabeth Costello as Coetzee’s mouthpiece and refusing to understand realism exclusively as verisimilitude in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, Gareth Cornwell, nevertheless, argues for the presence of a viable realistic economy in Coetzee’s novel. He asserts that Elizabeth’s invocation of a politics of embeddedness is ultimately premised upon a sense of “relational” or “intersubjective” relationship between things and their readers established within and enabled by the rhetorical economy of the text. This intersubjective possibility, he believes, is precisely what Elizabeth Costello’s realism consists in. Cornwall concludes his discussion with the following notes: “By freeing the term ‘realism’ from certain historical associations and ideological determinations—in particular, from the sense of ‘historiographic mimesis’ to which his earlier writings appeared to confine it—Coetzee effectively reaffirms that all good writing is inescapably ‘realist’ and, as such, necessarily and inextricably implicated in the universalist assumptions of humanism” (359). Setting aside the problematic assertion that Elizabeth Costello is Coetzee’s mouthpiece, Cornwell’s description is too general (even if partially accurate) to be able to explain the differences between Coetzee’s style and his predecessors, Daniel Defoe, for example. The question we should ask is the following: what are we to make of the presence of animals and the various gestures of animality that characterize Kafka’s and Coetzee’s prose? The desire immanent to Kafka’s and Coetzee’s

prose, in fact, consists in resisting and overcoming precisely this “universalist assumptions of humanism” that excludes the animal others as the ground of its aesthetic and hermeneutic make up.

My purpose here is not provide a complete counter to Cornwell’s comments or unwrap the full implication of Elizabeth Costello’s invocation of “embeddedness” at this stage—as these are the central questions of the novel to which Elizabeth Costello and I will return in following chapters. However, a short note on the question of animals and the gesture of animality in Coetzee’s narrative can shed some light on what is at stake in the following lessons. Elizabeth’s reference to animals as metaphors and examples to explore the question of aesthetics is not without interest. The question we should ask is the following: Does Elizabeth intend to imply that to challenge the problematics of realism, to override “the idea of elephants,” and to go beyond the page, we must be able to reconceive our relationship with our non-human others? Elizabeth’s concern for animals, in fact, is the main question of the novel. To reconceive a different way of living, we must be able to reconcile ourselves with our animal others, and in fact, with our own animality. This gesture is further hinted at by the text’s gesture of describing Elizabeth in terms of animal imagery and metaphors. These metaphors are indeed sustained throughout the novel. Casting Elizabeth Costello in terms of animal imagery, highlighting her concomitant sensitivity to her aging and animals effectively posits Elizabeth Costello as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative. Being human (master), she is, as an aging woman, cognizant of her mortality/animality (slavery), and, thus, her kinship with or “kindness to” animals.⁷⁴ Realizing

⁷⁴ It is interesting to note that Coetzee’s short story, “As a Woman Grows Older,” appeared a few months after the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*. It is, therefore, not an accident that Elizabeth Costello’s age and, equally, her aging are consistently stressed throughout the lessons alongside her meditations on animals and animal cruelty.

that his mother has aged, John now sees himself as her mother's "trainer" (3). He initially thinks of his mother as "a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance" (3). Thinking about her mother as cruel because her writing "shakes" people, John replaces the metaphor of the "seal" for the "cat" as mean between a "shark" and a "seal": "[o]ne of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold yellow stare" (5). He also sees her mother as a "dying whale" with "[f]lecks of gold circling" her and a victim for other predators (6). Later, John wonders whether his mother is "the fish or the fowl" (10). Addressing his mother's incompetence in tackling the big questions, John thinks of the problem as follows: "A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers, chalk and cheese. No, not chalk and cheese: fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish of or the fowl?" (10) The only human to which John compares her mother's face is Keats, "the great advocate of blank receptiveness" (4). Does this comparison reveal anything about Elizabeth's temperaments and ideals? This is a question to which I will return in lesson VIII where Keats's name is once again mentioned.

To posit Elizabeth Costello as the Unhappy Consciousness proper, the text also alludes to Elizabeth's Costello's divinity. In his conversation with Susan Moebius, John acknowledges her mother as embodying a divinity of sorts. He tells Susan that the reason she slept with him was because she had been "baffled" by "the mystery of the divine in the human," thereby, using him as a proxy or medium to the divine: "You know there is something special about my mother - that is what draws you to her - yet when you meet her she turns out to be just an ordinary old woman. You can't square the two. You want an explanation. You want a clue, a sign, if not from her then from me. That is what is going on. It's all right. I don't mind" (28). John, in fact, describes the

polemic at the heart of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, particularly Hegel's dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, i.e., how to "square" one's particularity, ordinariness or animality with one's universality or divinity. At Susan Moebius's room, he remembers a line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "*sleep, he thinks, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care*" (27). Having in mind his mother's reference to Borges's "Library of Babel," he thinks to himself that "[n]ot all the monkeys in the world picking away at typewriters all their lives would have come up with those words in that arrangement" (27). The text, however, invites us to see our particularity within the terms of our animality and, in fact, to redefine our divinity in terms of our animality. The tension is how are we to reconcile our divinity with our animality. The tension is enmeshed in the texture of text.⁷⁵ Elizabeth's and John's conversation over the question of realism and idealism happens via the text's concomitant references to a "fat woman," "so fat that her toes barely reach the floor," who is "eating popcorn" while observing the mother and son dispute (31). The question we might ask is the following: what is the aesthetic function of a "fat woman" at the airport observing a mother and son having a dispute about the question of realism over a bucket of popcorn? The representation of the "fat woman," in fact, grounds the question of animality and suggests a relationship of relevance to the topics of realism and idealism. Seen from John's perspective, the woman is described in terms of her animality: "He thinks of the cud of mashed corn and saliva in her mouth and shudders. Where does it all end?" (33). John's uneasiness can be seen more clearly via John's thoughts on the plane as soon as her mother falls asleep. John's uneasiness over her mother's animal body is not unlike if not more severe than his reaction to the "fat woman":

⁷⁵ As we shall see later, this tension, which is indicative of the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, is consistently expressed at very points in the other lessons.

She lies slumped deep in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. . . . He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see, he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing thing down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. Not, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (33-34)

The son of the divine cannot but feel and express disgust and repulsion at the fat woman's, his mother's, and by implication, his own animality. The point of the novel is to overcome this sense of disgust and repulsion. It seems that this tension can only be worked through the mediating being, Unhappy Consciousness, of a woman whose animality is part of her divinity. This will be the burden of lesson II and, indeed, the rest of the novel.

The second lesson is titled "The Novel in Africa." Elizabeth has joined the "entertainment staff" of a cruise ship where she meets an old friend, Emmanuel Egudu, with whom she engages in a polemic about the status of the novel in Africa, the nature of novelistic writing especially in relation to the virtues of the oral and of oral literature (36). The lesson's point of contention is "the truth of the oral," the value of breath and voice, particularly in its relation to an apparently discrete set of subjects: the African novel, our likeness/unlikeness to animals, and finally the question of physical and sexual intimacy (54). The lesson's insistence on "the truth of the oral" is significant because a) it attempts to move beyond the note with which Lesson I ended, i.e., our sense of repulsion with our animality, b) it highlights our "kindness to animals" as a magical venue to a different reality and c) it serves as an index that ties the human body to those of animals in the following two lessons, i.e., Lessons III and IV. It is important to note once again that it is Elizabeth as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative who is capable of providing us with the most acute observations regarding "the truth of the oral" and the truth of our "kindness

to animals.” Primarily, however, Elizabeth has to rid the oral from the chains of identity politics wherein mysticism and the culture industry join in holy matrimony. As such, Lesson II builds upon the lessons gained from Lesson I. Egudu’s exploration of the theme of the oral in relationship to the African novel turns into a heated argument and becomes an occasion for Elizabeth’s further meditation on the theme. What irritates Elizabeth about Egudu’s talk is Egudu’s performance of what Elizabeth refers as his “Africanness” (51). Egudu’s main point is that writing and reading are not particularly African activities precisely because Africans regard writing and reading as solitary businesses. However, because of poverty and the African public’s lack of interest in the novel, the African writer has had to look over his/her shoulder to a global market for a readership. As a result, the African writer has had to “please,” negotiate or represent his “Africanness” to strangers (43). Egudu, however, refers to the Negritude movement and the African “essence” as offering a critique of the Western novel (43). What distinguishes the African novelist such as Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri is the incorporation of the spirit of “the oral” and “the living voice” to represent the African essence (44 & 50). According to Egudu, an oral novel is a novel that has not “lost touch” with the body (45). Nevertheless, writing to strangers, the African writer, has had to succumb to his fate: exoticism.

Egudu’s position is, in fact, in line with much of African literary criticism that sees the essence of African literature to consist in an undisrupted continuity with orality and Africa’s precolonial past.⁷⁶ In *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*, Evan Mwangi offers a brilliant counter to the views that “yoke the Africanness of African literature to oral

⁷⁶ See, for example, Chinweizu’s, Onwuchekwa Jemie’s and Ihechukwu Madubuike’s *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Isidore Okpewho’s *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*, Harold Scheub’s *The Tongue is Fire: South African Storytellers and Apartheid*, and Abiola Irele’s *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*.

literature.” Mwangi argues that the distinction between orality and literacy is a false distinction in that this very distinction has been disrupted by many texts across various cultures and periods and as such there is nothing specifically African to be celebrated in anything that “warrants linking Africanness to orality” (107). Ultimately, the cult of the oral, he believes, is the exoticized cultural commodity that is to be consumed by the West under the banner of apparently progressive politics. He contends that the African literature’s deployment of oral literature is, in fact, dynamic, and creative rather than stale or stable. Rather than being tied to a stable precolonial past, Modern African literature’s deployment of orature, in particular, interrogates and problematizes the fixed, local, and often patriarchal elements of this precolonial past. While modern African literature tends to preserve what colonialism sought to destroy, it, at the same time, seeks to question the nativist regressive nationalist positions of the present. Mwangi sees this gesture best concretized in modern African’s literature deployment of metafictional elements. Metafictional elements in modern African literature, in fact, contest the regressive trends immanent in some postcolonial literature and criticism. Coetzee’s deployment of metafictional elements in *Elizabeth Costello*, Mwangi notes, can be read as the prime example of the modern African novel contesting the regressive appeal to this cult of orality.

Egudu appears as a character who embraces and capitalizes on his exoticism while appearing to be critical of being exoticized. As Nwangi rightly underlines, Egudu can be seen as “what Appiah calls the ‘comprador intelligentsia’ who form the basis of postcolonial studies by constructing Africa as a cultural commodity to sell to Western audiences” (115).⁷⁷ In Elizabeth’s mind, Egudu’s way of dressing, in fact, betrays his commodification of the African identity and

⁷⁷ Nwnagi’s reference here is to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s seminal essay, “Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonial?,” wherein Appiah contests the regression of the cult of orality in African art and postcolonial aesthetics to identity politics and the dictates of the market.

his essence: “He is wearing a vivid green dashiki, suave Italian shoes” (37). Like the previous lesson, Lesson II abounds in metaphors of the culture industry in relation to money and identity politics. There is a correspondence between Egudu’s identity politics and his slavery to the culture industry. Like a good slave, he ends “his show” at the bidding of “entertainment director” as soon as the Q&A section begins to acquire a degree of complexity.

‘The novel in Africa’ was intended, like all the shipboard talks, to be a light affair. Nothing on the shipboard programme is intended to be a heavy affair. Egudu, unfortunately, is threatening to be heavy. With a discreet nod, the entertainment director, the tall Swedish boy in his light blue uniform, signals from the wings; and gracefully, easily, Egudu obeys, bringing his show to an end. (48)

The culture industry, is, in fact, averse to critical thinking. It does not tolerate anything that goes beyond the language of entertainment. Egudu’s performance of his identity, i.e., his identity politics, is part and parcel of the culture industry that stifles critical thought and guarantees the dynamics of oppression. As such, Egudu’s performance of Africanness merely consolidates the established reality.

Elizabeth is irritated by Egudu’s version of identity politics: “*We, we, we*, she thinks. *We Africans*. It is not *our* way. She has never liked *we* in its exclusive form Africanness: a special identity, a special fate” (40). In Elizabeth’s final judgment: “all of Emmanuel’s talk of an oral novel, a novel that has kept in touch with the human voice and hence with the human body . . . , is just another way of propping up the mystique of the African as the last repository of primal human energies” (53). Elizabeth is keen to see the contradictions and shortcomings of Egudu’s “mystique of orality” (46). She thinks to herself that Africans are, in fact, comfortable with the

act of reading since they read the newspaper which is as much “an avenue to a private world as a novel” (41). Later at the dinner table, Elizabeth questions Egudu’s insistence on the African’s preference for “the living voice.” She argues that Africans do listen to the radio which is, of course, not a living presence. Elizabeth suggests that what Egudu may have in mind is the matter of performance and not that of the voice. She notes that the novel was never “intended to be the script of a performance.” She continues to add that one cannot expect to have a “live performance and cheap handy distribution” at the same time (50). Elizabeth sees the plight of the African novel in its exoticization. The African novelist does not write to the African public and, as a result, the novelist takes up “the role of interpreter” which is an impediment to the novelistic practice itself (51). In other words, the African novelist has contributed to this exoticism. The African novelist, should, therefore, write for the African people. Her response lays bare the contradictions inherent in Egudu’s identity politics. As Elizabeth realizes, Egudu has a stake in his exoticism. Exoticism is the very “fate” he has embraced (48).

Yet what is it that Elizabeth Costello ultimately tries to point to? Aarthi Vadde juxtaposes Egudu’s strong public performance to Elizabeth’s Costello “weak performances” to highlight what Vadde takes to be a characteristic feature of Coetzee’s modernity which can “recast” or “expand” the field of postcolonial discourse. She believes that Coetzee’s particular modernity with its critical tenseness imbricated in Elizabeth’s failures, inconclusiveness, and affective responses can enrich the field of postcolonial studies by incorporating the “underexplored” concepts of “perversion, communicative failure, intimacy, and identification into political postcolonial discourse” (231-247). On the contrary, I believe, Elizabeth’s language ultimately points beyond postcolonial discourse (as it does beyond perhaps other philosophic or critical discourses) by highlighting the characters that lurk at the margins of postcolonial discourse, i.e.

animals.

Elizabeth's position, in fact, should not be read as her rejection of the claim of the oral and the body to truth. By preserving the truth of the body and the oral, the novel, indeed, forces us to encounter our animal others throughout the lessons. The body and its rhythms are, in fact, the repository of a kind of truth. This truth becomes conceivable for Elizabeth on another plane of reality. The closing scene of Lesson II registers two widely divergent accounts or reactions to the animal body and natural beings. These accounts are juxtaposed so that Elizabeth can reserve whatever partial truth resides in the claims to the truth of the body, here mainly implicated in the truth of the oral. In other words, these accounts can be read as attempts to move beyond the sense of revulsion towards the animal body present in Lesson I. The first account is a record of revulsion, disgust, and violence toward human and nonhuman others. On their way to Macquarie Island, the passengers are greeted by a group of penguins. Susan mediates on the innocence of the penguins which reminds her of Poe's description of the Southern Ocean in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Nantucket*:

The Southern Ocean. Poe never laid eyes on it, Edgar Allan, but criss-crossed it in his mind. Boatloads of dark islanders paddled out to meet him. They seemed ordinary folk *just like us*, but when they smiled and showed their teeth the teeth were not white but black. It sent a shiver down his spine, and rightly so. The sea full of things that seem like us but are not. Sea flowers that gape and devour. Eels, each a barbed maw with a gut hanging from it. Teeth are for tearing, the tongue is for churning the swill around: that is the truth of the oral. Someone should tell Emmanuel. Only by an ingenious economy, an accident of evolution, does the organ of ingestion sometimes get to be used for song. (54)

Seen from Adorno's perspective, the source of this revulsion has its roots primarily, if not exclusively, in our similarity with as well as our difference from other natural beings. This concomitant similarity and difference, paradoxically, highlights our similarity to them. What is bothersome in his fictional conception of the islanders, which can possibly also account for his novel's racist undertones, is the uncanny recognition of this similarity. Adorno sees the mechanism of this hatred in the history of the construction of the category of the modern subject. The subject that has constructed its identity at the expense of its suppression and annihilation of nature and natural beings, refusing to see itself as nature, i.e. cannot but feel repulsion at remembering its similarity to nature and animal others. The history of this repulsion carries a certain angst for the subject as this very history also points to an evolutionary fact: "teeth are for tearing, the tongue is for churning the swill around," in which we humans have had a good share. Only as result of an evolutionary "accident," Elizabeth notes, the teeth and the tongue are "sometimes get to used for song."

The text implicitly draws a correspondence between Poe's textual (fictional) violence against the islanders and the violence against the penguins which echoes Elizabeth's later drawing of the correspondence between the violence against animals and Jews later in the novel. The island had been "the hub of the penguin industry" in "the nineteenth century" where "[h]undreds of thousands of penguins were clubbed to death here and flung into cast-iron steam boilers to be broken down into useful oil and useless residue" (55). The key point is the following: the violence against human others and the non-human others seem to follow the same logic. After all, the islanders are rendered as inhuman or not fully human as they only "seemed . . . *just like us*." The repulsion and destruction of the other, of course, cannot exclusively be explained as an evolutionary necessity. What is at stake is the historical moral constitution of the

subject. The rage at the other, which, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is immanent to the Enlightenment rationality, and which, culminates in the destructive urge of capitalism, has its roots in the historical constitution of the category of the subject. To override and transcend this rationality is the burden of the novel.

The “truth of the oral” and the body and its joys, however, are soon conceived on a different plane of reality. Wandering on the island, Elizabeth comes across an albatross which she initially takes to be “a rock, smooth and white mottled with grey” (56). Elizabeth’s sense of the island as the Garden of Eden at this encounter resembles that of the first travelers to the New World. Elizabeth conceives of the island and her encounter with the albatross as the time before the fall: “*Before the fall, she thinks. This is how it must have been before the fall. I could miss the boat, stay here. Ask God to take care of me.*” This Edenic state is premised upon the plain of “kindness to” and equality with the animal others: “So, she and the two birds remain, inspecting each other” (56). The albatross and its child are not signs or stand-ins for anything. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s distinction between magic and science can be helpful in reading this passage. The authors distinguish between magic and science in the following words:

The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer. At the magical stage dream and image were not regarded as mere signs of things but were linked to them by resemblance or name. The relationship was not one of intention but of kinship. (7)

Here Adorno and Horkheimer explore the historical process by which magic is supplanted by science and scientific rationality. The practice of magic primarily relies on the act of mimesis and

of identification with a multiplicity of deities, demons or natural forces. The practice of magic eventually gives way to the single distinction between the subject and its other. The single distinction between the subject and the world devours all other distinctions, hence the constitution of the subject of power par excellence. This passage, thus, can be read to describe Elizabeth's desire for a return to the magical state where kinship with or "kindness to" animals was a historical reality.⁷⁸ Elizabeth's relationship with the Albatross is, therefore, one of kinship/kindness. Here Adorno's and Horkheimer's description of the affinities between art and magic may explain the significance of this passage. According to these thinkers, art has strong affinities to magic both of which endeavor to transcend the domain of "profane existence":

Art has in common with magic the postulation of a special, self-contained sphere removed from the context of profane existence. Within it special laws prevail. Just as the sorcerer begins the ceremony by marking out from all its surroundings the place in which the sacred forces are to come into play, each work of art is closed off from reality by its own circumference. The very renunciation of external effects by which art is distinguished from magical sympathy binds art only more deeply to the heritage of magic. This renunciation places the pure image in opposition to corporeal existence, the elements of which the image sublates within itself. It is in the nature of the work of art, of aesthetic illusion, to be what was experienced as a new and terrible event in the magic of primitives: the appearance of the whole in the particular. The work of art constantly reenacts the duplication by which the thing appeared as something spiritual, a manifestation of *mana*. That constitutes its aura. As an expression of totality art claims the dignity of the absolute. (13-14)

⁷⁸ My reading is affirmed by Elizabeth's insistence on our "kindness to animals" in Lessons III and IV.

Here, the magical plain correlates to the biblical allusion to the book of *Genesis*. In the book of *Genesis*, plants are the only source of food and nourishment. Feeding on plants is the privilege humans share with other creatures: “God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth; and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food’” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*). It is equally a reference to Elizabeth’s vegetarianism. As I will explore in more detail later, our “kindness to animals” and, in fact, our reconciliation with our animality is the precondition for the aesthetic practice and its goal proper in the novel. In fact, our “kindness to animals” is what gives art its magical or expressive quality. This fact is underlined by Elizabeth’s multiple references to Kafka’s Red Peter and later, in lesson’s II and IV, in her reference to Ted Hughes’s poem “The Jaguar.”

This encounter with the animal other paves the ground for a different conception of the voice and the truth of the oral. On the island, Elizabeth asks the Russian singer about her intimacy with Edugu and what she sees in him. On this island, as Elizabeth notes, there is no sense of shame. The Russian singer describes Edugu as “generous” and tells Elizabeth that “the voice makes one shudder.” The reference to “the voice” as against “his voice” gives a certain preeminence and universality to the question of “the voice.” “The voice” comes from the body, but, unlike many bodily functions, it seems not to be tied to a particular body. It can move from one body to another and make it “shudder,” even though the Russian and Edugu may have used German, “the imperial tongue of the new Europe,” to communicate with each other (57). “The voice” is not the voice of a specific person but of a person who is endowed with the quality of “the voice.” There is magic in “the voice.” The Russian singer’s reference to “the voice” reminds

Elizabeth of her sexual engagement with Edugu at a younger age:

The voice. Her thoughts go back to Kuala Lumpur, when she was young, or nearly young, when she spent three nights in a row with Emmanuel Egudu, also young then. ‘The oral poet,’ she said to him teasingly. ‘Show me what an oral poet can do.’ And he laid her out, lay upon her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her.

(58)

The “truth of the oral” and the truth of the breath is that they can make one “shudder.” Regardless of the very nature of the encounter, there is something to be preserved from the truth of this encounter. The question we might ask is the following: If there is a truth to the voice and the body, if “the voice makes one shudder,” is it possible to conceive of inter-species relationships between the human and the animal others, or at least, human sympathy on the basis of “the voice”? After all, who has not been awed by the voice of an animal? Who among us can hear the “death cry” of an animal, as Elizabeth later reminds us (108), and not realize the pain and suffering of the animal? The truth of the oral/body becomes the ground for a different perception of reality in the following lessons.

Chapter 5

Giving Voice to suffering: From the Truth of the Oral to the Truth of Animal Body, *Elizabeth*

Costello's Lessons III & IV

Lessons III and IV are both titled "The Lives of Animals" with the corresponding sub-headings: "ONE: The Philosopher and the Animals" and "TWO: The Poets and the Animals." Elizabeth is invited to Appleton College where her son, John, teaches physics. To everyone's surprise, she chooses to talk about, in John's mind, "a hobbyhorse of hers, animals" (60). Lessons III and IV, in fact, attempt to tie the truth of the human body or the truth of the oral to the truth of the animal body, thus, underlining our "kindness to animals," on the one hand, and giving voice to the suffering of animals and of the suffering body at large, on the other. Suffering emerges as a historical fate, and, in this sense, as the universal language of the body. To do so, Lessons III addresses the limits and limitations of the faculty of reason. It stages a critique of a host of metaphysical, positivist, analytic, skeptic, idealist philosophies for their banal naivety of safeguarding realism. The lesson negates the anthropocentric conception of the animal and, by consequence, human subjectivity. Furthermore, it underlines the need for a different understanding of the animal/animality, and by extension, human subjectivity. The negation of anthropocentric concepts and working out a different understanding as a result of that is attempted through the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness which acts as a gateway/mediator to the suffering of the human and the nonhuman animals. Eventually, to relate to the animal other and its suffering, IV delineates a mode of aesthetic/poetic "engagement" with the animal other which could enable us to use our capability of, to use Elizabeth's words, "inhabiting another body" (96). To safeguard this poetic engagement, Lesson IV, through the agency of its Unhappy Consciousness, constantly contests the taboo that keeps watch over the animal body. This

contestation happens via highlighting the historical juncture where the human meets its animal other.

Initially, Elizabeth targets the limits and limitations of the faculty of reason. An expository reminder on the nature of the critique at stake here will highlight Elizabeth's role in the novel. As the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, Elizabeth Costello, in fact, pushes the textual economy of the lessons towards a dialectical critique of the concepts in question. Commenting on scientific experimentation on animals, Elizabeth lays bare the dialectical impetus of the lessons:

The behaviourists who design them claim that we understand only by a process of creating abstract models and then testing those models against reality. What nonsense. We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity. There is something self-stultified in the way in which scientific behaviourism recoils from the complexity of life. (108)

Recoiling from complexity is, in fact, the butt of Hegel's dialectic and his critique of skepticism and positivism. The immersion in complexity defines Hegel's dialectic, i.e., the starting point as well as the dialectical process itself. For Hegel, knowledge always follows from experience. The very term, "lesson," in fact, ties the novel to Hegel's concept of dialectic as a pedagogical practice. The lesson's dialectical dynamic, thus, negates the flat realism of the perspectives in question. *Elizabeth Costello's* Lessons, in fact, gives themselves to the didactic of the object. In other words, while Elizabeth tries to reserve the partial truth of the various discourses, her own as well as the others, her discourse with the others, at the same time, stages the failure of the totalizing tendency of reason and systematic thinking. Her discourse with the others, in fact, lays

bare the absurdities of rational positions that tend to posit themselves as systems capable of capturing the whole truth. In concert with Adorno and Freud, Elizabeth dramatizes this absurdity as an indispensable feature of systematic thinking.⁷⁹ Elizabeth Costello is, after all, an unabashed idealist. In a sense, Elizabeth Costello attempts to transcend the realistic pretenses immanent in positivist and scientific rationality, on the one hand, and crude idealism, on the other.

Elizabeth starts her critique by underlining the fact that religious, philosophical and scientific discourses are organized by the dichotomy or opposition of man vs. animal. In this opposition, the concept of man is primarily defined by the qualities of reason, thought and self-consciousness whereas the concept animal is defined by the lack of these very qualities. From this anthropocentric position, a set of absurd propositions, inferences, and conclusions follow:

The universe is built upon reason. God is a God of reason. The fact that through the application of reason we can come to understand the rules by which the universe works proves that reason and the universe are of the same being. And the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its being: that man is god-like, animals thinglike. (67)⁸⁰

⁷⁹ In his preface to *Totem and Taboo*, Freud refers to Kant's "categorical imperative" as an example of a modern-day taboo: "Though expressed in a negative form and directed towards another subject-matter, they [taboos] do not differ in their psychological nature from Kant's 'categorical imperative', which operates in a compulsive fashion and rejects any conscious motives" (xiv). One can argue that Adorno partially follows Freud's lead in his critique of Kant's philosophy in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Costello's words here echo Adorno's and Horkheimer's in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Throughout European history the idea of the human being has been expressed in contradistinction to the animal. The latter's lack of reason is the proof of human dignity. So insistently and unanimously has this antithesis been recited by all the earliest precursors of bourgeois thought, the ancient Jews, the Stoics, and the Early Fathers, and then through the

Even if we accept the first principle/proposition that man is reason and that animals are just things or automatons, we cannot on any rational ground deduce that the being of man and the being of the universe are “the same being.” On the contrary, the being that comprehends or discovers the universal rules of nature can only be equal to itself. As Kant puts it in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the best it can do is “[to] cognize of things a priori only what we ourselves have put into them” (111). Acknowledging Kant’s achievement, Elizabeth, nevertheless, criticizes Kant for his failure to follow the implications of his thought with respect to animals, i.e., “his intuition that reason may be not the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain” (67). The problem, as Adorno and Horkheimer underline in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno discusses at length in various ways in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, lies in the fact that the “transcendental or logical subject” comes into being as a result of a more successful repression of our animality.⁸¹ Instead of providing corrections to the Newtonian vision of the universe and the Cartesian subject to make room for morality and judgments of taste, Kantian metaphysics, in fact, merely reifies more efficiently the coordinates

Middle Ages to modern times, that few other ideas are so fundamental to Western anthropology” (203).

⁸¹ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write: “The self which, after the methodical extirpation of all natural traces as mythological, was no longer supposed to be either a body or blood or a soul or even a natural ego but was sublimated into a transcendental or logical subject, formed the reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action” (22). An exploration of Adorno’s engagement with Kantian idealism is impossible in a short space and, thus, beyond the scope of this research. Yet the following lines from *Negative Dialectics* testify to Adorno’s incessant critique of the Kantian conception of the transcendental subject: “The spell cast by the subject becomes equally a spell cast over the subject. . . . The subject is spent and impoverished in its categorical performance; to be able to define and articulate what it confronts, so as to turn it into a Kantian object, the subject must dilute itself to the point of mere universality, for the sake of the objective validity of those definitions. It must cut loose from itself as much as from the cognitive object, so that this object will be reduced to its concept, according to plan. The objectifying subject contracts into a point of abstract reason, and finally into logical noncontradictoriness, which in turn means nothing except to a definite object” (139).

of the Newtonian world and the ascendancy of the absolute subject. Eventually, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, in the Kantian picture, the feelings of sympathy and passion are made irrelevant to morality. Kant's categorical imperative, as Freud also points out, functions as the ultimate taboo. It shields the subject from 'contagion' with, i.e., being in touch with, his/her own feelings and emotions. In his *Beethoven: Philosophy of Music*, Adorno gets to the heart of the problem:

Ethical dignity in Kant is a demarcation of differences. It is directed against animals. Implicitly it excludes man from nature, so that its humanity threatens to revert to the inhuman. It leaves no room for pity. Nothing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man's resemblance to animals. The taboo is always at work when the idealist berates the materialist. Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as Jews for fascism. To revile man as animal—that is genuine idealism. (80)

In fact, Kant's categorical imperative keeps watch to separate us from our own animality. The logical corollary of this imperative, based upon the opposition between man vs. animal, entitles us to cancel our feeling of sympathy for the animal others. Man as the possessor of reason feels entitled to kill animals simply because animals lack what we recognize as rationality, self-consciousness, in Kant's case, the "I Think," which must accompany all my conceptions" (Adorno & Horkheimer 20).⁸² Nevertheless, as Elizabeth underlines on numerous occasions

⁸² Here, I concur with Derrida's reading of Adorno. Following Adorno, Derrida underlines the violence immanent in the Kantian delineation of subjectivity and his account of the moral law: "Accents of cruelty already mark Kant's discourse when he speaks of the imperative necessity of *sacrificing* sensibility to moral reason. But this sacrificial cruelty can become so much more serious, and virtually terrible, implacable, and ferocious when it comes to the animal that some, such as Adorno, have not hesitated to denounce it as an extreme violence, even a sort of sadism. . . In his *Philosophy of Music*. . . , Adorno for his part does not hesitate to judge as 'suspect,' 'so suspect [so *suspekt*],' Kant's notion of 'dignity,' which is given to the human only 'in the name

during the course of her discussion, there is nothing in the form of the argument that can justify this sense of entitlement.

Elizabeth provides counterexamples such as Ramanujan to question our closeness to God or reason, on the one hand, and to problematize our conventions of academic discourse, on the other. Elizabeth also refers to Wolfgang Köhler's study *The Mentality of Apes* to explore the shortcomings of instrumental rationality and highlight the banality immanent in such anthropomorphic experimentations. Our experiments with animals have been primarily anthropocentric and, therefore, fallacious and self-serving. What Elizabeth endeavors to shed light on at this stage is twofold: a) that the categories of reason and consciousness as they have been conceived historically in religious, philosophical and scientific discourses are, in fact, highly suspect categories to be considered as the sole index of our humanity and b) that the logical corollary that entitles us to murder animals is, in fact, not at all logical but absurd and self-serving. It is, in fact, a logical conclusion merely vested in human interest.

However, these conclusions could have been achieved easily in our postmodern era without the use of a fictional character named Elizabeth Costello and without using the medium of fiction. In simple words, what makes *Elizabeth Costello* as a novel different from a philosophic or a scientific argument? To answer this question, some scholars have read *Elizabeth Costello* and the dynamics of the novel within a Levinasian framework. Attridge, for example,

of autonomy.' The capacity for autonomy, self-determination, moral autodestruction (*Selbstbestimmung*), let us also say for auto-prescription and moral autobiography, is indeed what, in Kant, becomes the privilege or absolute advantage of the human (in the sense in which, we might say, the *autos* of automotion, reflexive *autotely*, is generally held to be the property of what lives in general). Inasmuch as it assures the dominance or mastery (*Herrschaft*) of man over nature, that is in fact, Adorno makes clear, 'directed against animals [*Sie richtet sie gegen die Tiere*]' " (100).

ties the character of ethics to Coetzee's literary language as a quality that invites the reader to host the other as an "unconditional," "pre-rational" or "non-rational" decision. This "event" characterizes the "singularity" of the encounter with the literary text of which Coetzee's novels are the best examples.⁸³ Attridge acute observations problematizes a vast array of philosophical readings of Coetzee's works ("A Yes without a No" 91-106). Even though I concur with Attridge's assertion that in the case of Coetzee's fiction, the ethical is tied to the "singularity" of Coetzee's literary language, I do not think that a Levinasian framework can adequately explain the specificity of Coetzee's language or the "singularity" of literature as "event" in this case. I provide three reasons. The first reason is already highlighted by Attridge. Following Derrida, Attridge acknowledges that Levinas's first philosophy denies the animal a face. In *The Animal That Therefore I am*, Derrida writes:

Levinas insists on the originary, paradigmatic, "prototypical" character of ethics as human, the space of a relation between humans, only humans; it is for this that they are human. It is only afterward, by means of an analogical transposition, that we become sensitive to animal suffering. It is only by means of a transference, indeed, through metaphor or allegory, that such suffering obligates us. Certainly, the human face is and says "I am," in the end, only in front of the other and after the other, but that is always the other human, and the latter comes before an animal, which never looks at him to say "Thou shalt not kill," even if it be as if to say "Help, I am suffering," with the implication "like you." (108)

Derrida, in fact, is partly commenting on a comment made by Levinas in an interview on the

⁸³ For a detailed discussion of Attridge's use of the terms "singularity" and "event" in relation to literary language and his view of literary language in general, see his seminal work *The Singularity of Literature*.

question of moral obligation to animals:

It is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings. We do not want to make an animal suffer needlessly and so on. But the *prototype of this is human ethics*. Vegetarianism, for example, arises from the *transference* to animals of the idea of suffering. The animal suffers. It is because we, as human, know what suffering is that we can have this obligation. (qtd. in Derrida 108)⁸⁴

Here, Derrida, in fact, delineates Levinas's continuity with the religious and Cartesian project where the animal is not able to respond, does not know what a response is, and, as a result, lacks a face. Thus read, our conception of the suffering of the animal is a result of a "transference," indeed, as Derrida underlines, via "metaphor or allegory." This "transference" regulates our understanding of the suffering of the animal others, whereas this "transference," according to Levinas, is irrelevant to his ethics as first philosophy.

Second, if we extend, contrary to Levinas's understanding of ethics as first philosophy, as Attridge does, somehow the definition of the other by way of analogy to include animals and not only that but also their fictional representations and the literary text itself, we would still risk collapsing the dynamics of the novel within an anthropocentric conception of ethics that, according to Derrida, belies Levinas's "character of ethics as human." Contrary to Attridge, I do not think that it is possible to escape this logic of "transference" entirely simply through the magic of literature. This would simply be too much of an ideal definition for literature especially

⁸⁴ I have quoted the following passage from Derrida's text to underline the terms italicized by Derrida for their particular relevance to Derrida's discussion and the nature of the polemics at stake in *Elizabeth Costello*. For the full transcript of the interview, see "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (168-180).

in a world where the logic of sacrifice defines the order of the day. Literature, despite its differences from ordinary, philosophic and scientific discourses is incapable of escaping the category/logic of history and the world to which it ultimately owes its existence. Defining literature as such merely reasserts the privileges of a subject that can experience such a singular event. Coetzee's novels, nevertheless, I believe, do have a face and they do gaze back at their readers. In the case of Coetzee's novels, and of *Elizabeth Costello* in particular, what we confront is, seen from Adorno's perspective, the mournful gaze of animals. In the following chapters, I will draw on Adorno's meditations on aesthetic theory to explore the nature of this gaze. Adorno's theory, I believe, has the potential to explain the nature of this gaze/encounter while having the advantage of accounting for the aporetic nature of this gaze/encounter at the same time. Furthermore, Adorno's aesthetic theory, as we will come to see more clearly, has the advantage of enabling us to see the figure of animals throughout the whole novel and not just as presences in Lesson III and IV.

Third, and most importantly, a Levinasian framework cannot explain the specificity of Elizabeth Costello's subject position and, by consequence, the dialectical impetus of the novel. The question is the following: what is the aesthetic role of this fictional character with respect to the theme of animals and animality? Addressing her audience, at the outset, Elizabeth radically identifies herself with Kafka's Red Peter. She further tells her audience not to take her comparison "at face value, that is to say, ironically" but in Kafka's fashion quite literally: "I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean" (62).⁸⁵ More specifically, the question to address is the aesthetic function of Elizabeth's identification with Red Peter, which we as readers are asked to take "literally" in our own way.

⁸⁵ As we will see later, this literalism is the hallmark of Elizabeth's discourse.

The key to this question lies in Elizabeth's reference in her talk to Red Peter and Kafka as hybrid figures:

Hybrids are, or ought to be, sterile; and Kafka saw both himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies. The stare that we meet in all the surviving photographs of Kafka is a stare of pure surprise: surprise, astonishment, alarm. Of all men Kafka is the most insecure in his humanity. *This*, he seems to say: *this* is the image of God? (75)

As these hybrid figures, "as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies," Red Peter and Kafka are, in fact, the very prototypes of the Unhappy Consciousness in the narrative.⁸⁶ They function as gateways/mediators to the suffering of the human and nonhuman animals. Through the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness, in fact, the narrative defies—by which I do not mean overcomes—the logic of "transference" operative in Levinas's account. This gesture is the hallmark of the novel; it defines the aesthetic politics of the novel. In Elizabeth Costello's account,

Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behaviour but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak. (70)

Elizabeth's purpose is not just to carry out a philosophical discussion. Her primary aim is to give voice to figures of animals that have been constituted as the other of our philosophical discourses.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth's description of these "hybrids" is the very definition of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness.

It is through the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness that, I claim, we may begin to have an intimation of wounded animals.

As in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, the use of the Unhappy Consciousness and the discourse of hybridity at large problematizes the distinction between the fictional and the real, the aesthetic and the historical, the writer and the narrator, the subject and the object, and all that for a different understanding of truth or, in better terms, to set the stage for a different perception of reality. Particularly, here the discourse of the Unhappy Consciousness, to use Adorno's words, "revile[s] man as animal," and, thus, problematizes the distinction between man and animal. Once again, the author, the narrator, the characters and the readers are both writing (active) as well as being written (passive) into the narrative. Elizabeth Costello refers to Kafka as Red Peter's amanuensis in the same spirit that "He," the writer, operates as an amanuensis for "his man," i.e., the narrator/character, in Coetzee's "Nobel Lecture" titled "He and His Man": "For he wields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of that. . . . those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields himself up to this man of his do such words come" (15). Without "his man," the author would not be able to imagine a different world. In an interesting reversal of our commonsense perception of the role of the author, Elizabeth later refers to herself as "a secretary of the invisible" before her tribunal by the end of the novel when she is being asked about her beliefs (199). Interestingly, the fictional Red Peter is referred to as "the historical Red Peter" in Elizabeth's speech (68). Alternatively, it is possible to think that Elizabeth's conception of whatever/whomever she means by "the historical Red Peter" comes from its fictional representation. In either case, Red Peter has entered the domain of the real; he has been "embedded in life" (32). Red Peter has entered the domain of history and subjectivity. A character that is initially not part of reality is conjured into life through the magic of art. In a

sense, he becomes equal to us. This is the position that enables the writer to transcend his realism, i.e., his own context. This is exactly why “[‘his man’] yields an able pen.”

You need a Kafkaesque character, a hybrid figure, an Unhappy Consciousness, to be able to question the pretensions of academic discourse, scientific rationality, but above all to be able to feel yourself towards, in Elizabeth’s words, “inhabiting another body” (96). It is only through this figure that we begin to contemplate the price human and nonhuman others have paid for the suppression of our animality and the animal others. Elizabeth Costello is, in this sense, Kafka’s and Red Peter’s heir. It is Elizabeth’s desire to confront this unhappiness wherein her own salvation and the perhaps the salvation of her kind (the human animal and its posited other, the non-human others) resides. The use of Kafka and Kafkaesque characters, Red Peter and Elizabeth Costello, as I will explain further, is significant in that Kafka, as Adorno underlines, berates the concept of “human dignity” through drawing on the “recollection” of our similarity with the animal others (Adorno, “Notes on Kafka” 269). Animals in Coetzee, therefore, do not appear purely as figures of difference. This difference has already been constituted historically; to emphasize it would only reify that difference. The attempt, as in Kafka, is to identify radically with this shared animality. As in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, through the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness, Coetzee is attempting the impossible, to make us identify with the other but without compromising the other’s difference. It is to override the logic of anthropomorphism that Elizabeth Costello draws on these hybrid figures and the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness.

In this light, Elizabeth Costello’s literalism and her choice of Kafka and Kafkaesque characters can be read as a choice that contests the allegorical or metaphorical “transference” at stake in Levinas’s characterization of our ethical attitude towards animals. A few expository notes on Adorno’s understanding of Kafka’s literalism may shed light on the dynamics of the

novel, on the one hand, and of Elizabeth Costello's obsession with Kafka, on the other. In "Notes on Kafka," Adorno contends that Kafka's stories are, in fact, allegories that must be read *à la lettre*, literally, expressing the truth of the social order. The allegories express the "thing-like state," to which humans are reduced (261). Correspondingly, Kafka's characters are pinned down to the formulaic/mathematical propositions of a historical order to which human subjects have been reduced. The following comment by Adorno on Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" sums up his stance on Kafka's literalism: "In 'The Metamorphosis', the path of experience can be reconstructed from the literalness as an extension of the lines. 'These Salesmen are like bugs', is the German expression that Kafka must have picked up, spread up like an insect" (254). The shock evoked by Kafka, Adorno contends, results from the fact that Kafka "takes dreams *la lettre*. Because everything that does not resemble the dream and its pre-logical logic is excluded, the dream itself is excluded. It is not the horrible which shocks, but its self-evidence" (247). As a result, the logic of symbolism is excluded by that of allegory, the literal becomes the allegorical and the allegorical becomes the literal, whereby the literal expresses "the *déjà vu*" of social reification (245). This literalism, therefore, is the distinctive quality of Kafka's fiction. In this way, Kafka's narratives become "the trial run of a model of dehumanization" (254). Kafka's narratives foreground "the endlessly repeated sacrifice, which culminates in the image of the last one" (256). This sacrifice functions as the branding iron which literally wounds the subject and marks its history as the "blind force" of myth and the compulsive force of nature (259). To read Kafka, therefore, is to touch the wound that is shared by humans and animals alike. Ultimately, Kafka's ruse/technique, i.e. his particular literalism, indeed, unravels the logic of sacrifice, thus effecting in us "the recollection of the similarity" to our nonhuman others:

[Kafka] follows that tradition of enlightenment which reaches from the Homeric myth to

Hegel and Marx. . . . As was done thousands of years ago, Kafka seeks salvation in the incorporation of the powers of the adversary. The subject seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself. . . . Instead of human dignity, the supreme bourgeois concept, there emerges in him the salutary recollection of the similarity between man and animal, an idea upon which a whole group of his narratives thrives. (269)

If our conception of truth and of concepts, as de Man aptly puts it, come about as the result of the literalization of metaphor,⁸⁷ then Elizabeth's Costello literalism can be read as, in Adorno's sense, the rational mimesis of this linguistic process, hence, "incorpora[ting] the powers of the adversary." Like Kafka, Elizabeth Costello treats our words and concepts literally as "food for thought" (90). In fact, conceptualization is figured as that of devouring in the novel.⁸⁸ It is through this dialectical move/aesthetic ruse that Coetzee tries to give a face to the animal others.⁸⁹

This literalism, therefore, characterizes the language of the novel's Unhappy Consciousness, i.e. Elizabeth Costello. It is in this light that we should read Elizabeth's comparison between the abattoirs of today and Nazi concentration camps, and Treblinka in particular, quite literally. Elizabeth draws a correspondence between our "willed ignorance"

⁸⁷ "In *Allegories of Reading*, de Man debunks Rousseau's distinction between the literal and the figural language in the *Second Discourse*. In short, de Man argues that "since all entities are the same in that they are different from each other, then the substitution of sameness for difference, which implies a degree of metaphoricity from the start characterizes the act of denomination . . . The result of this process, notwithstanding, is the literalization ('literal denomination') of particular entities" (Shahinfard 26).

⁸⁸ In his seminal essay "On Subject and Object," Adorno captures the dynamics of this conceptualization in similar terms: "Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting how much it is object itself" (246).

⁸⁹ This not to say that literature, including Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, can entirely escape the aesthetics of the symbolic or the metaphorical. As part of the problematics of representation, it occupies a central place in the narrative, especially in the novel's postscript.

towards the horrors committed in abattoirs today and the “willed ignorance” of German officials and of the Poles’ living around Treblinka. Elizabeth further adds that “[u]nder the circumstances of Hitler’s kind of war, ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism, but that is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigour, we refuse to accept” (64). Elizabeth draws on the concepts of “sin” and “pollution”—concepts that own their origin to an animistic world—only to remind us that our common understanding of this “willed ignorance” is unforgivable (64 & 65). The idea is that the Germans and the Polish people of this generation, as we perceive the issue, cannot be cleansed of this sin and their modern-day psychic equivalents. In “our chosen metaphors,” they lost their humanity by “treating fellow human beings . . . like beasts” (65). It is these common metaphors implicated by the conjunction “as” which are the object of Elizabeth Costello’s criticism. Once again, it is important to note that Elizabeth says what she means: “I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean” (62). Here, therefore, she draws a full-fledged comparison, which is to be conceived literally and not just merely as political evocation, between Nazi death camps and animal industrial enterprises: “Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them” (65). For Elizabeth Costello, the historical fact of killing our fellow human beings, here the Jews, is of equal moral import to the killing of animals. Elizabeth, in fact, is taking the terms of the comparison beyond that of comparison itself. In other words, Elizabeth is taking the term of the metaphor, “they died like animals,” *à la lettre* (64).

Whether we are prepared to accept Elizabeth’s stance on the issue or feel insulted by

Elizabeth's analogy, as does Abraham Stern, a participant in the event, we should first take a closer look at Elizabeth's perspective, i.e., the conceptual-affective framework through which she looks at the question of animals and humans. What is immanent to the structure of rationality, central to its definition since Plato, is the absence of emotion and feeling. Questioning Nagel's conclusion in his essay "What is it Like to Be a Bat?," Elizabeth introduces a new category/paradigm to the questions of humanity, animality, and animals. In this essay, Nagel concludes that we will forever remain in the dark with regards to having an experience or a feel for a bat's life or existence simply because we do not possess the bat's mind and its sensory mechanism. Despite her admiration for Nagel, Elizabeth regards Nagel's perspective "tragically restrictive, restrictive and restricted" (76)

To Nagel a bat is a fundamentally alien creature, not perhaps as alien as Martian but certainly more alien than any fellow human being (particularly, I would guess, were that human being a fellow academic philosopher).

So we have set up a continuum that stretches from the Martian at one end to the bat to the dog to the ape (not, however, Red Peter) to the human being (not, however, Franz Kafka) at the other; and at each step as we move along the continuum from bat to man, Nagel says, the answer to the question "What is it like for X to be X?" becomes easier to give. (76)

Nagel's framework of analysis takes its framework of inference from the mathematical/physical concepts and formulas. It is interesting to note that Nagel's theoretical framework/continuum cannot encompass or comprehend "hybrids," i.e. Red Peter and Frantz Kafka. This is exactly why I insist on the significance of these figures for the aesthetic politics of the novel. The burden of

the novel, of whatever hope might be conceivable both within and beyond the aesthetic realm, falls on their shoulders. To Nagel's mathematical conclusion, Elizabeth opposes "the experience of full being":

To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.

To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul. (77-78)

Elizabeth, in fact, proposes an alternative to the Cartesian picture of the universe. The primary category here is "fullness of being" rather than cogitation (78). In better terms still, Elizabeth supplants an "experience" for a "category." What is at stake here is our similarity or rather identity to animals rather than our difference, especially if this difference is merely defined by a category and a formula. Elizabeth's stance is, in a certain sense, animistic.⁹⁰ We are after all, "living soul[s]." Elizabeth's position is perhaps not exclusively a rational one in our terms, but it does avoid the contradictions and absurdities of the Cartesian view of the world and its claims to rationality. Elizabeth's stance does not fall within the dictums of the Cartesian discourse and Newtonian physics precisely because "the experience of full being" cannot be measured. However, there is more ground to argue that "to be full of being" is a more primary quality than of the consciousness defined by the Cartesian motto, "Cogito, ergo sum." And why should

⁹⁰ Elizabeth's position is in various points in the novel animistic. In Lesson VII, for example, Elizabeth reinterprets Newtonian physics within animistic terms.

we not take our similarities to animals as primary rather than take a formula as an index of our humanity especially if our similarities allow us to avoid the contradiction of the Cartesian/Kantian accounts of subjectivity?

If the fullness of being is an “experience,” then the right question is whether or not we can have an “experience” of this state of being? What is in us that can enable us to have a feeling for what we share with the nonhuman others? Once again Elizabeth refers to the “horror of the camps.” She proposes that the “particular horror of the camps. . . is not that despite the humanity they shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else” (79). What enables us to “share at times the being of another,” Elizabeth proposes, is the faculty of “sympathy” or “sympathetic imagination”: “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (79-80). If I, as a writer of fiction, Elizabeth claims, has been able to imagine a life of a fictional character that has never existed, then “I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (80). The faculty of sympathy, after all, “has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, ‘the another’” (79). In Adorno’s conception, the primacy of the object can only be conceived in a subjective economy. Moreover, if as Adorno and Horkheimer discuss, Enlightenment thrived on the elimination of the sympathy and pity, as manifest in the writings of Kant, Nietzsche, and de Sade, then Elizabeth’s proposal for a poetics of sympathy can be seen as an antidote to this pathological tendency which is immanent in Enlightenment rationality.⁹¹ The logical consequence of the rejection of the

⁹¹ See, in particular, “Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (63-93).

category of pity and sympathy can be followed in the pathways of Nazi concentration camps. In fact, anti-Semitism and various discourses of racism, ableism, and discriminatory class discourse are replete with animal imagery and its correlate, i.e., lack of sympathy towards the victims. In these discourses, the animality of the human other, the reduction of the human body to an automaton are not just metaphors but literally define the actual mindset of the oppressor as well as the daily reality of the oppressed. Such literalism, as Elizabeth pinpoints, in her roundabout way, is premised upon the distinction between human vs. animal. To be able to overcome the logic underlying anti-Semitism, therefore, we have to overcome the discourse that opposes humans to nature and their animal others. Elizabeth's stance, in fact, echoes Adorno's account of the conceptual framework that feeds anti-Semitism: "Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as Jews for fascism." This partly explains why for Elizabeth the killing of animals in animal industrial farms has the same moral import than the killing of Jews during the Holocaust. To override the reality of anti-Semitism, we have to cancel the reality/conceptual framework that feeds it. Otherwise, as Adorno and Horkheimer observe, the victims of today can become the anti-Semites of tomorrow.⁹²

⁹² See note 55. In a tragic turn of events, there has been a persistent attempt, in fact, impatience by parts of the Israeli establishment to embrace and embellish the aesthetics/discourse of fascism in its entirety. Ayelet Shaked's election advertisement, "Fascism," in which fascism is cast within the paraphernalia of culture industry as a perfume that "smells like democracy" is a good case in point. Even though she emphasized the ironic tangent of the clip, the very fact of playing with the concept is not only highly questionable but is, in fact, an insult to the memory of the dead, especially since it follows the fascist's penchant for the aestheticization of the ugly. Needless to say that contrary to Shaked's claim, the advertisement does portray the politics of the New Right of Israel to the letter. In the same manner, there has been an attempt by Zionist political and religious leaders to vindicate Hitler of his intentions/crimes. For example, in an address to the 37th Zionist Congress in 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu stated that Hitler had no intention to exterminate Jews, but that he was coaxed into doing so by Jerusalem's Grand Mufti, Haj Amin al-Husseini. Likewise, a program aired by Israel's Channel 13 shows Rabbi Eliezer Kashtiel, in an address to the graduates of an Israeli military school, regurgitating Hitler's language of racial superiority to the letter. He confesses his firm belief in racism, in this case, the biological

Elizabeth Costello's literalism, therefore, can be read as the rational mimesis of our conceptual framework. To understand the literalism/reality of the master's psyche and its oppressed other, Elizabeth lays bare the underlying values immanent in our common metaphors. The last scene of Lesson III follows Elizabeth's impetus as it portrays sense-making literally as the act of devouring. The logic at work in the discussion over the subject of taboos that follows Elizabeth's talk over the course of the dinner party takes its lead from the ritualistic sacrifice of animal others. The question on the table is the nature of dietary restrictions/taboos in an attempt to figure out what it tells us about human subjectivity. The animals are, therefore, once again objects of pure observation, here an occasion for a discussion over a dinner party. The discussion, however, only delineates the contradictions and ambivalences immanent in human subjectivity rather than shed light on the true nature of animals or our similarity or distinctions from the animal others. In other words, at the very best, the discussion reveals the symptoms of the subject/master, i.e., our madness. As such, the discussion cannot go beyond the pathology of the master and its contradictions. The master's perspective is a look caught in its epistemological discourse. The discussion follows a series of propositions each of which contradicts the other at every turn with Elizabeth still trying to preserve the partial truths, i.e., the symptoms of the subject, despite her renunciation of the rational framework within which the discussion happens. What is staged is, of course, the failure of rationalistic discourses to apprehend and capture the question of the animals, the literary event and that of fiction. The lesson lays bare the rationality immanent in our scientific and philosophical systems, in Adorno's words, as "the belly turned mind" (*Negative Dialectics* 23). The common metaphors that the president of Appleton College

superiority of Jews over Arabs. In another clip, Rabbi Giora Radler is heard praising Hitler as a righteous man: "Of course, Hitler was right in every word he said. His ideology was correct." The rabbi's only complaint is that Hitler was on the wrong side (@davidsheen).

uses, of course, innocently, as the closing remarks for the first day is, in fact, very revealing: “The president rises, and then everyone else. ‘A wonderful lecture, Mrs Costello,’ says the president. ‘Much food for thought. We look forward to tomorrow’s offering’ (90). These metaphors should be read, as in Kafka’s texts *à la lettre*. They reveal the underlying dynamics and protocols of academic discourse as systems of sacrificing and devouring. Does this “banality” of mind, attitude, and expression have anything in common with the Nazi executioners that Elizabeth refers to later in another talk in Lesson VI (176)?

Lesson IV, on the one hand, seeks to question the abstract, ahistorical nature of our conceptual frameworks: scientific, literary, aesthetic or religious. At every turn, Elizabeth tries to resist the realism of our abstract rationality by underlining where men and its other, the animals, meet in historical terms. On the other hand, for Elizabeth it is poetry and poetic language that can best contest or supplant this abstraction and, indeed, bring into being or approximate the fullness of experience. Poetics of abstraction can only be contested via immersion in “complexity” of which “poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will” seems to be the best conduit (108 & 98).

Lesson IV is titled “Lives of Animals” with the sub-heading “Two: The Poets and Animals.” Nevertheless, Elizabeth’s discourse on poetic discourse and the poets is often pulled within the matrix of abstract rationality by her interlocutors who tend to enslave or subside a discussion of poetic language to that of abstract rationality. Elizabeth’s opposition tends to grind Elizabeth’s concepts and language within the machinery of abstract reasoning. To offer counters to Elizabeth’s suggestions, Elizabeth’s interlocutors often translate Elizabeth’s terms into their own conceptual framework. The lesson opens with John’s and Norma’s dispute over Elizabeth’s critique of Western rationality and her stance on animals. The discussion serves as an interlude to

what follows later. Norma attacks Elizabeth on fronts that are not strictly speaking those of Elizabeth's. Norma, however, claims that her critique of Elizabeth's position is done on Elizabeth's "own terms." Norma finds Elizabeth's philosophizing merely erroneous, and, thus "difficult to take" (91).

Presumably she was trying to make a point about the nature of rational understanding. To say that rational accounts are merely a consequence of the structure of the human mind; that animals have their own accounts in accordance with the structure of their own minds, to which we don't have access because we don't share a language with them. (91)

It is interesting that understanding or accepting one's position is again phrased within the metaphor of devouring, as it is implicit in the expression "difficult to take." She finds Elizabeth's critique of rationality naive precisely because "[r]eason provides us with real knowledge of the real world. It has been tested, and it works" (92). Elizabeth's philosophizing might be naive in philosophic terms, but Norma's summary treatment of Elizabeth's arguments does not do justice to Elizabeth's talk. Elizabeth never questions the fact that reason, and, for that matter, science works. Elizabeth might be "mad," as Norma puts it (113) and as Elizabeth herself acknowledges (114), but she is not that "mad." What Elizabeth provides in her talk on "Animals and Philosophers" is a dialectical counter to a position that equates reality with reason and observational behavior, which is quite different from stating that reason/science does not work or that it lacks a purpose or function. What Elizabeth tries to highlight is the historical price of this crude rationality, i.e., the Holocaust, among others. Seen from a Hegelian perspective, our science works but at the same time, it is not dissociable from the history of humanity and our very own conceptualizations. Science, after all, like other human enterprises, is nothing but our conception of the universe. Moreover, Elizabeth's position does not, strictly speaking, as Norma

claims, takes its lead from Kantian formalism and his concept of subjectivity. All Elizabeth's invocation of Kant amounts to is that Kantian idealism is only partially right. Furthermore, unlike what Norma claims, Elizabeth is after all intent on establishing our similarity to animals rather than our difference. True, Elizabeth claims that our scientific, religious and philosophic perspectives through which we have shaped our reality and our history have been highly anthropocentric. She also stresses the fact that we do not share a language with animals has been used as an excuse for our brutal treatment of animals, and, by consequence, the human others. Nevertheless, it is possible to conceive of a different reality based on our "kindness to animals" and through what she refers to as "the sympathetic imagination" (80).

Likewise, Abraham Stern in his letter to Elizabeth takes to task Elizabeth's stance on what he considers to be Elizabeth's "own terms":

You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. (94)

Stern, in fact, misunderstands the nature of Elizabeth's argument. He ignores the historical content of Elizabeth's account. Elizabeth's concepts of God, man, and animals and their values are entirely different from what Stern takes them to be the case. Differently put, Stern's terms of the comparison are not those of Elizabeth's. Stern, indeed, posits Elizabeth's words within an ahistorical, merely logical, Aristotelian model of deduction. The Aristotelian syllogism is a

merely formal mode of deduction that takes its lead from Aristotle's identity principle (principle of non-contradiction). Elizabeth's critique of the concepts in question, in fact, can be read as a questioning of this very mode of deduction and this formal logic. What constitutes the likeness/unlikeness in Aristotle's account, and by consequence, Stern's, is the sacrifice of nonidentity or the non-identical, i.e., the animals. This formal logic is constituted through sacrificing the animal others and the history associated with it. Both Stern and Norma try to bring Elizabeth's language within the machinery of formal reasoning. The history of our animality and the oppression of the animal others is the taboo over which formal abstract reason keeps an untiring watch. To identify the object as such is to understand/reduce the objects of the equations as/to abstractions. The outcome of the philosophy of identity, according to Adorno, is "death" of which Auschwitz was its prime exemplar:

Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—'polished off,' as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death. The most far out dictum from Beckett's *End Game*, that there really is not so much to be feared any more, reacts to a practice whose first example was given in the concentration camps, and in whose concept—venerable once upon a time—the destruction of nonidentity is ideologically lurking. (*Negative Dialectics* 362)

Stern's syllogism, in fact, takes its ground and imperative from what, seen from Elizabeth's perspective, made the Holocaust a historical reality in the first place. Elizabeth's position, as I will argue in more detail, is more in tune with what Adorno referred to as the "new categorical

imperative.”⁹³

It is to override this context of crude realism, apparent in Norma’s and Stern’s position, that she chooses to discuss the possibility immanent in “poetic invention,” i.e., of “inhabiting another body” (98 & 96). In her talk, she compares two kinds of poetry in light of their representation of animal figures. In the first kind, which for our purpose here we can call anthropocentric poetry, animals appear as stand-ins for “human qualities: the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth” (94). In Rilke’s poem “The Panther,” which belongs to the first category of poetry, the animal is framed within a Newtonian model of time and space. The image of the panther in the cage, on Elizabeth’s account, belongs to “elementary particle physics” portrayed “as the vital embodiment of the kind of force that is released in an atomic explosion but is here trapped not so much by the bars of the cage as by what the bars compel on the panther: a concentric lope that leaves the will stupefied, narcotized” (95). The panther is trapped within a Newtonian concept of time and space wherein the panther appears solely as the object of our gaze. In other words, the animal is trapped within our gaze, within our conception of the animal as a physical force confined within the coordinates of Newtonian physics. The animal is the object of our desire. The panther’s slavery and control is the guarantor of our apparent freedom from the force of nature.

Rather than being the object of our gaze or a stand-in for our own concept of the animal, Ted Hughes’s poem, “The Jaguar,” by contrast, does not “try to find an idea in the animal, that is

⁹³ The Nazi’s Final Solution, Adorno contends, rendered Kant’s categorical imperative comic and grotesque and supplanted it with a different imperative: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will never repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (*Negative Dialectics* 365).

not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (96). In this poem,

it is the crowd for a change that stands mesmerized, and among them the man, the poet, entranced and horrified and overwhelmed, his powers of understanding pushed beyond their limit. The jaguar’s vision, unlike the panther’s, is not blunted. On the contrary, his eyes drill through the darkness of space. The cage has no reality to him, he is *elsewhere*. He is elsewhere because his consciousness is kinetic rather than abstract: the thrust of his muscles moves him through a space quite different in nature from the three-dimensional box of Newton – a circular space that returns upon itself. (95)

The poem encourages a different “engagement” with the animal by which we can transcend the abstract universals that dominate our experience of the world (96). In this poem, the animal is no longer defined by our gaze; the jaguar is no longer a slave-figure confined within the prison house of Newtonian abstractions. His gaze, likewise, is not “blunted” but rather shoots through the look that can no longer hold fast to its own abstracting power. Elizabeth speculates that this experience might belong to our “dream experience” and “collective unconscious.” It is a different way of knowing and a different way of “being in the world” (95):

In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body. With Hughes it is a matter – I emphasize – not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. (95-96)

This poetry, thus, makes possible an experience that is no longer subject to the abstracting power of the mind and its conceptual categories. It claims the truth of the body over and against that

coldblooded gaze that abstracts from every single animal as a concept of the mind for its own purposes. What distinguishes Hughes's jaguar from Rilke's representation of the panther is the absence of the economy of desire. Unlike, "love poems," that objectify and, in fact, abstract from every single object for the sake of poet's/poetic expression, whose purposes is to move the object of one's desire, "poetic engagements of this kind" give themselves entirely to the dialectic of the object. The primacy of the object, as Adorno underlines, is only conceivable within a purely subjective economy, in Elizabeth's words, "within an entirely human economy":

What is peculiar about poetic engagements of this kind is that, no matter with what intensity they take place, they remain a matter of complete indifference to their objects. In this respect they are different from love poems, where your intention is to move your object.

Not that animals do not care what we feel about them. But when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourselves and the animal into words, we abstract it forever from the animal. Thus the poem is not a gift to its object, as the love poem is. It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share. (96)

Elizabeth is, of course, once again challenged for her position on the question of animals. Her interlocutors evade Elizabeth's discussion on poets and "poetic engagements" of the kind Elizabeth has in mind, and, instead, attempt to translate Elizabeth's suggestion into their own terms. In this way, they try to question Elizabeth's sympathy for animals. Like Norma and Stern before them, they question Elizabeth on what they take to be Elizabeth's terms but which are, in fact, not Elizabeth's but their own terms. To an extent, Elizabeth's talk on poets and poetic engagement is threatened to become another panel on philosophy and formal logic. At every

point, Elizabeth contests their position via emphasizing our “kindness to animals,” i.e., “an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature” (106). At every turn, Elizabeth contests the bounds of formal logic by emphasizing where man and its animal others meet in historical terms. The first challenge comes from a young man in the audience who questions Elizabeth’s choice of Ted Hughes’s poetry. Hughes, he says, had been a rancher “raising sheep for the market” (96). The young man questions Hughes’s sincerity as well as Elizabeth’s professionalism in choosing Hughes as a party for her discussion. Mentioning the fact that she has never “met Ted Hughes” and expressing her lack of knowledge about “what kind of farmer” Hughes has been, Elizabeth turns the question into a discussion of Hughes’s philosophy and his poetry, in particular (96). What is distinctive about Hughes’s philosophy and poetry is his attempt to resuscitate a primitive experience of the world: “an attentiveness that our faraway ancestors possessed and we have lost (he conceives of this loss in evolutionary rather than historical terms, but that is another question). I would guess that he believes he looks at animals much as palaeolithic hunters used to.” Like a good dialectician, despite the limitations of this worldview, Elizabeth still sees “something attractive about it at an ethical level” for its “respect and honour” of the murdered animal (97). The premise underlying this primitivism is the assumption of equality and “kindness to” animals even as it involves the hunting and eating of animals. Elizabeth reminds us once more as an aside that the historical cost of abdicating this primitive attitude is the reality of the Holocaust. Since we have become too many, we have had to invent “factory animals,” which were, in fact, the prototypes of Nazi concentration camps: “Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies” (97). In this way, Elizabeth reiterates to the letter Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s account of the historical trajectory of the modern subject in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* i.e. the passage from a world ruled by the principle of magic and of animism to a world dominated by abstract logic and the principles of

mathematical rationality. The ultimate manifestation of the latter, premised upon a more successful sacrifice/suppression of nature, animals and our animality, was, of course, the Holocaust. In Elizabeth's account, likewise, this is the historical juncture where the fate of humans and animals meet each other. This juncture rebuts the celebratory discourse of evolutionary accounts with the ascendancy of the rational human figure at its center. What matters is that Hughes the poet in his poetry is capable of transcending Hughes the rancher. This is the magic of "poetic invention": "writers teach us more than they are aware of. By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves" (97-98). Poetry can counter the historical logic whereby human and nonhuman others were/are murdered for the sake of and a result of the cold gaze of the subject whose identity is exclusively defined via the dictates of abstract rationality.

Like a good dialectician, however, Elizabeth questions the limits of Hughes's poetry, i.e. Hughes's "idea" of the animal. What Hughes shares with ecologists, what Elizabeth Costello refers to as "ecology managers," is their "Platonic" conception of nature and animals (98 & 99). What Elizabeth underlines in Hughes's and the ecologists' views is their continuity with Western rationality and its discourse. Despite "the vividness" of Hughes's poetry and its description of the jaguar, Hughes's poetry is still tangled within abstract logic for the poet does not write about the individual jaguar but about "*the* jaguar, about jaguariness embodied in this jaguar." Likewise, in the ecologist's conception of the universe, animals and, indeed, every other organism, are involved in a "complex dance" wherein each "organism has a role" (98). What matters in this vision is the role played rather than the individual actors themselves:

I called this Platonic and I do so again. Our eye is on the creature itself, but our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthly, material embodiment.

The irony is a terrible one. An ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures justifies itself by appealing to an idea, an idea of a higher order than any living creature. An idea, finally – and this is the crushing twist to the irony – which no creature except man is capable of comprehending. (99)

The master/slave relationship as the mad Jacobus Coetzee, an anti-hero in Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* contends, is a "spatial relation" (97). The master stands on the side of substance abstracting/defining whatever falls within its lordly gaze on the outside of abstract reason. We as masters, in a sense, stand outside the dance because we can understand the system of interactions:

we managers understand the greater dance, therefore we can decide how many trout may be fished or how many jaguar may be trapped before the stability of the dance is upset. The only organism over which we do not claim this power of life and death is man. Why? Because man is different. Man understands the dance as the other dancers do not. Man is an intellectual being. (99)

The ecological perception of the universe stresses our difference/distance from animals. In thus perceiving the object, as Elizabeth underlines by reference to Aquinas, the animal is still "locked into natural slavery; we say, it lacks self-consciousness." In other words, Hughes's poetry and the ecologist's perception of the world fall within the Cartesian vision of the universe: "The species life is a force which acts through the individual but which the individual is incapable of understanding. In that sense the idea is innate, and the ant is run by the idea as a computer is run by a program" (99). Elizabeth, thus, underlines the historical persistence of a vision that ranges

from Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, to Hughes and the ecologists. This vision subsumes individual animals to “the idea” of the animal. This vision has persisted across various human discourses and disciplines throughout centuries.

The second question is from Elaine Marx, a professor of English literature, who questions Elizabeth’s apparent outright rejection of our conception of reason and rationality. According to Elaine Marx, the very fact that Elizabeth can argue about the falsity of human rationality indicates that Elizabeth still “puts a certain faith in the power of reason, of true reason as opposed to false reason” (100). Elaine gives this analysis to offer the counter that Elizabeth’s own reasoning, after all, falls within “false reason.” To “concretize” her point, Elaine refers to the story of Lemuel Gulliver and his visit to the land of the Houyhnhnms. Elaine questions the Houyhnhnms’ society “with its rational vegetarianism and its rational government and its rational approach to love, marriage and death” on two grounds. First, no one wants to live in such perfectly “regulated societies” (100). Second, in historical terms, such a utopian regulation of society has proven to establish dystopian societies with tragic consequences. Elaine’s specific comment is that it is not part of “human nature” to give up its carnivorous side (101). We should rather embrace what makes us human, i.e., “embracing the carnivorous Yahoo within ourselves.” In Elaine’s reading, Elizabeth’s argument against our “cruelty” against animals is on the side of “false reason.” The true reason will accredit our “carnivorous” nature (100).

To provide an answer to Elaine’s critique, Elizabeth once more highlights the route where humans meet their animal others in historical terms. Historical consciousness is the route that questions our mastery over the nonhuman others. Elizabeth starts with an alternative reading of Swift’s “Modest Proposal.” She questions what she calls the “orthodox reading” of this text wherein atrocity against piglets serves as stand-in/metaphor for the atrocity against the Irish and

their babies: “If it is atrocious to kill and eat human babies, why is it not atrocious to kill and eat piglets? If you want Swift to be a dark ironist rather than a facile pamphleteer, you might examine the premises that make his fable so easy to digest.” Seen from Elizabeth’s perspective, we can say that “the premises,” i.e., the interpretative principles, that make the fable an object of appetite and consumption are the very “premises” that ground the reality of racism and its discourse (101). According to Elizabeth, “*Gulliver’s Travels* seems to operate within the three-part Aristotelian division of gods, beasts, and men. As long as one tries to fit the three actors into just two categories – which are the beasts, which are the men? – one can’t make sense of the fable” (102). In her reading, there is “a third category” called “man,” whose history, unlike, Swift’s “unhistorical fable,” is tied with colonialization. It is the history of slaughter and slavery of human and nonhuman others.

Gulliver goes on voyages of exploration to unknown lands, but he does not come ashore with an armed party, *as happened in reality*, and Swift’s book says nothing about what would normally have come after Gulliver’s pioneering efforts: follow-up expeditions, expeditions to colonize Lilliput or the island of the Houyhnhnms. The question I ask is: What if Gulliver and an armed expedition were to land, shoot a few Yahoos when they become threatening, and then shoot and eat a horse, for food? What would that do to Swift’s somewhat too neat, somewhat too disembodied, somewhat too unhistorical fable? It would certainly give the Houyhnhnms a rude shock, making it clear that there is a third category besides gods and beasts, namely, man, of whom their ex-client Gulliver is one; furthermore, that if the horses stand for reason, then man stands for physical force. (102)

Elizabeth’s historical attentiveness to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* turns Eliane’s distinction between “false” and “true” reason on its head. Like Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s account of the

emergence of the modern subject, man appears as a malignant force of nature. Elaine's reading of *Gulliver* is as "neat," disembodied" and "unhistorical" as the novel whose message it claims to unpack. For a more genuine "engagement" with the novel, one has to read "the premises" that make the imagined world of the novel as well as its dominant reception possible. Here, Elizabeth confronts Swift's figures/figuration of animality to account for the novel's aesthetic make-up as well as comment on the process of reading the novel itself. In Elizabeth's reading, we are compelled to confront our own "nature," i.e., our animality. In her reading, "man stands for physical force" rather being dignified for its capacity of reasoning. Elizabeth's reading approximates what Adorno regards as "genuine idealism"; it "revile[s] man as animal." Once again Elizabeth's dialectical reading, her historicism, contests her interlocutor's abstract logic.

Elizabeth Costello's respondent, Thomas O'Hearne, likewise, evades Elizabeth's discussion of "poetic engagement" to take Elizabeth's regard for animals hostage to a philosophic discourse that sacrifices animals to generate its meanings. His discourse can be read as representative of our contempt for animals. John's and Elizabeth's conversation about animals before her engagement with O'Hearne can be read as a prelude to O'Hearne's stance on the question of animals. We regard animals with "contempt" and view them as "slave populations" and as "prisoners of war." As Elizabeth highlights in her reference to Aristotle, hunting and war appear as synonymous concepts, thus tying animals with human history. At every turn, O'Hearne hypothesizes our difference/distance from animals and the animal kingdom. His discourse intends to re-state/reify our "spatial relation" with the animal others. Despite its difference from Aristotle's logic, as summarized by Elizabeth in Lesson III, O'Hearne's philosophy seems to pay tribute to the following dictum: "The prisoner of war does not belong to our tribe. We can do what we want with him" (104).

O’Hearne’s first counter is that the concept of animal rights like its counterpart, the concept of human rights, is primarily a Western phenomenon. Being Eurocentric, it claims ethical universality for what are merely “its own standards” (106 & 105). O’Hearne expresses the crux of the matter in the following words: “The notion that we have an obligation to animals themselves to treat them compassionately – as opposed to an obligation to ourselves to do so – is very recent, very Western, and even very Anglo-Saxon” (106). The concept of animal rights will, thus, be met with resistance and rightly so by cultures who see no reason to conform to our values. What O’Hearne insists on in all his questions is his idea that our relation with animals must be formalized within a purely human economy, i.e., as it pertains/belongs to us and not as an obligation to animals. In other words, the question must not disrupt our “spatial relation” with the animal others. Differently put still, the question should remain within the boundary of the master/slave relationship. Elizabeth contests O’Hearne seemingly progressive but, in fact, pseudo-historical position by highlighting that “kindness to animals” is not just a narrow Western phenomenon:

kindness to animals – and here I use the word *kindness* in its full sense, as an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature – has been more widespread than you imply. Pet-keeping, for instance, is by no means a Western fad: the first travellers to South America encountered settlements where human beings and animals lived higgledy-piggledy together. And of course children all over the world consort quite naturally with animals. They don’t see any dividing line. That is something they have to be taught, just as they have to be taught it is all right to kill and eat them. (106)⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Adorno sees the nature and attraction of artwork in this particular “kindness,” a kindness that defies identity thinking: “Apes in the zoo together perform what resembles clown routines. The

What Elizabeth seeks to dismantle is the divide that defines man as the legal subject who has absolute authority to define the fate of what he/she has always already abstracted as its other, the animals. Killing and murdering animals is here seen as something acquired rather than necessary. Perhaps the more universal tendency, as manifest in the behavior of children, is our ‘kindness to animals.’ What is left out here in the discussion, but we can deduce from Elizabeth’s sensibility, is the fate that befell the South Americans and its animal inhabitants in the Westerner’s expeditions to South America. Elizabeth finally concludes that while she agrees with O’Hearne’s point on “Western cultural arrogance,” she only sees it fit that the culture that has “pioneered the industrialization of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it” (107).

O’Hearne’s second question is a repeat of the questions already addressed by Elizabeth Costello in her talk, “The Philosophers and the Animals.” As such, O’Hearne’s behavior belies a compulsion that is characteristic of any taboo. O’Hearne, in fact, echoes the compulsions of the tribunal in the last chapter that pesters Elizabeth regarding her beliefs before it can be allowed passage into the other world/beyond the gate. O’Hearne alludes to the existing scientific literature to dictate once again the difference/distance between humans and animals. According to O’Hearne, since animals cannot “think strategically, hold general concepts or communicate

collusion of children with clowns is a collusion with art, which adults drive out of them just as they drive out their collusion with animals. Human beings have not succeeded in so thoroughly repressing their likeness to animals that they are unable in an instant to recapture it and be flooded with joy; the language of little children and animals seems to be the same. In the similarity of clowns to animals the likeness of humans to apes flashes up; the constellation animal/fool/clown is a fundamental layer of art” (*Aesthetic Theory* 119). I will discuss the relevance of Adorno’s aesthetic theory to Elizabeth Costello’s views and the novel at large in more detail in the following chapters.

symbolically,” animals should be placed within “another legal and ethical realm entirely.”

Animals cannot “understand” legal rights (107). As a result, it belongs to us to decide what rules we should follow in respect to animals. Elizabeth once again repeats that the scientific outlook that regards animals as “imbeciles is profoundly anthropocentric.” She provides the following counter to this anthropocentric vision: “It values being able to find your way out of a sterile maze, ignoring the fact that if the researcher who designed the maze were to be parachuted into the jungles of Borneo, he or she would be dead of starvation in a week” (108). Elizabeth, furthermore, opposes her own version of understanding to what she takes to be the imbecility of the behaviorists’ concept of understanding:

The behaviourists who design them claim that we understand only by a process of creating abstract models and then testing those models against reality. What nonsense. We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity. There is something self-stultified in the way in which scientific behaviourism recoils from the complexity of life. (108)

In the Hegelian dialectical tradition, the premise of a method already entails an assumption of knowledge before the object and process of inquiry for such knowledge. Here lies the imbecility of the behaviorist’s method that mistakes/ignores its own desire for a specific construction of knowledge for knowledge itself.

In order to denounce O’Hearne’s abstract treatment of animals as “dumb and stupid to speak for themselves,” Elizabeth alludes to Albert Camus’s visceral account of his childhood experience witnessing her grandmother cutting a hen’s head off (108). “The death cry of that hen,” Elizabeth contends, “imprinted itself on the boy’s memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he

wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result, in part, of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France. Who is to say, then, that the hen did not speak?” (108) Here, in fact, Elizabeth’s depiction ties the truth of the human body, with which Lesson II ended, to the truth of the animal body. The expression or the universal language of both is the truth/quality of the oral. She invokes Camus’s visceral account, which has its roots in Camus’s concrete experience, against O’Hearne’s disembodied logic. In his writings, Camus never drew any connection between this experience in his childhood, the account of which was published posthumously in his autobiographical fiction *The First Man*, and his polemic on capital punishment in his essay, “Reflections on the Guillotine.” Nevertheless, the two texts are similar in their visceral description of the event of death. In both texts, to use words from the latter, it is witnessing the “quivering body” in pangs of death that effects a corresponding quivering experience in the human subject (171). We “inhabit” the experience of the victim or the body of the victim. As such, Camus’s language enables the kind of aesthetic “engagement” that Elizabeth has in mind. In his essay, Camus speculates on the pangs of the intellect as well as the body prior to, at the moment of, and, in fact, after the execution. The human figure, moreover, is described in terms of its animality. In denouncing the premises of retributive justice, Camus draws on a correspondence between the human victim and its non-human others:

When the officials whose job it is to kill that man call him a parcel, they know what they are saying. To be unable to do anything against the hand that moves you from one place to another, holds you or rejects you, is this not indeed being a parcel, or a thing, or, better, a hobbled animal? Even then an animal can refuse to eat. The condemned man cannot. He is given the benefit of a special diet . . . ; they see to it that he nourishes himself. If need be, he is forced to do so. The animal that is going to be killed must be in the best condition.

(197)

In both cases, it is the experience of witnessing death that is most repulsive, which, in turn, grounds critical reflection. In other words, Camus does not start from abstract moral principles or scientific methods, but, on the contrary, from the firsthand experience of death itself. Being immersed in and by immersing himself in the complexities involved in the case of capital punishment, i.e., through imagining himself in place of the victims, Camus understands, and thus, exposes the horrors, shortcomings, and failures of the various discourses that favor capital punishment. Camus ascribes the abstract and simplified logic of his opponents and their failure to understand the complexity of the case to his opponents' "lack" of "imagination" (195). Similarly, Elizabeth seems to have this lack in mind when she asks us to draw upon what she calls "sympathetic imagination" in our discourse with the nonhuman others (80). Elizabeth, therefore, draws on Camus to claim the truth of voice and the truth of the body over and against the abstract rationality that characterizes our treatment of animals across religious, scientific and philosophical disciplines. The truth of the voice, "the death cry of that hen" speaks a more universal language than O'Hearne's abstract logic (108). Elizabeth asks us to embrace this language which we share with the animals. Another name for this language, in this specific example, is suffering. This is the historical juncture where the human figure literally meets the human other. Conversely, it is the language of abstract rationality, premised upon the lack of imagination, a language that fails to accommodate the truth of the body, that sees into the construction of concentration camps. In fact, the language of the body, our "kindness to animals," is the taboo over which reason keeps its watch. Nazi ideology rested upon the suppression of the mimetic impulse for which the concept Jewishness signified the worst of animality. In Hitler's parlance, Jews were the viruses and parasites of the German society. As such, the only rational

conclusion was to exterminate them.

O'Hearne once again follows the compulsion of the taboo. He opposes Elizabeth's argument by claiming that animals "do not *understand* death;" therefore, they have no "fear" of it as they have no intellectual understanding of the nature of death. To develop his point, O'Hearne draws on an evolutionary account grounded within a mathematical framework: "dying is, for an animal, just something that happens, something against which there may be a revolt of the organism but not a revolt of the soul. And the lower down the scale of evolution one goes, the truer this is. To an insect, death is the breakdown of systems that keep the physical organism functioning, and nothing more." In O'Hearne's perspective, it is impossible to equate the killing of an animal with murdering a human being. While O'Hearne regards killing animals as "licit," he regards "gratuitous cruelty" as "illicit" (109). He continues to add that living in a "community with animals" is just a "prelapsarian wistfulness," a utopia with no ground in reality. O'Hearne draws on Aquinas: "Thomas Aquinas says that friendship between human beings and animals is impossible, and I tend to agree. You can be friends neither with a Martian nor with a bat, for the simple reason that you have too little in common with them." This line of reasoning, in fact, resembles Nagel's gradation of our limitation in understanding the mind of other animals. It describes our difference from animals across an evolutionary curve defined within Cartesian coordinates. Implicit in O'Hearne's account is the tendency that tries to equate intellectual understanding with the totality of what counts as experience itself. While conceding that animals lack an intellectual understanding of death, Elizabeth, nevertheless, once again draws on the truth of the body to question O'Hearne's reduction of the experience to an intellectual understanding: "Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hand an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without

reserve” (110). Elizabeth refers to a philosopher who believes that we cannot say that a veal calf misses its mother because the veal calf cannot conceptualize/understand concepts such as mother-child relationship, absence and presence, and that of missing someone. To her such philosophical positions are just plainly stupid: “In order to, strictly speaking, miss anything, it would first have to take a course in philosophy. What sort of philosophy is this? Throw it out, I say. What good do its piddling distinctions do?” Elizabeth’s acrimonious tone captures the extent of her frustration at the banality of such philosophic positions. Once more Elizabeth underlines the affinity of such positions to discourses of racism: “To me, a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you have a white or a black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and predicate, are more like than they are unlike” (111). What feeds both positions is their outright submissiveness to formal logic/reasoning. Such formalism functions as the categorical imperative, i.e., the taboo, that keeps watch over and, in fact, suppresses our resemblance to animals. This taboo guards the historical line where the human meets its non-human other.

The lesson, likewise, closes on the notes with which it starts, i.e., on Elizabeth’s moral rigor as well her animality, i.e., “the smell of cold cream, of old flesh,” seen once again from John’s perspective (115). In her conversation with John, Norma accuses Elizabeth’s desire as one of “extend[ing] her inhibiting power over the whole community!” On John’s suggestion that Elizabeth might be “sincere,” Norma ascribes her sincerity to Elizabeth’s madness (113). On her way to the airport, rattled and shaken by emotion, Elizabeth, likewise, describes herself to his son as “mad” (114). She describes herself to John in words that are reminiscent of Kafka’s *Hunger Artist* and of Kafka himself, who are the very figures of the Unhappy Consciousness in the

narrative. Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, Elizabeth cannot digest the reality that defines the protocols of "normal" discourse among people, a reality which is, of course, premised upon sacrificing and devouring animals (114). Like all other Coetzee's hybrid heroines, she feels lost, at the odds with the world wherein she lives. She describes her feeling in the world by comparing herself to a person living in a Nazi's universe:

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, "yes, it's nice, isn't it? Polish-Jewish skin it's made of, we find that's best, the skin of young Polish-Jewish virgins." And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, "Treblinka, 100% human stearate." Am I dreaming, I say to myself. What kind of house is this?

Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life, everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?* (115)

These lines shed light on the price Elizabeth has had to pay for refusing to conform to what we owe our identity across our history. This history, as Adorno and Horkheimer contend, has been sacrificial in nature. To be able to write this history, we have had to sacrifice human and nonhuman others. What troubles Elizabeth is a world wherein sacrifice has been transformed from a ritual into the precondition of the ratio, in Adorno's and Horkheimer's words, an "element of character" and "subjectivity" (42). Elizabeth does not answer O'Hearne's counter on the impossibility of living in a "community with the animals." But to write a different history, we have to confront the taboo that keeps watch over animals. This alternative history might be

premised upon the realization of our “kindness to animals,” a “kindness” relying on the truth of the body and the truth of the oral as against abstract rationality.

Chapter 6

The Ban on Images: The Suffering Body and the Question of Evil, *Elizabeth Costello's* Lessons

V and VI

Having highlighted the sacrificial nature of our rationality and its costs for the human and nonhuman others, including but not limited to the reality of suffering experienced by the body we share with animals, Lesson V and VI once again address the tension between the real and the ideal in relation to the reality of the human body/suffering body but this time specifically in terms of its representation in religious and aesthetic terms. Lesson V's and VI's engagement with the question of representation makes sense as it follows Elizabeth's plea for "sympathetic imagination" and "poetic engagement" in Lessons III & IV. If "poetic engagement" is the gateway to a different understanding/relation to the suffering body and the animal others, then aesthetics of representation, as an element in the kind of engagement Elizabeth has in mind, has a certain urgency for the understanding of suffering at stake here. Lesson V and VI can be read as bans against reducing suffering to an image. While Lesson V highlights the inadequacy of literary or aesthetic representation (conceived as the image of suffering) to the task, Lesson IV takes a step further by positing the realistic (imagistic) rendition of suffering as plainly evil. Needless to emphasize that it is the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative with her bodily sensory attentiveness that once again meditates the problematics in question in these lessons.

In lesson V, Elizabeth flies to Zululand, South Africa to attend her sister's honorary degree conferral ceremony. Her sister, Blanche, initially trained as a classical scholar but retrained as a medical missionary, has moved to Africa to pursue a religious vocation. Publishing a book, *Living for Hope*, about her experiences at the Hospital of Blessed Mary, which she has

founded and where she provides care for children suffering from AIDS, Blanche has raised from obscurity to fame. She is to be awarded an honorary degree in the humanities in recognition of her achievements. In her talk in the graduation ceremony, Blanche frustrates her audience's expectation by providing a critique of the historical trajectory of the humanist enterprise. She criticizes the humanist heritage for the abdication of its critical vocation for the recovery of "the True Word" (122). Seen from Blanche's perspective, the humanities has foregone the ideal to which it owns its origin, i.e., redemption. According to Blanche, the humanist's attention to the text of the classics was initially intended to understand humanity in its unredeemed state as a means to shed light on the state of the redeemed humanity and the idea of redemption depicted in the Greek New Testament. If the *New Testament* envisaged humanity in its redeemed state, the Greeks and the classics were nothing but a record of humanity in its unredeemed state. The study of the classics, therefore, was the key to a better comprehension of what exactly hinged on the idea of redemption. In Blanche's account, the idea of redemption immanent in the *New Testament* and its central narrative, i.e., the resurrection of Jesus/humanity, was eventually supplanted by the study of the classics as an alternative vision of a good life. What was supposed to be a subsidiary discipline to the understanding of the divine/redeemed humanity eventually evolved into an independent discipline and an alternative vision of the good life. As such, the humanities eventually abdicated its critical vocation. It succumbed to the existing order of things. The images of God and the other world were supplanted by idealized images of Greek gods/goddesses and of men/women made in their images on the one hand, and the narrow work of textual studies, on the other. At the heart of Blanche's talk, her arguments with her interlocutors, including her sister, Elizabeth, is the question of redemption and what is indispensable from the idea of redemption, i.e., its aesthetics of representation.

Having established the reality of the suffering body, Lesson V can be read as offering an understanding of mortality and of the suffering body that does not rest on the concept of sacrifice and its aesthetic/religious correlative, i.e., the sublimation of suffering, death and mortality into an image. Lesson V, critiques the limitations inherent in acts of symbolic projection. Seen from Adorno's perspective, such acts seek to ideate/idealize positive/utopian images of salvation at the expense of annihilating, transubstantiating, and devouring the suffering body. The dynamics of Lesson V can be read as corresponding to Adorno's adherence to the biblical commandment *Bilderverbot*, i.e., the ban on divine images. Following mainly Elizabeth Prichard's reading of the term in Adorno, I will provide a short account of Adorno's invocation of the term *Bilderverbot* and its correlative concept "inverse theology." I will use this account to discuss its relevance to the aesthetic politics of Lesson V, in particular, the dynamics through which Lesson V refuses to sublimate/consummate real suffering into a comforting concept/image of the mind. Adorno's most direct reference to the *Bilderverbot* and its relation with the body, "the flesh," can be found in the following lines from *Negative Dialectics*:⁹⁵

The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite [of representational thinking/idealism]: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit. (207)

⁹⁵ For Adorno's reference to the word in his body of works, see Elizabeth A. Prichard's excellent essay, "*Bilderverbot* Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno's Inverse Theology."

One can locate the following points of emphases in the passage above. A) There is acknowledgment of a certain similarity and agreement between materialism and theology, i.e., “absence” or “ban on” images, on the one hand, and an insistence on “the resurrection of the flesh”, on the other. The two are nevertheless distinct discourses and as such their understanding of the ban of images distinct from each other. B) In his concern for the “object in its fullness,” the materialist ban on images is in line with what Adorno refers to as “the preponderance of the object” (*Negative Dialectics* 183-186). C) Materialism transfigured the religious ban on images by forbidding the positive representation of Utopia. D) Materialism’s “great desire,” is in “the resurrection of the flesh.” In this sense, it is opposed to idealism or philosophical absolutism which are, in Adorno’s thought, premised upon devouring the nonidentical. I will open my brief exposition by focusing on the following questions: What is involved in the idealist enterprise that opposing it partakes of a “desire” for “the resurrection of the flesh”? And how does this “resurrection” relate to the ban on images?

What is involved in the idealist/realistic projection/representation of the object is, in Adorno’s account, the annihilation/transubstantiation of the object/the suffering body into a concept of the mind, into a vision of absolute truth and its correlate, i.e., Utopia. The conception of (a positive image of) Utopia is immanent to any totalitarian or fascistic enterprise. The fascist phantasmagoria feeds on the positive conception of Utopia. For Adorno, this tendency characterized The Third Reich’s military regiment, envisaged its hygiene and eugenicist projects, and materialized the pogroms and concentration camps. Likewise, this positive vision of Utopia also characterized the dynamics of capitalism and its culture industry, often seen by Adorno as the society of the spectacle, and foretold the tragic possibilities of the atomic age. Therefore, in the first instance, Adorno’s understanding of the term *Bilderverbot*, as an immanent gesture of

the materialism Adorno has in mind, is opposed to the idealist/positivist desire that devours the object of its perception for an idealized image of its own mind.

As Pritchard and Christopher Brittain argue, Adorno's dialectical use of the term *Bilderverbot* and his concept of theology can perhaps best be understood in Adorno's description of his own and Benjamin's project as "inverse theology."⁹⁶ In a 1934 letter, referring to Benjamin's essay on Kafka, "Franz Kafka," Adorno expresses what he sees as their "agreement" on Kafka and Kafka's theology:

Let me only mention my own earliest attempt to interpret Kafka, . . . I claimed he represents a photograph of our earthly life from the perspective of a redeemed life, one which merely reveals the latter as an edge of black cloth, whereas the terrifying distanced optics of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself [I]t seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thoughts here - it could indeed be called an "inverse" theology. This position, directed against natural and supernatural interpretations alike, . . . strikes me as utterly identical with

⁹⁶ Because of the limitations of space, I do not indulge in the contentious scholarship on Adorno's investment in the term *Bilderverbot* or provide a detailed account of its implications for his critical theory. Suffice it say that in my reading of this term, I mainly follow Elizabeth A. Pritchard's and Christopher Craig Brittain's elaboration of the term. Both thinkers refuse to read Adorno's negative dialectics as a variant of negative theology. Both read Adorno's reading of Kafka to be in line with Adorno's concept of "inverse theology" as providing a mirror image to the hellish nature of antagonistic society from the position of the "redeemed life" (*Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin: Complete Correspondence* 66). They both believe that Adorno's conception of theory corresponds to Kafka's aesthetic practice for the following reasons: a) it sheds light on the hellish nature of existence and b) while refusing to project a symbolic vision of Utopia, it creates a sense of urgency for an alternative vision of life.

my own. (*Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin: Complete Correspondence* 66-67)

Adorno's invocation of the term "inverse theology" in the passage above is very cryptic and not at all clear at first glance. However, this much is clear that the optical aesthetic of the photograph, in Adorno's metaphor, reveals life in its unredeemed state. While renouncing to provide an image of Utopia, Kafka's aesthetics, nonetheless, reveals the very contours of what Adorno regards as "damaged life" in *Minima Moralia*. It has a certain capacity to reveal and, in fact, unravel the fabrics of our social reality. Pritchard places an understanding of the term in relation to Adorno's trajectory of the theme in his other works, where Adorno makes references to life as seen in/from the light/perspective of redemption. Drawing on Adorno's reading of Kafka, Pritchard states that this light/perspective reveals the world as one of suffering seen from the perspective of the oppressed. Not only does Kafka bring about an inversion of "theological doctrine of the unknowable divine", but, moreover, "an inversion of historical standpoint," wherein history, in contradistinction from official history, is revealed/seen through the standpoint of its victims (308 & 309). Pritchard quotes the following passage from Adorno's reading of Kafka:

In the middle ages, Jews were tortured and executed "perversely"—i.e., inversely; as early as Tacitus, their religion was branded as perverse in a famous passage. Offenders were hung head down. Kafka, the land-surveyor, photographs the earth's surface just as it must have appeared to these victims during the endless hours of their dying. It is for nothing less than such unmitigated torture that the perspective of redemption presents itself to him.

("Notes on Kafka" 268)

Kafka's magic is as follows: what the reader confronts is not a positive representation of the victim's suffering but the perspective of the dying in their final hours. Pritchard eventually

discusses the connection between the term *Bilderverbot* and “inverse theology” to Adorno’s insistence on the “resurrection of the flesh.” Pritchard sees Adorno’s ethical and moral philosophy as an inversion of the Kantian morality. Adorno’s “‘new’ categorical imperative,” Pritchard contends, “reflects the imperatives of a bodily resurrection insofar as it inverts the conventional logic of categorical imperatives: it is authorized not by a vision of formal reason but by a somatic solidarity with sufferers, and furthermore, it makes imperative the elimination of this suffering” (317).⁹⁷ The somatic and the lived experience must, therefore, be included as an integral part of any moral account. The discursive analysis or critical reflection, in fact, has its root in and must take its lead from somatic/physical/suffering body. Far from being an invocation of a conventional account of positive or negative theology, and here’s where Pritchard’s insight really resides, Adorno’s “*Bilderverbot* meets body” (295):

Adorno is emphatic that thinking is indissoluble from the body and that this somatic element is what “makes knowledge move”; It is what lends morality its imperative aspect. Adorno observes, “The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. Woe speaks: ‘Go.’ Hence, the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice.” For Adorno, the will to protect other humans from harm and to seek justice on their behalf is, then, motivated not by

⁹⁷ Here Pritchard has the following passage from Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* in mind: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection” (365).

rationalization but by a visceral form of solidarity. Hence, rather than seeking to expunge the bodily in order to arrive at a “universal reason,” we should seek to activate those feelings which reflect our lived connection to others. (315)⁹⁸

The ban on images in this account follows from Adorno’s commitment to the reality of suffering and the necessity of its inclusion for any cogent moral/ethical account. The recovery and acknowledgment of the bodily and somatic is, in fact, indispensable from Adorno’s understanding of *Bilderverbot* and his conception of theory.

Pritchard’s reading of Adorno’s moral theory as an inversion of the Kantian moral theory is consistent with my reading of Elizabeth Costello’s demand for the incorporation and acknowledgment of the indissoluble reality of suffering body. In my reading of the novel so far animals and the suffering animal body which we share with other animals acquire an authority of their own.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the somatic and the bodily will increasingly appear as indispensable elements of knowledge as the novel progresses. Ultimately, I believe, the question of *Bilderverbot*, materialism and its “desire” are indispensable from the question of aesthetics. In fact, these terms have to be conceived within the aesthetic domain. Insofar as cultural, philosophical or artistic endeavors are concerned, these terms are, strictly speaking, aesthetic questions, hence, the relevance of the sensory and the somatic. In other words, the experience of

⁹⁸ Pritchard’s references above belong to the section titled “Suffering Physical” in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (p. 203).

⁹⁹ In Lesson III and IV, Elizabeth refuses to accommodate the suffering of animals as a concept of the mind or transubstantiate it into a vision of a good/plausible life. In my discussion of dialectics of forgiveness in the *Age of Iron*, I have discussed how an acknowledgment of difference, one’s own particularity, evil, lived experience, overrides the Kantian notion of morality, and have explored the necessity of this overriding for the aesthetic politics of novel and its emancipatory potentials.

reading Kafka, upon which Adorno's invocation of the term "inverse theology" is premised, after all, is an aesthetic experience and not a conceptual category or gesture to be conceived in such terms as negative or positive theology. The possibility of this "resurrection," however limited, is inconceivable outside the category of the aesthetic. In my reading of *Elizabeth Costello* so far, I have tried to show that the best we can hope for having such an experience or perspective is through the mediation of the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, Elizabeth Costello. In other words, the Unhappy Consciousness is the voice of the physical and the somatic in the narrative, and, thus, serves as a reminder of our "kindness to animals." The structure of the lessons, the way they progress, as I will argue, rather than positively visualize this suffering, come to represent this suffering in the mimetic contortions and failures of discourse. It is not an accident that Adorno's style became increasingly cryptic in his later works. In his writing, in fact, Adorno pays homage to the preponderance of suffering in the universe. The Unhappy Consciousness I have discussed so far comes to be embodied in the style of a subject who is the Unhappy Consciousness of philosophy/art and who is, in Adorno's language, both subject and object, passive and active, writing and being written.¹⁰⁰ This subject position and this style constitute the affinity between Adorno and Coetzee/Elizabeth Costello. The somatic and the aesthetic are, therefore, indispensable to Adorno's works and his negative dialectics as to Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and its heroine's language.

The reality of flesh and that of suffering and its relationship with the of the ban on images is underlined by Lesson V's gesture of animality from the very beginning. The link with the realm of animals and the animal body, i.e., our "kindness" as well as indebtedness to animals, is

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of the relationship between Adorno's Unhappy Consciousness and his style of writing, see Steven Helmling's excellent essay "During Auschwitz: Adorno, Hegel, and the 'Unhappy Consciousness' of Critique."

once again brought to the fore at the outset by Lesson V's multiple references to Elizabeth's and Blanche's old physique. Their physique and temperament and the situations in which they find themselves are often described in terms of explicit animal imagery and metaphors. The text reminds us how we have got to this point, viz., the fact that any genuine understanding of our mortality, death, and suffering requires an affective reflection on our resemblance to animals. This is exactly how Coetzee's *Bilderverbot* operates at this point. Instead of positing an anthropocentric image of mortality and salvation, the lesson invites us to reflect on our resemblance to animals and identify the somatic/physical suffering involved in the suffering animal body. In Hegel's account of the Unhappy Consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, the "resurrection of the flesh" in the body of Christ can only lead to logical inconsistency and contradiction, which, ultimately results in the act of Crucifixion. "The resurrection of the flesh," nevertheless, in this reading of Coetzee and Adorno, is premised upon the realization of our "kindness to animals." Elizabeth's first impression of her sister speaks to this resemblance: "Her face is seamed, the backs of her hands are mottled with brown; otherwise she has lasted well. The kind of woman she thinks to herself, who lives to be ninety. *Scrawny* is the word that unwillingly comes to mind: *scrawny as a hen*" (117-118). Elizabeth's description of Blanche and her sister's age in these terms reminds us of Elizabeth's reference to Camus's visceral description of witnessing the slaughtering of a hen as a child and its impact on him in lesson IV. The description foreshadows the thematics to be addressed in lesson V and VI, i.e., human suffering in pangs of death and its representation. Blanche, likewise, refers to Elizabeth's being tired, and, by implication, her age in the following terms: "You look bushed Elizabeth, get some sleep" (118). In addition to its dominant meaning, i.e. being exhausted, the expression in Australia and New Zealand has the further significance of being "lost or bewildered, as in the bush." Elizabeth also meditates on their meeting in the following terms: "Familiarity. Family resemblance. Two

old women in a foreign city, sipping tea, hiding their dismay at each other. Something there capable of being worked up, no doubt about that. Some kind of story skulking, inconspicuous as a mouse in a corner” (118). It is as if the existence of the story we are about to read would not be possible without such animism and without reference to animals. The audience’s frustrated reaction to Blanche’s talk is also perceived in animalistic/somatic terms, in Elizabeth’s mind, as “[raising] people’s hackles” (126). By drawing on animal imagery extensively, lesson V, in fact, problematizes the idealist urge that abstracts from the animal body to generate/guarantee the spectacle of our daily reality.

In this light, the question of suffering, representation and that of the ban on images is cast within the contending notions of what counts as real or substantial. Lesson V, as Stephen Mulhall also contends, offers a reflection on the contending notions of reality. In tandem with Hegel’s dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, the question once again is cast as an argument about what counts as substantial and what counts as insubstantial in the human/godly affair. Blanche opposes the truth of Christianity and its idea of salvation to that of Humanism and its alternative vision of the good life, i.e., Hellenism. The question at stake is what narratives or images can withstand the reality of suffering and equally serve the purpose of salvation. She opposes the two primarily with regards to their stance towards reality, in particular, human suffering, but at the same time in terms of their capacity to transcend our fallen reality. In Blanche’s account, Hellenism offered an “utterly idealized picture of Greek society,” and its visions of rationality and the good life were nothing but illusory (131). According to Blanche, “since it had nothing whatever to do with the lives of real people, humanism went bankrupt” (132). Elizabeth tentatively concurs with Blanche’s criticism of Hellenism even though she disagrees with Blanche that there is nothing to be saved from its ideals: “Hellas, half-naked men, their breast

gleaming with olive oil sitting on the temple steps discoursing about the good and the true, while in the background lithe-limbed boys wrestle and a herd of goats contentedly grazes. Free minds in free bodies. More than an idealized picture, a dream, a delusion. But how else are we to live but by dreams?" (132)¹⁰¹ In Blanche's account, nevertheless, since Humanism failed to provide "guidance" to people, it had to remain content with or, in other words, trapped within the coordinates of existing reality (127). In their attempt to supplant Christianity with an "idealized" image of life, Humanism did away with Christianity and its truth, i.e. redemption. Humanism, thus, was a blind force in history precisely because it failed to see the critical core of Christianity, i.e., its opposition to existing reality, on the one hand, and its desire for an alternative vision of reality, on the other. In a language similar to Adorno's and Horkheimer's, Elizabeth Costello contends that the studia humanitatis died at the hand of the monster it enthroned as the primary principle of the universe, i.e., "the monster of reason, mechanical reason" (123). Christianity, in contrast, in Blanche's reading, is realistic as it deals with real human suffering. This is the truth by which Blanche's counters Elizabeth's challenges throughout.

Elizabeth and Blanche, in fact, share the same values and concerns: human suffering, guidance, and salvation. They differ in their idea of what image or images would serve the purpose of salvation. They both pronounce bans on certain visions or representations of reality or suffering, albeit for different reasons. The two interlocutors are sisters for whom religion and humanism, function as sister discourses and disciplines. The heart of the conflict is their disagreement about questions of representation as they both are well-aware of the kind of values at stakes here are indissociable from their aesthetics of representation. Elizabeth challenges Christianity and Crucifixion, in particular, for its disavowal of beauty and its obsession with the

¹⁰¹ We have access to Elizabeth's mind through Coetzee's use of free indirect speech.

representation of ugliness, agony, death, and mortality: “Why a Christ dying in contortions rather than a living Christ? A man in his prime, in his early thirties: what do you have against showing him alive, in all his living beauty?” (138) According to Elizabeth, the humanists “looked beyond Christianity” for the “contempt” it “exhibits for the human body and therefore for man himself” (139). If Blanche had a desire to import Europe into Zululand, why did she have to opt for “this utterly alien, *Gothic* obsession with the ugliness and mortality of the human body?” Elizabeth Costello is, in fact, questioning the form of the Unhappy Consciousness for whom the body and bodily embodiment, in general, is, as Hegel puts it, “the enemy” that blocks and frustrates its attempts for reconciliation with the Divine, viz., the unessential consciousness’s desire to unite with the essential consciousness. Dismissing the truth content of Elizabeth’s challenge, Blanche focuses to provide a counter to Elizabeth’s defense of the representational politics of Greek art. Blanche states that the Zulus, indeed, were presented with a vision of Greek aesthetics and values. The early colonialists, “educated Europeans,” saw the Zulus as the embodiment of Greek god and goddesses. They “offered” the Greeks to the Zulus and “*wanted* Zululand to be Sparta” and the “Zulus to be Greeks” (140). The Zulus, nevertheless, rejected the Greeks for their lack of realism:

‘Well, the Zulus knew better.’ She waves a hand towards the window, towards the hospital buildings baking under the sun, towards the dirt road winding up into the barren hills. ‘This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it. Which is why African people come to church to kneel before Jesus on the cross, African women above all, who have to bear the brunt of reality. Because they suffer and he suffers with them.’ (141)

Blanche is, of course, partially right about the truth of Christianity and its stance with regards to

reality. Religion contains a critical core. By negating the order of the existent, it reveals that the state of the world is far from ideal. The object of Christianity is transubstantiation; its technique is one of magic. It acknowledges the suffering of earthly existence in the body of Christ. The believer, thus, embraces the reality of suffering. In other words, Christianity translates one's pain into a universal narrative where one's pain is as significant as another's. It translates pain from an individual affair into a communicative act. While Christ moves among people, he also incorporates the figure of the supernatural. It tells believers that it is possible to bear the reality of suffering. It transubstantiates unbearable suffering into a manageable affair. Christ's resurrection also makes the flesh and its representation, i.e. "individuality," as Hegel contends, indispensable to the idea of salvation. The bodily resurrection necessitates and, in fact, calls for spiritual resurrection.¹⁰² There is a basic Hegelian lesson here: without acknowledging particularity, i.e., the particular human body with its desires, experiences, and failures, we cannot conceive of spirituality at all. Coetzee and Adorno, indeed, push this dialectical lesson to its ends.

Nevertheless, in her words to Elizabeth prior to the latter's departure, Blanche betrays the lie that is central to the Christian narrative of salvation:

You backed a loser, my dear. If you had put your money on a different Greek you might still have stood a chance. Orpheus instead of Apollo. The ecstatic instead of the rational. Someone who changes form, changes colour, according to his surroundings. Someone who can die but then come back. A chameleon. A phoenix. . . . Someone who moves among the people, whom they can touch - put their hands into the side of, feel the wound, smell the

¹⁰² In a similar vein to Hegel, Adorno states that "Christian dogmatics, in which the souls were conceived as awakening simultaneously with the resurrection of the flesh, was metaphysically more consistent—more enlightened, if you will—than speculative metaphysics, just as hope means a physical resurrection and feels defrauded of the best part of its spiritualization" (*Negative Dialectics* 401).

blood. But you didn't and you lost. You went for the wrong Greeks, Elizabeth. (145)

Implicit in Blanche's comment is that Christianity is not the one and the only true religion it claims to be and that any other narrative, with the same basic mythical structure, could/may have served the purpose of attracting, healing and fooling the masses. Blanche's view here presents Christianity as an investment subject to the rules of credit and exchange contained in the form of the conditional, "if you had put your money on a different Greek . . ."¹⁰³ It carries the sense that Blanche does not really believe in Christ or its message as the true religion. Is Christianity Blanche's ruse of dealing with suffering as is poetry for Elizabeth Costello's? Seen from Adorno's and Horkheimer's perspective, Blanche's words reveal that Christianity fails to supplant the mythical structure, its cycle of sacrifice-retribution-sacrifice, it claims to have dispensed with.¹⁰⁴ In denouncing the body, in seeing it as an impediment to the divine, in fact, in

¹⁰³ In a somewhat similar vein as Hegel's exploration of the Unhappy Consciousness in his *Phenomenology*, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that in the Christian representation of Jesus "[t]he harm is done precisely by the reflective moment of Christianity, the spiritualization of magic. A spiritual essence is attributed to something which mind identifies as natural. Mind consists precisely in demonstrating the contradiction inherent in such pretensions of the finite. Bad conscience is therefore obliged to present the prophet as a symbol, the magical practice as transubstantiation. It is that which makes Christianity a religion, and, in a sense, the only one: an intellectual link to something intellectually suspect, a special sphere of culture." Adorno and Horkheimer add that this symbolic projection of Christ as the ultimate image of self-sacrifice contains the kernel of several other contradictions/frauds. One such contradiction is immanent in Christianity's devaluation of life. In devaluing life, in the process of self-abnegation, Christianity hands the order of life over to "both God and Caesar" and "acquires a license to manage salvation." As a result, Christianity as "natural love," as a process of self-abnegation succumbs to the order of exchange and "credit": "Christianity, however, wanted to remain spiritual even where it aspired to power. In ideology, it repudiated self-preservation by the ultimate sacrifice, that of the man-god, but thereby relegated devalued life to the sphere of the profane: it abolished the law of Moses but rendered what was theirs unto both God and Caesar. Secular authority is either confirmed or usurped, while Christianity acquires a license to manage salvation. Self-preservation is to be conquered through the imitation of Christ—by order. In this way, self-sacrificing love is stripped of its naivety, severed from natural love and turned to account as credit" (145-146).

¹⁰⁴ See section IV of the chapter "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (144-147).

devaluing earthly existence, Christianity merely reiterates what Adorno and Horkheimer characterized as “[m]ythical inevitability” (46). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “[e]very mythical figure is compelled to do the same thing over and over again. Each of them is constituted by repetition: its failure would mean their end. . . . They are figures of compulsion: the horrors they commit are the curse which has fallen on them” (45-46). In this vein, Joseph—a “local carver” who has been “adopted” by the institution represented by Blanche and who has spent “thirty years of his earthly existence” carving the same exact figure of Christ “in agony” only in different sizes—appears as a mythical figure of compulsion in the narrative (134-139). He figures as the Unhappy Consciousness, whose obsessions/dynamics Hegel explored in detail in his *Phenomenology*. In Hegelian terms, he is caught within the compulsion of “desire and work” (*Phenomenology* 132 par. 218). Joseph sees his identity in his labor and service for Christ. In this labor, he has sacrificed his body for the Saviour; he had continued with his work until he developed arthritis. One may agree with Elizabeth’s intimation: “there is something about the entire crucifixional tradition that strikes me as mean, as backward, as medieval in the worst sense—unwashed monks, illiterate priests, cowed peasants” (139). The persistence of animal imagery in the term “cowed” relates Christianity and the aesthetics of crucifixion, in particular, to ideology and power. The form of its compulsion, the power over the believers, seems to have its ground in the domination of nature, animals, and bodily impulses, in the transubstantiation of suffering and the animal body into its opposite, i.e. spirit. As such, Elizabeth’s point here resonates with her criticism of religion and science in the previous lessons for envisioning God as the God of reason, and, thus, of identifying man primarily as a being that possesses reason and, as such, granting him the right of domination over other creatures. The whole question, embodied in Elizabeth’s discussion with her sister, revolves around the terms with which we choose to come to terms with or confront suffering. This question is, of course, indissociable from the primary

questions of aesthetics, i.e., narrative techniques and representational politics.

To approach this question, once again the narrative acknowledges the primacy of the body. The body here appears as a source of knowledge. Elizabeth has an intimation of the carnivorous nature of Christianity. Initially, apologizing to Blanche for fainting during the Communion, she attributes her fainting to “haven’t been eating properly” since her arrival (143). She can be seen as a descendent of Kafka’s Hunger Artist to whom she also alludes in the final lesson of the novel. Although she is not consciously thinking of this fact when she attends the Communion, her body knows better and reacts to the carnivorous ritual of Christianity.

Msimungu turns, kneels before the altar. A silence falls. Above him looms the crowned head of the tortured Christ. Then he turns and holds up the Host. There is a joyous shout from the body of worshippers. A rhythmic stamping commences that makes the wooden floor vibrate.

She feels herself swaying. The air is thick with the smell of sweat. She clasps Blanche’s arm. ‘I must get out!’ she whispers. . . .

She takes a deep breath trying to clear her head, but it does not help. A wave of cold seems to ascend from her toes. It rises to her face, her scalp prickles with the chill, and she is gone. (142-143)

Through the image of the crucifix, believers, in fact, evade real suffering and responsibility thereof. Suffering is, in a sense, already overcome by Christ. The Crucifixion is the apotheosis of all human suffering, on the one hand, and a testimony to the justice of the universe, on the other. As this double entendre, it annuls the urge/need for any action to transcend the injustice of the

world. Therefore, Christianity shares with the Greek vision of the world the idealism contained in the world of culture. By devouring the body of Christ, the participants are transformed into the community of believers. This concept of community is inimical to particularity, i.e., other bodies. This aversion to particularity is, as I will try to show, what it shares with the Greek culture. In both cases, the question is the mastery of nature which is epitomized in devouring/transubstantiating the suffering body.

It is interesting to note that the reliance of this carnivorous desire upon the spectacularization of the situation is brought to the foreground by the presence of the television crew and the minister's consent to the recording of the whole ritual. The culture industry merely accommodates this carnivorous ritual as does the latter accommodate the former. This reference merely underlines, as Adorno emphasized throughout his career, the continuity between myth and modernity. It depicts how the former spectacle feeds the latter and vice-versa.

The moral imperative here is cast within aesthetic terms. How is it possible to acknowledge, deal with or confront human suffering without projecting or transubstantiating suffering into an image or symbol? In other words, how is it possible to tell a story without feeding on the suffering animal body? Put differently still, how is it possible to tell a story about victims of suffering without falling victim to the context of the real (i.e., "damaged life"), without sacrificing/subjecting those victims once again to this very context? The question here seems to be the same question that occupies Susan Barton's mind in *Foe*: "without desire, how is it possible to tell a story?" (88).¹⁰⁵ The problematics of representation are dealt with a month later

¹⁰⁵ This question has a certain urgency for Coetzee as he has been criticized for his lack of realistic representation, in particular, for ducking the task of representing the reality of South Africa and for not giving voice to his black characters.

by Elizabeth's reflection on "their unsisterly parting" (145) As in *Age of Iron*, critical reflection is only made possible via giving up one's subjectivity to the agency of the letter. She conceives her reflections as a fictional letter to Blanche; she has no intention of mailing the letter. As such she is able to withdraw, even though only partially, the letter/discourse from sibling rivalry and the order of exchange and competition. In the letter—wherein she recounts her encounters with her mother's friend, Mr. Philips—she engages in a dialectical reflection on the problematics of representation and truth, particularly with respect to the question of rivalry between the humanities and Christianity. At every stage, she tries to acquire a disposition or an attitude that accepts human suffering without subduing it to an idealized image.

In her letter, she describes Mr. Philips's deteriorating physical and mental condition. Elizabeth describes Mr. Philips's features and habits when she first meets him, i.e., before being struck by cancer, in the following words: "When I first met him, Mr P was still quite a spry old fellow, with his pipe and his blazer and cravat and his David Niven moustache He took care of his appearance, had hobbies, read books; there was still life in him, as Mother put it." After the surgery, he looks like an entirely different person. Due to "a laryngectomy," he is left with an "unsightly, raw-looking hole in his throat." Through the use of a prosthesis, he can only produce a sound which amounts to nothing more but "a kind of croaking," obviously another reference to one's animality. At her mother's request, she pays him a series of visits as an attempt to "take him out of himself" (146). Elizabeth's story can be read as Elizabeth's ethical response to a deteriorating body. In other words, her response can be read as an alternative to the humanist and Christian way of dealing with suffering. On her visits to Mr. Philips's house, she sits as a painting model for Mr. Philips. On one occasion, something out of the ordinary happens. Being frustrated in failing to paint her as usual, Mr. Philips makes a comment in the form of the past hypothetical.

He writes the following message on the pad which he uses as his main tool for communication “Wish I could paint you in the nude . . . [w]ould have loved that” (147). Elizabeth, as she puts it, does something “out of character” (149); she takes off her brassier for Mr. Philips. Being over forty and having had two children, she no longer possesses her youthful beauty, but she thinks of her breasts as a “blessing” in “that place of withering away and dying” (148). She reflects on her pose as follows:

Where did I learn that pose, gazing calmly into the distance with my robe hanging about my waist like a cloud and my divine body on show? *From the Greeks*, I now realize Blanche: from the Greeks and from what generations of Renaissance painters made of the Greeks. As I sat there I was not myself, or not just myself. Through me a goddess was manifesting herself, Aphrodite or Hera or perhaps even Artemis. I was of the immortals.
(149)

Unlike what Blanche thinks, the Greeks did not utterly lack a sense of truth or reality. The truth content of Greek aesthetic and the arts consists in its focus on the human body and its conception of the human body in terms of the beautiful and divine. In contradistinction to Christianity and its tradition, Hellenism did not thrive on devaluing life; it did not proffer in directly devouring/transubstantiating the body. The death’s overcoming, nevertheless, is rather attempted via beautiful images which exclude all suffering to achieve a mesmerizing but, at the same time, a distant image of the human ideal. Nevertheless, in its refusal to deal with death, mortality, and suffering, Greek aesthetics remains untrue to the body and its pain. It sacrifices the reality of suffering for its image of the ideal. As such it remains merely an idealized picture of humanity, and thus, foreign to reality of the human body and its rhythms.

Without renouncing her interest in the body and its divinity, Elizabeth, nevertheless, tries to make a correction to Greek Idealism. She immediately dissociates herself from Greek goddesses via focusing on a different understanding of the concept of “blessing.” Unlike the cold lifeless vestige of Greek goddesses, Elizabeth conceives of herself and her body as partaking of the category life, on the one hand, and as being life-giving, on the other. Her breasts are once again the focus of representation: “what was going on revolved around my breasts, that I was sure of, around breast and breast milk. Whatever else they did, those antique Grecian goddesses did not exude, whereas I was exuding, figuratively speaking: I was exuding into Mr Philips’s room, I felt it and I would bet he felt it too, long after I had taken my leave” (149). Here, Elizabeth opposes an almost earthly image of beauty, which is more than an image as it partakes of life and is also life-giving, to the Greek’s crude vision of an idealized beauty that is almost otherworldly. She associates herself in that particular moment with Mary of Nazareth as represented by the renaissance painter Correggio. She imagines the day she was painted in the following words:

Imagine the scene in Correggio’s studio that day, Blanche. With his brush the man points: ‘Lift it up so. No, not with the hand, just with two fingers.’ He crosses the floor, shows her. ‘So.’ And the woman obeys, doing with her body as he commands. Other men watching all the while from the shadows: apprentices, fellow painters, visitors.

Who knows who she was, his model that day: a woman from the streets? the wife of a patron? The atmosphere in the studio electric, but with what? Erotic energy? The penises of all those men, their *verges* tingling? Undoubtedly. Yet something else in the air too. Worship. The brush pauses as they worship the mystery that is manifested to them: from the body of the woman, a life flowing in a stream. (149-150)

Here the image of Mary offers a counter to the Greek's idolization of beauty, on the one hand, and the Christian's fixation on the agonized body, on the other. Correggio's vision of Mary reverts from the cold aesthetics of the Greeks with their fetish for the fantastic and the exaggerated vision of bodily beauty. Correggio's image, furthermore, can be read as the obverse image of Crucifixion and its carnivorous ritual. The image of Mary intermingles the earthly and the divine. This earthly angel is of the essence of life and is life-giving; it "exudes" life not blood. In other words, the image of Mary is already the image of the ideal, the image of the earthly as the divine. Elizabeth's counter to Blanche is thus Renaissance Italy, "when immemorial Christian images and observances are invaded by the humanists' dream of antique Greece" (150).

Humanism, in Elizabeth's account, therefore, was never a regression on the Christian picture of the world. Renaissance humanism, thus, contains the promise of reconciliation. As Mulhall also puts it, Elizabeth invokes Correggio's painting to work out a "synthesis of Greek and Christian culture": "it reorients the Incarnation towards life rather than death and towards the body as the bearer of life and giver of sustenance as essentially fertile and creative. . . . One might say: If Orpheus is Elizabeth's overlooked Greek, Mary is Blanche's overlooked Christian" (199).

Strictly speaking, however, Orpheus is not Elizabeth's "overlooked Greek." Elizabeth's attempt here is to escape the mythic structure of guilt and retribution entirely. If Mary has an allure for Elizabeth, it is because she holds the promise of escaping the mythic logic that sacrifices the animal body for a sense of our identity. Mary is not a mythic figure or an idealized picture of divinity precisely because Correggio's model that particular day could have been any woman. The fact that Correggio's choice of the model has been arbitrary speaks to the fact that the image of divinity does not necessarily require a divine being or an essence in the thereafter. It already exists on the earth; Mary's divinity does not require the narrative of death and reincarnation characteristic of mythical figures and their fate. Elizabeth describes Mary's revelation of her

beauty and her own as “acts of humanity”: “Nothing compels us to do it, Mary or me. But out of the overflow, the outflow of our human hearts we do it nevertheless: drop our robes, reveal ourselves, reveal the life and beauty we are blessed with” (150). The truth of Renaissance humanism consists in locating beauty, agency, and divinity in the human subject: “The humanities teach us humanity. After the centuries-long Christian night, the humanities give us back our beauty, our human beauty. That was what you forgot to say. That is what the Greeks teach us, Blanche, the right Greeks. Think about it” (151). This is the point where Elizabeth concludes her letter.

The story, however, does not end there. What Elizabeth does not write about concerns her visits to Mr. Philips after he has received “another dose of radiation.” This entire section, which is not written as a letter, is about the body in pangs of death and suffering. It culminates in Elizabeth’s particular response to suffering. The last section of lesson V is written in the limited third-person point of view and mainly in the form of free indirect speech. Mr. Philips now is on his death bed: “not a spry old fellow any longer, just an old fellow, an old bag of bones waiting to be carted away.” On one of her visits, Elizabeth decides to give him a treat. She performs an act of fellatio on the “old” man (151). There is nothing pleasant in the act for her, of course, as it captures Elizabeth’s comforting gestures for an old man waiting his turn.

It goes on long enough for her, the woman, to drop a hand casually on to the bedcover and begin to stroke, ever so gently, the place where the penis, if the penis were alive and awake, ought to be; and then, when there is no response, to put the covers aside . . . and open up the front and plant a kiss on that entirely flaccid little thing, and take it in her mouth and mumble it until it stirs faintly with life. It is the first time she has seen pubic hair that has turned grey. Stupid of her not to have realized that happens. It will happen to her too, in due

course. Nor is the smell pleasant either, the smell of an old man's nether parts, cursorily washed.

Less than ideal, she thinks, withdrawing and covering old Mr Philips up and giving him a smile and patting his hand. The ideal would be to send in a young beauty to do it for him, a *fille de joie* with the plumb new breasts old men dream about. . . . But then, once you are past a certain age everything is less than ideal; Mr Philips might as well get used to that. Only the gods are for ever young, the inhuman gods. The gods and the Greeks. (153-154)

Here, in a dialectical turn, Elizabeth's mind reaches back to the truth of Christianity, i.e. the acknowledgment of suffering and mortality.¹⁰⁶ For their renunciation of real human suffering, Greek art and Humanism for that matter retain an idealist core. For their Utopian vision of the world, they sacrifice the real sentient suffering body. While humanism forgets about human suffering in its fetishization of beauty, Christianity sublimates suffering via the body of the Savior. In this sense, the Greek and the Christian aesthetics of representation are alike. The sentient body is not a hindrance but is the key to the understanding of real suffering, on the one hand, and of ethical response, on the other. Any representation that does away with human suffering for an idealized image of beauty and divinity, in fact, remains trapped in the false dictates of mythic time. What is myth but a sense of entrapment within the bounds of a timeless framework? In life, everything is "less than ideal." Elizabeth's acknowledgment of human

¹⁰⁶ As Adorno contends, repetition is an integral part of Hegel's dialectical process. Adorno compares it to the Jewish procession Echternach: "As a sense of nonidentity through identity, dialectics is not only an advancing process but a retrograde one at the same time. To this extent, the picture of the circle describes it correctly. The concept's unfoldment is also a reaching back, and synthesis is the definition of the difference that perished, "vanished," in the concept Dialectics is not ashamed to recall the famous procession of the Echternach: one jump forward, two jumps back" (*Negative Dialectics* 157).

suffering, nevertheless, does not rest on the aesthetic politics of crucifixion or transubstantiation either. Elizabeth's act rather can be read as an acceptance of suffering *à la lettre* without the element of sacrifice. Her act is, in fact, a moving away from an idealized image of suffering towards the physical body where it belongs. For Elizabeth, the performance of oral sex constitutes her ethical response. Elizabeth does not treat suffering as sublimated matter; her relationship to the body does not have its root in a carnivorous desire. Elizabeth is, indeed, associated with the Kafka's Hunger Artist and as such she does not give in to carnivorous desires. She cannot digest the suffering body. If as Freud speculates in *Totem and Taboo*, humans' conception of animism, the origin of totem and taboo, and acts of sacrifice have their origin in the humans' inability to come to terms with their own mortality, then Elizabeth's performance of oral sex in this context can be read as an attempt to transcend the logic of totem and taboo and that of sacrifice. Can this way of acknowledging the body, of honoring its reality and the reality of its mortality, by activating, at least, a memory of its capacity for sexual pleasure and its various sublimations and transformations, be part of an understanding of what it is to be part of the body of humanity?

The word/concept Elizabeth thinks of to describe her action/act of humanity is the Christian word "*caritas*": "For that, in the end, is what she is convinced it is. From the swelling of her heart she knows it, from the utter, illimitable difference between what is in her heart and what Nurse Naidoo would see, if by some mischance Nurse Naidoo, using her pass key, were to fling open the door and stride in" (154). As a concept, *caritas* is inscribed as one of the central tenets of Christian theology. It is, in fact, the most important of the graces. Nevertheless, Elizabeth embraces this concept without trading real suffering for an image. What Elizabeth speaks of at this point is the primacy of the body and its claim to knowledge. Elizabeth, of course, does not give up on discursive reasoning—she is, in fact, a rigorous dialectician, but, in

the manner of Adorno's negative dialectics, she embraces an understanding of knowing and of knowledge that takes its lead from the primacy of the body and one that acknowledges the primacy of experience. The bodily experience and the discursive knowledge that follows from it have their ground in "the nonidentical," i.e., the somatic identification with the physical, bodily suffering of other human/nonhuman bodies. This way of knowing overrides, in fact, inverts the Kantian taboo by including the experience of the heart and the body as part of the ethical/moral account. While she conceives of her act in terms of *caritas*, she cannot fully conceptualize the nature of her experience: "What can one make of episodes like this, unforeseen, unplanned, out of character? Are they just holes, holes in the heart, into which one steps and falls and then goes on falling?" (155) Mulhall's reading of this passage resonates with my dialectical reading at this point: "In the end, then, the human body—call it the spirit's necessary embodiment in flesh and blood—may pose an insuperable problem for both Hellenism and Christianity, for humanism and religion alike; and if for them, why not for any cultural system of sense-making? Perhaps that is the truth about the body: It is both the origin of human ways of making sense of things, and that which exceeds any such sense-making system."¹⁰⁷ Mulhall quotes the following passage from Attwell's interview with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* to underline his speculation that any system of sense-making, including literary discourse, cannot withstand or account for the "reality" of the body (201). Coetzee's words here resonate with the politics of representation and its failures in Lesson V.

If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected.

That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not," and the proof

¹⁰⁷ Mulhall's description of "the human body" as "the spirit's necessary embodiment in flesh and blood" reads like words out of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which may place his reading of the novel at odds with his Wittgensteinian stance towards the problem of reality/realism in the novel.

that it *is* is the pain that it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (one can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure.)

Not grace, then, but at least the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.

(Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, but the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so. (248)

In my reading, human suffering appears as un-sublimated matter, as the remainder of the concept/image of suffering. It is in this sense that Lesson V announces the ban on images of suffering. The suffering body functions as “the nonidentity” of identity. The ethical/moral response is invoked by the somatic identification with the suffering body, which is nonetheless, not reducible to concepts, which is not to say that it cannot be acknowledged. The only thing we can do is to accept the reality of suffering *à la lettre*. There is no external standard by which one can measure the experience of the body other than that of the body itself. To posit it as a concept is to judge it by an external standard. But does not literature's task partly consist in the representation of the body and its sensations? Does not its task consist in exciting our emotions by way of its power of representation? Does it not place literary discourse at odds with its own

desires? These questions take us to Lesson VI which is titled *The Problem of Evil*.

Lesson VI recounts Elizabeth Costello's invitation to speak at a conference in Amsterdam on the question of evil where she chooses to talk about what she finds to be evil in Paul West's novel, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. The novel is an account of the failed July plot (1944) to assassinate Hitler inside his Wolf's Lair field headquarters near Rastenburg, East Prussia. The plot was led by Claus von Stauffenberg, a Wehrmacht officer of aristocratic descent, and several other Wehrmacht officers. A particular passage in which Paul West powerfully recreates in graphic detail the torturing of the officers at the hands of Hitler's executioner haunts Elizabeth's imagination. At Hitler's bidding, the whole scene is to be produced as a film, as the ultimate imagery of pain and humiliation, for Hitler's pleasure primarily and, of course, as a lesson to all dissidents. The whole scene, thus, partakes of the paraphernalia of the culture industry and its techniques. "I want them to linger. I want them naked as well. After all, they will end their lives as movie stars!" says Hitler to his hangman in Paul West's fiction (259). Hitler is a perfectionist and like a serious director wants all the details, gestures and movements to be accurate to the task: "I shall be watching for you, mein herr, on film, and may the devil himself help you if I catch you putting a hand wrong. Any of those swine get off too easily—I mean with a sudden drop—and you yourself will eat the meal of your private parts fried in machine oil!" (260-261). Elizabeth's situation at the conference becomes awkward when she realizes that Paul West on "whose soul she spends so many pages" is among the conferees (161). The lesson narrates Elizabeth unsuccessful attempt to revise/rewrite her talk—to circumvent what might come across as an attack on a fellow novelist—her meditations on her encounter with evil in her personal life in relation to Paul West's novel and the acts of reading and writing in general, her doubts and scruples about her stance on Paul West's novel—especially because she thinks she has committed the same literary evils of which she accuses Paul West—and an awkward

encounter with Paul West in which she rambles fanatically when her apology is met by Paul West's silence.

Lesson VI starts with the truth content of the lesson V. It highlights the irreducibility of the body and the suffering body to a consoling concept, image/symbol of mind or culture. As in Lesson V, it contests the tendency that reduces the body as an object of knowledge. Lesson VI, nevertheless, takes a step further: it renounces any symbolic or realistic representation of suffering as plainly evil. In Lesson VI, the knowledge of this evil is communicated through the agency of the bodily and the somatic. Far from treating the body as an object of knowledge, Lesson VI, by contrast, highlights the primacy of the body as a means of experience and knowledge. As always, Elizabeth Costello, as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, is the medium through which this knowledge is communicated to the reader.

The fact that in the previous Lesson Elizabeth cannot even conceive of her last encounter with Mr. Philips as a letter, even a fictional letter, as a text to her sister may speak for her reluctance to reduce the body and its suffering to an image of the mind, to the order of the symbolic. Even though the event is still produced for us as a text, it can be read an allegory for the primacy of the body and its suffering. Put differently, although the body and its suffering is the palimpsest of discursive thought, the body itself is not reducible to discursive language of any sort, to the status of the letter or that of the text. At least, we can assume that resisting the reduction of the body to the letter is the desire of these lessons. The fact that we still read the letter as a text is, in fact, indicative of the aporia of literature and literary discourse. What does this aporia tell us about the question of evil?

Perhaps no other contemporary thinker explored the ambivalences, aporias, and

antinomies of modern art and literary representation than Adorno.¹⁰⁸ It is Adorno who famously declared that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” a position that he modified and revised but whose concerns he never renounced (34 “Cultural Criticism and Society”).¹⁰⁹

Coetzee’s fiction with its sensitivity and references to the Holocaust and the context of World War II and with its equal ambivalences and aversions toward realism and the representation of suffering can be categorized as a literature that belongs to and, in fact, tries to find a response to what Adorno specified as writing, more properly put, as the situation of writing after Auschwitz.¹¹⁰ This point even becomes more apparent in Lesson VIII and the novel’s postscript wherein Coetzee’s language turns against not only realism but against art’s “*imagerie*” itself.

Adorno’s ban on images was, in fact, particularly a ban on the spectacularization of suffering

¹⁰⁸ In fact, his posthumous work, *Aesthetic Theory*, can be read as nothing but one such attempt.

¹⁰⁹ In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, Adorno writes: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living” (362-363).

¹¹⁰ Having a non-rational Levinasian framework towards Coetzee’s literary language and of literature in general, Attridge contends that this ethical attitude towards the other, i.e. radical openness to the other, may harbour equally good or evil. Alluding to Lesson VI of *Elizabeth Costello*, among other examples, Attridge highlights that literary language is not immune to this evil precisely for the kind of ethical encounter at stake in the literary “event.” “Coetzee is certainly not oblivious to the riskiness of this conception of the ethics of literature. The possibility of a literary work’s doing damage is at the heart of another so-called ‘lesson’ in *Elizabeth Costello*, ‘The Problem of Evil’, and we may suspect that reading Byron has had a less than wholesome effect on *Disgrace*’s David Lurie The writer as well as the reader may proceed by a non-rational responding to voices, external or internal (the latter are termed ‘countervoices’ by Coetzee), with the same openness to any possible outcome, good or bad” (102). Attridge’s reading does not address the specificity of evil at stake in Lesson VI, i.e., the visual, perfect representation of suffering, as well as the specificity of Elizabeth’s reaction to such a representation. Setting aside the truism that there is risk involved in everything, here it is not literary language and literature in general that risks harbouring evil as such but a specific type of literature and literary language. This is exactly why, in contradistinction from Attridge, I characterize Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* as belonging to the situation of writing after Auschwitz.

which he considered as an injustice to the memory of the dead. For Adorno, any attempt to make suffering into a consoling image of mind or culture would entail the risk of joining the forces of the adversary. Likewise, this is a concern Coetzee faced in his literary representations of suffering in South Africa. Rejecting to conceptualize suffering, i.e., positively conceive it, he was often accused of being an escapist artist, lacking commitment. In his essay “Commitment,” and in more depths, in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno discussed the representation of suffering as one of art’s antinomies. The following, rather lengthy, passage from Adorno’s essay “Commitment” where he comments on Schönberg’s compositions can be a good starting point. The passage resonates with Elizabeth Costello’s ambivalences and Coetzee’s confession of his impotence in dealing with the body and its pains:

There is something painful in Schönberg’s compositions It is rather the way in which, by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The esthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could stand upright before justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation. Works of less than the highest rank are even willingly absorbed, as contributions to clearing up the past. When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder. (312-313)

Not only did Adorno question the realistic representation of suffering as problematic, but he also highlighted that artistic representations in general can never be equal to the task in their expression of suffering. According to Adorno, nevertheless, realistic representations carried the greatest risk and the greatest responsibility for betraying the suffering of the victims. This is partly why Adorno criticized with a passion Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy and his conception of committed literature.

Likewise, Elizabeth describes his feeling of reading Paul West's novel, his rendition of the executioner's treatment of its victims, as being "sick with the spectacle" (158). The word through which she describes the lines that depict the scene of torture is "obscene." This is eventually the word Elizabeth takes to carry out the ban on the images of suffering:

Obscene. That is the word, a word of contested etymology, that she must hold on to as talisman. She chooses to believe that *obscene* means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain off-stage. Paul West has written an obscene book, he has shown what ought not to be shown. That must be the thread of her talk when she faces the crowd, that she must not let go of. (168-169)

The voyeuristic pleasure/position of "want[ing] to see" is perhaps one that Elizabeth and we, as readers of Paul West and literary discourse in general, share with Hitler. The metaphor by which Elizabeth conceives the logic of the taboo is the age-old metaphor of contagion treated *à la lettre*. Her account of the situation is not dissimilar to the Platonic hermeneutics of being possessed by an exterritorial agency. By choosing to depict the last hours of these victims, Paul West has let the devil enter him through the hangman in the act of writing, and through Paul West the devil has entered Elizabeth in her act of reading the novel. The whole game partakes of the economy of "desire." The game is the act of being possessed by the spectacle in the act of

possessing/consuming the scene of torture: “She has begun to wonder whether writing what one desires, anymore than reading what one desires, is in itself a good thing” (160). In this game, Elizabeth feels to have been spurred on by Paul West. Her reading of the novel does not partake in the category of freedom. Her interior monologues, by which she tries to make sense of her experience of reading the novel, are replete with metaphors and expressions that connote lack of agency and control: “*Let me not look . . . Do not make me go through with it!* But Paul West did not relent. He made her read, excited her to read. For that she will not easily forgive him” (179). This is perhaps why she remembers her encounter with evil as a young girl where she was sexually violated about which she has kept her silence throughout the years. There is, indeed, an analogy between reading Paul West and her earlier encounter with the devil as a teenage girl.

What is of prime importance in this lesson is that Elizabeth’s attempt to make sense of her reading experience takes its lead from her sensory bodily experience. Despite her many doubts and scruples, despite the inadequacy of her arguments, despite the possible spectacle of embarrassment that can be mentally taxing in academic contexts, and despite the fear of being reduced to “the old-fashioned censor,” she decides to proceed with her talk (164). Her certainty of experiencing evil, of encountering the devil herself, comes to her predominantly as a tactile experience: “She felt the brush of his leathery wing, as sure as soap, when she read those dark pages” (168). In fact, due to the novel’s gestures of animality, sensory and tactile imagery comes to occupy a central position in Coetzee’s *Lessons*. She even thinks of the reaction her talk may induce in Paul West in terms of animal imagery: “What will it matter then if once upon a time she ruffled the feathers of some stranger in Amsterdam?” (164) It is by now clear that the common metaphorical language should be read against the grain of its character, i.e., literally. The sensory is cast within the matrix of our resemblance to animals. Touching is a source of knowledge. She has accepted the letter of invitation because “the obscene touch of West’s book was still rank

upon her,” a further correspondence between the act of reading the novel and sexual violence (159).

What allows Elizabeth to empathize with Red Peter’s touching of his wounds is precisely this valuation of the somatic element as a means of knowledge. As the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, she carries with herself the memory of the somatic element. Whenever she feels lost, she attempts to find her way back via the following dictum that she keeps repeating to herself: “Go back to the experience” (179). It is the bodily and the somatic that insist on the ban on the images of suffering. Adorno’s valorization of the Unhappy Consciousness here resonates with Elizabeth Costello’s insistence on the authority of the body and its experience:

The supposed basic facts of consciousness are something other than mere facts of consciousness. In the dimension of pleasure and displeasure they are invaded by a physical moment. All pain and all negativity, the moving forces of dialectical thinking, assume the variously conveyed, sometimes unrecognizable form of physical things, just as all happiness aims at sensual fulfillment and obtains its objectivity in that fulfillment. . . . It is the somatic element’s survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move, the unassuaged unrest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge. Conscious unhappiness [Unhappy Consciousness] is not a delusion of the mind’s vanity but something inherent in the mind, the one authentic dignity it has received in its separation from the body. This dignity is the mind’s negative reminder of its physical aspect; its capability of that aspect is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have. The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering: “While there is a beggar, there is a myth,” as Benjamin put it. This is why the philosophy of identity is the mythological form of thought. (*my addition, Negative Dialectics* 202-203)

The somatic moves knowledge and is an integral component of consciousness and that of critical thinking even though its share is often repressed/denied in the formation of what passes as knowledge. In this sense, in a certain reading of Hegel, Adorno's thinking can be read as a critical revision of Hegel's concept of spirit and the Unhappy Consciousness precisely for his insistence on the physical and the somatic in knowledge. The possibility of knowledge, happiness, and reconciliation revolves upon this emphatic recognition of the somatic element in thought, in our contemporary situation, upon the Unhappy Consciousness.¹¹¹ Elizabeth Costello and Red Peter, like other Coetzee's hybrid figures, are, in fact, the very figures of hope and redemption. The novel refuses to present itself as a consoling image of culture. Its refusal consists in problematizing the facile discourse of happiness that characterizes this culture and its entertainment industry. What function does the entertainment industry serve but to misrepresent, misidentify, or reduce suffering to an image or series of images as commodity proper to be consumed within the span of a few minutes or hours of supposedly leisure time, which is, in fact, an extension of the working hours?¹¹² If as Adorno stressed, "[a]ll post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage," Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, precisely to the extent that it refuses to arrange its elements after the logic/image of this culture, attempts to offer a correction to it (*Negative Dialectics* 367).

In this light, *Elizabeth Costello* and its heroine seem to comply with what Adorno regarded as the new categorical imperative after Auschwitz:

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange

¹¹¹ In this sense, Adorno's thought follows the materialist tradition, of Marxism in particular. What other justification do Marx's writings have to offer other than the fact that they been conceived from the perspective of suffering individuals? The form knowledge takes in Marx is conveyed to it by the physical, and by extension, the mental suffering of workers. Marx's insight, in fact, rests upon and takes its lead from the somatic element.

¹¹² See Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*.

their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives. (365)

Adorno's version of morality/materialism takes its lead from the body and its suffering which is, of course, not reducible to discursive language even as this language itself takes its lead from "unbearable physical agony." The ban on images of suffering is a ban against this reduction of suffering to cultural staples of meaning or discursive language. In this light, it is interesting to note that the victims of Paul West's novels are not Jews; neither are they torch-bearers of human ideals and virtues. In Paul West's fiction, the victims share many of Hitler's devilish principles and ideals. Elizabeth's aversion toward the scene of torture is, therefore, not an aversion to the suffering and pain of innocent victims of the Holocaust. It is rather an aversion toward the depiction of suffering as an image per se. It is precisely in this sense that Elizabeth complies with the "refractory" nature of the "new categorical imperative." Despite her many scruples, Elizabeth seems to make some absolute claims about the evil in the literary representation of suffering. In response to a member of the audience who labels her a "weak vessel" because of her reaction to Paul West's novel, she states the following:

'The experience that writing offers, or reading - they are the same thing for my purposes, here, today -' (but are they the same thing really? - she is losing her track, what is her track?) 'real writing, real reading, is not a relative one, relative to the writer and the writer's capacities, relative to the reader' (she has not slept in God knows how long, what passed

for sleep on the plane was not sleep). ‘Mr. West when he wrote these chapters, came in touch with something absolute. Absolute evil. His blessing and his curse, I would say. Through reading him that touch of evil was passed on to me. Like a shock. Like electricity.’ She glances at Badings, standing in the wings. *Help me*, her glance says. *Put an end to this*. ‘It is not something that can be demonstrated,’ she says, returning a last time to her questioner. It is something that can only be experienced.” (175)

The category of “experience,” which is never dissociable from the somatic element, cannot be subsumed within the dictates of discursive language and the protocols of academic discourse. Elizabeth’s position, however, does not fall within or is not a recipe for naïve empiricism or psychologism. Elizabeth is after all a dialectician and, in fact, all throughout does not give up on discursive language. It is in this sense that one should read Coetzee and its female heroine, Elizabeth Costello. In this Lesson, she tries to restore the contested historical content residing in the word “obscene.” As a word whose sense underlines Elizabeth’s bodily connection to her reading experience of the novel, it is “the talismanic word” for her search of the truth: “Go back to the talismanic word, hold fast to it. Hold fast to the word, then reach for the experience behind it: that has always been the rule for when she feels herself slipping into abstraction” (177). By going back in a full circle to our primary understanding of our universe in terms of animism and the logic of contagion, immanent in the Platonic theory of art as mimesis, Elizabeth tries to resuscitate the truth content of a world which we in our naïveté think we have dispensed with. Elizabeth rather tries to get beyond the circle of immanence by turning our discursive language against itself. The result is usually tantamount to Elizabeth’s failure to make full sense of her experiences, which in the novel, likewise, foregrounds the failure of literature. By failing to articulate meaning, the narrative actively inscribes the reader as the writer, as an agent who should compensate for lack of meaning and language, who, nevertheless, shares the same

insecurities and failures of the text she is trying to decode. This dynamic describes precisely the novel's ban on the images of suffering.

Correspondingly, the ban on the images of suffering can be read as a critique of success in literature and art, in general. Adorno's insight that "genocide is the absolute integration" holds as much truth for his theory of aesthetics as for his critique of identity philosophy. Art's "affirmative character," from which all art and its language cannot escape, consists in the art work's construction of symbolic immanence in opposition to the empirical reality. Yet precisely because it takes its elements and partly its logic from the empirical world, its claim to meaning, paradoxically speaking, can only exist in a world beyond its own immanence, even as the artwork tries to establish itself, through its own meaning, as that world's determinate negation. Above all, Adorno underlines, the artwork, after the order of the empirical world, takes its shape through the actual domination of nature: "Art's affirmative element and the affirmative element of the domination of nature are one in asserting that what was inflicted on nature was all for the good; by re-enacting it in the realm of imagination, art makes it its own and becomes a song of triumph" (*Aesthetic Theory* 160). In constructing an alternative image to the order of the existent, art collides with the image of the empirical world. In its envisioning of Utopia, art, in fact, betrays its utopian potentials.¹¹³ This betrayal of art's potential most markedly appears in "consummate works" that present themselves as the very image of success. Modern artworks, by contrast, invest in their "vulnerability," wherein resides their critique of success, i.e. their attempt at redemption:

¹¹³ Adorno's rich and complex analysis of aesthetic products and his account of the complex relationship between artistic products and the world from which they distinguish themselves obviously does not stop at this point. Almost every sentence in his *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as a dialectical counter, addition/negation of what comes before or after it. In stating what Adorno means by a particular passage, one risks reducing, and, thus, betraying the complexity of his arguments.

today, indeed, what appears evil in consummate works is their own consummateness as a monument to force rather than a transfiguration that is too transparent to spur any opposition. According to cliché, great works are compelling. In being so, they cultivate coercion to the same extent that they neutralize it; their guilt is their guiltlessness. Modern art, with its vulnerability, blemishes, and fallibility, is the critique of traditional works, which in so many ways are stronger and more successful: It is the critique of success. It is predicated on the recognition of the inadequacy of what appears to be adequate; this is true not only with regard to its affirmative essence but also in that in its own terms it is not what it wants to be. (*Aesthetic Theory* 160)

Similarly, Coetzee's representation of Elizabeth Costello's aversion to the scene of torture seems to have its root in this understanding of modern aesthetics. Paul West's success resides in his ability to invent, imagine, and visualize every single detail, in Elizabeth's mind, "leaving nothing out" (158). In the introduction to her talk, Elizabeth gives Paul West's book the compliment of "the nearest approximation that we, in our disillusioned age, have produced to the monster of myth, namely Adolf Hitler" (173). Paul West's immaculate success resides in his perfect rendition of the mimetic impulses of the victims. Mimesis here, specifically exemplified in the attempt at verisimilitude, as the apparent likeness of external nature, as in all realism, is used as an element of technique, as a means of domination of the mimetic impulse itself. Likewise, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer underline the use of mimesis as an element of technique by the Nazis. It is partly through the mimetic incorporation of the rage and terror of the oppressed (nature) that the Nazis fueled their perverse "psychic energy" for hatred and destruction (151).

Even the plaintive sounds of nature are appropriated as an element of technique. The bellowing of these orators is to the pogrom what its howling klaxon is to the German flying

bomb: the cry of terror which announces terror is mechanically switched on. The screamers deliberately use the wail of the victim, which first called violence by its name, and even the mere word which designates the victim—Frenchman, Negro, Jew—to induce in themselves the desperation of the persecuted who have to hit out. They are the false likeness of the terrified mimesis. (150)

We can, therefore, understand the risk of contagion by evil if we pay attention to the similarity of Paul West's literary technique to the ones used by the Hitler's executioner and his military and ideological machinery, despite their marked differences, of course. An executioner's real objective does not consist just in the infliction of pain which may as well be tolerated. Its real objective is to gain absolute control over the last reservoir of human freedom, i.e. one's bodily impulses and movements. The psychological warfare is the following: I have complete control over that which you have never had any control in the first place, i.e., the reservoirs of your pain and pleasures: From now, it is ultimate pain that defines the rule of the game; it is not you as a subject with a consciousness and a will but a body which would twitch to my commands. The key point is the following: the body and its mimetic impulses become the representation/imago of power and desire. Through extracting the mimetic impulses of the victims, the executioner posits himself as the subject proper, the subject of power, not as a subject of mimetic impulses but as the subject that has overcome mimesis. Paul West, thus, deploys the literary equivalent of the very techniques used in torture chambers. Paul West's language, therefore, to use words from Coetzee's novel that run parallel to Adorno's and Horkheimer's language, gets its "*obscene energy*" by feeding on the bodily impulses of the victims (177). The essential point is the following: it is the representation of pain that wins victory over the victims. It is no wonder that Paul West's description of the scene of torture reminds Elizabeth of an episode in her life where she had been a powerless victim of sexual violence.

Paul West's immaculate success in the representation of evil can be read as the perversion of what Adorno refers to as art's "expression," and its "mimetic" comportment, which is art's contestation against the spectacularization of art into the glistening images of the culture industry. According to Adorno, "[expression] is recalcitrant to the theory that wants to name it" (*Aesthetic Theory* 111). Adorno, nevertheless, defines the term "expression" in/as a constellation of dialectical concepts. He initially defines "expression" as "dissonance," and via its antithetical terms "semblance" (110). "Semblance" is art's claim to aesthetic immanence, unity, coherence, harmony, and meaning which it develops in opposition to the empirical world. Insofar as art's elements take shape within and from the empirical world, none of its claims can be actual. Roughly put, "semblance" is the discrepancy between art's claim/appearance and its truth.¹¹⁴ Expression, in contrast, is "the element immanent to art through which, as one of its constituents, art defends itself against the immanence that it develops by its law of form" (110). He further defines expression as that which "speaks out of the artifact not as an imitation of the subject" but as that which is the "objectification of the non-objective" in it. (111). According to Adorno, since expression can only be conveyed via art's "semblance" and through technique, expression,

¹¹⁴ "No artwork is an undiminished unity; each must simulate it, and thus collides with itself. Confronted with an antagonistic reality, the aesthetic unity that is established in opposition to it immanently becomes a semblance. The integration of artworks culminates in the semblance that their life is precisely that of their elements. However, the elements import the heterogeneous into artworks and their semblance becomes apocryphal. In fact, every penetrating analysis of an artwork turns up fictions in its claim to aesthetic unity, whether on the grounds that its parts do not spontaneously cohere and that unity is simply imposed on them, or that the elements are prefabricated to fit this unity and are not truly elements. The plurality in artworks is not what it was empirically but rather what it becomes as soon as it enters their domain; this condemns aesthetic reconciliation as aesthetically specious. The artwork is semblance not only as the antithesis to existence but also in its own terms. It is beleaguered with inconsistencies. By virtue of their nexus of meaning, the organon of their semblance, artworks set themselves up as things that exist in themselves. By integrating them, meaning itself—that which creates unity—is asserted as being present in the work, even though it is not actual. Meaning, which effects semblance, predominates in the semblance character" (*Aesthetic Theory* 105).

“whereby nature seeps most deeply into art,” can, nevertheless, only manifest itself as, a “second-order non-objectivity” (113 & 111). Artistic expression is the expression of “natural history”; art’s expression is nothing but the sedimentation of suffering nature.

Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks. They turn this countenance only toward those who return its gaze, even when they are composed in happy tones or glorify the *vie opportune* of rococo. . . . Historical processes and functions are already sedimented in them and speak out of them. Kafka is exemplary for the gesture of art when he carries out the retransformation of expression back into the actual occurrences enciphered in that expression, and from that he derives his irresistibility. Yet expression here becomes doubly puzzling because the sedimented, the expressed meaning, is once more meaningless; it is natural history that leads to nothing but what, impotently enough, it is able to express Through expression art closes itself off to being-for-another, which always threatens to engulf it, and becomes eloquent in itself: This is art’s mimetic consummation. Its expression is the antithesis of expressing something. (111-112)

As the expression of “natural history,” art, especially in its modern form, as the mimetic expression (mimesis) of the abstract laws of exchange, cannot help but remain dark, abstract, mutilated and fragmentary. Authentic artworks resist the clarity of subjective expressions. Rather, genuine artworks close themselves off against the expressions of the subject. They endeavor to transform “communicative into mimetic language” (112). According to Adorno, “artistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain” (110). Art’s expression is, therefore, objective rather than subjective. Art’s mimetic character is, Adorno contends, twofold: a) through its “semblance character,” it endeavors to resemble itself and b) through its expression, it manifests itself as the objectified mimesis of suffering nature (100-117). As subjects, we can relate to artistic expression, Adorno claims, since artist

expressions “reverberate with the protohistory of subjectivity” whose memory still lingers in the subject (112).

Paul West’s realistic rendition of the scene of torture, which “leaves nothing out,” announces complete mastery over its victim’s mimetic impulses and makes them in to an immaculate cinematic spectacle of suffering (158). He positions us in the same voyeuristic position as Hitler’s. The victims are victims precisely because they are framed within the Newtonian three-dimensional universe. In this sense, their fate is not dissimilar to Rilke’s panthers. They are the objects of our gaze rather than beings whose, in Elizabeth’s words, “eyes drill through the darkness of space” (95). Paul West’s representation can be regarded as the perversion of genuine mimesis. According to Adorno, the problem with all artistic representations is that they obey their allocation to the sphere of culture, which is ruled by the market and societal forces. They sway their head to the spatial difference to which they have been assigned and which they further obey, by way of resistance, by establishing their own law of immanence. As such, the relationship they establish with their audience cannot be anything but voyeuristic. This explains the ease with which works of art and narrative and aesthetic techniques have been assimilated by the culture industry and the cinema.¹¹⁵

The spectacularization of art and of suffering in our example here relies upon this spatialization/specialization of art as a specific area of culture. This point may explain why Adorno was fascinated by the works of Kafka and Beckett, both of whom have been significant influences on Coetzee. Kafka’s and Beckett’s works contest the very spatialization of art. They

¹¹⁵ In fact, I do not think that Coetzee’s or her narrator’s target here is particularly Paul West’s fiction. Lesson VI can be read as a warning commentary on art’s paradoxical/antimonial character (the ease with which artworks can join the forces of the adversary), on the one hand, and the particular danger/evil immanent in the insistence upon spectacularization of suffering, on the other.

contest the spatial relationship between the text and the reader. According to Adorno, Kafka eliminates “the contemplative” space between the reader and the text: “Among Kafka’s presuppositions, not the least is that the contemplative relation between text and reader is shaken to its very roots. His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film” (“Notes on Kafka” 245). It is the reader that is the true “victim” of the text. Kafka’s writings, thus, reveal the truth of domination. The modern subject, be it the character or the reader, is the victim of the social forces in so far as it abides by, participates in, or plays by the rules of the game, i.e., the master’s discourse. It is in this sense that Kafka takes the German metaphors *à la lettre*, extends them, and pushes them to their limits. This literalism and its extension defines, according to Adorno, the best feature of Kafka’s work and may hold the interpretative key to his works: “In ‘The Metamorphosis’, the path of the experience can be reconstructed from the literalness as an extension of the lines. ‘These travelling salesmen are like bugs’, is the German expression that Kafka must have picked up, speared up like an insect. Bugs—not what becomes of a man who is a bug as big as a man?” (254). It is the literalized extension of the metaphor that wins victory over art’s specialization/spatialization and its correlative, voyeurism. Commenting on Beckett, likewise, Adorno describes Beckett’s characters as follows: “Beckett’s *Ecce Homo* is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences. The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them” (“Commitment” 314). Beckett’s characters, thus, share their being with their animal’s counterparts, “the apes,” which, according to Adorno, are the prototype of artistic expression: “The expression of artworks is the nonsubjective in the subject; not so much that subject’s expression as its copy; there is nothing so expressive as the eyes of animals—especially apes—which seem objectively to mourn that they

are not human” (*Aesthetic Theory* 113). It is precisely this spatialization/specialization that Coetzee, as I have also tried to show in my reading of *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *Elizabeth Costello*, intends to override.¹¹⁶

In Elizabeth Costello’s comment on Kafka’s “Red Peter,” it is Red Peter’s “embeddedness” in life—not its distinction from the real or its voyeuristic value—that is the source of Kafka’s greatness (32). Coetzee’s language, here manifest in Elizabeth Costello’s plea for the ban on images of suffering, attempts to override the economy of desire and its correlate, i.e., voyeuristic pleasure. The desire of these lessons, therefore, to use Susan Barton’s words in *Foe*, is to make fictional characters “substantial.” Put differently, the emphasis in lessons V and VI on the ban on images and the primacy of the body is, indeed, an emphasis to transcend the carnivorous nature that is immanent in the spectacularization of literary discourse—of its characters, concepts, meanings and forms. Coetzee’s language, thus, contests the sacrificial nature of literary language and discourse. Elizabeth Costello “is sick with the spectacle.” Her reaction to the evil immanent in the literary representation of suffering, this “sickness,” is that which “comports itself mimetically” in lessons V and VI (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 110).

¹¹⁶ It is in this sense that poststructuralist readings of otherness fail to see the aesthetic implications of the other in Coetzee’s writings.

Chapter 7

From the Ban on Images to “Inwardness” and “Special Fidelities”: The Possibility of Eros and the Inevitability of Sacrifice, *Elizabeth Costello*’s Lessons VII and VIII

Following lessons V and VI, lessons VII and VIII are likewise preoccupied with the problematics of aesthetics and literary representation. They can be read as attempts to get beyond aesthetic figurations that reduce suffering or evil to an image or a set of abstractions. To do so, they endeavor to resuscitate, redefine, and reimagine the very qualities that have been the very target of modernity and the societal forces of abstraction, in Elizabeth’s mind, “inwardness” and “Eros, on the one hand” and “the special fidelities of the artist,” on the other. As in the previous lessons, Lessons VII and VIII attempt to get beyond the logic of sacrifice immanent in the historical trajectory of the subject. Lessons VII and VII ultimately emerge as worthwhile and necessary, yet, insufficient attempts at bypassing the logic of sacrifice. Lesson VIII eventually ends on a surprising note of failure. The sacrificial figure of the animal emerges once again at the margin of the literary discourse.

Lesson VII is titled “Eros.” It opens with Elizabeth’s remembrance of a reading by Robert Duncan of his seminal work “Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” at the University of Melbourne in 1963. The dependence of culture and the arts on the political economy of the market and its war machinery, or, in better words still, their lack of autonomy from the market, is once again acknowledged at the outset. Elizabeth reminisces, “Duncan and another, less interesting poet named Philip Whalen had been brought out on a tour by the US Information Service: the Cold War was on, there was money for cultural propaganda.” She remembers vividly her strong attraction to Robert Duncan. She is reminded of Duncan because “she has just come across another telling of the Eros and the Psyche story, by one Susan Mitchell, whom she has not read before” (183). Elizabeth’s reference is to Mitchell’s poem “Erotikon: (A commentary on

«Amor and Psyche»)." ¹¹⁷ The reference to these poems, in fact, foreshadows the constellation of concepts that are central to Lesson VII. Following their lead, Elizabeth endeavors to cast, understand, in fact, (re)-interpret the ideas of myth, gods, humans, and Eros in the context of our modernity. Having asserted the primacy of the body in relation to the problematics of representation, in particular, the spectacularization of suffering and that of evil, Lesson VII attempts to resuscitate the very element that is targeted by the society of the spectacle, i.e. Eros. As Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse argue, the late industrial society and its culture industry lay a total claim to the sensory; it denied suffering at the expense of a new definition of the body and its pleasures. ¹¹⁸ Adorno's understanding of the body as primarily the suffering body opposed precisely this very new definition of the body as a reservoir of infinite orgasmic pleasures—orgasmic, of course, as defined by the logic of the culture industry. ¹¹⁹ In its acknowledgment of the concept of aggressive society, Lesson VII equally bears familiarity to Marcuse's description

¹¹⁷ As Mulhall indicates, Lesson VII, "Eros," was initially conceived to be included in a collection of works within which, of course, it eventually appeared, *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern* in 2005, approximately two years after its appearance in *Elizabeth Costello*. Unlike the rest of the lessons, Lesson VII, together with the last lesson, therefore, was not initially conceived to be delivered as a public lecture. Susan Mitchell's poem, "Erotikon," appears as the first contribution in the collection after the editors' introduction (214-215).

¹¹⁸ See, in particular, Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* and *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. See also Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument in the following section from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (94-136).

¹¹⁹ In his discussion of Adorno in his seminal work, *The ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton draws attention to this fact in the following words: "To posit the body and its pleasures as an unquestionably affirmative category is a dangerous illusion, in a social order which reifies and regulates corporeal pleasure for its own ends just as relentlessly as it colonizes the mind. Any return to the body which fails to reckon this truth into its calculations will be merely naive; and it is to Adorno's credit that, conscious of this as he is, he does not flinch from trying to redeem what he calls the 'somatic moment' of cognition, that irreducible dimension which accompanies all our acts of consciousness but can never be exhausted by them. The aesthetic project must not be abandoned, even if its terms of reference have been permanently tainted by fascism and 'mass' society" (344).

of late industrial society as being hostile to Eros and the erotic. Late industrial society, Marcuse believed, has brought about “a repressive desublimation” of our desires (*On-Dimensional Man*).¹²⁰ In Marcuse’s term, the “performance principle” of this society is hospitable to aggressive impulses and inimical to the erotic ones (*Eros and Civilization*). Here, as in the diagnosis of the Frankfurt School thinkers, Marcuse and Adorno in particular, the loss of Eros and the erotic is associated with the loss of inwardness which seems to have come about as the natural byproduct of the society of the spectacle. Lesson VII can be read, in a sense, as an attempt to rescue Eros and the erotic from the dictates of the culture industry and the society of the spectacle and its allies, religious and scientific abstraction. The resuscitation of Eros in this lesson is attempted through reconceiving the idea of inwardness, the very dimension that is being threatened by the forces of a society that thrives on the images of the culture industry. It is, in fact, hard to address the question of inwardness without considering the thinker from whom the concept has become indissociable, Søren Kierkegaard. Lesson VII, in other words, can be read as an attempt to rewrite Kierkegaard’s concept of inwardness in order to win back the potentials of Eros and that of desire from their assimilation into their opposite. For the sake of the argument, I will avoid a detailed reading of Kierkegaard’s philosophy and its scholarship and will focus mainly on Adorno’s understanding of his predecessor’s conception of inwardness in order to elucidate Coetzee’s particular in-version/conception of inwardness at stake in Lesson VII.

Kierkegaard’s inwardness, in a sense, can be read as the incommensurability between one’s inner truth or faith and the external world of culture, customs, and mores. Anti-Climacus’s definition of the self as “the relation [that] relates itself to itself” can shed light on the nature of this inwardness (*The Sickness unto Death* 13). According to Adorno, this “repetition” defines

¹²⁰ See Part I, section 3, “The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation”

Kierkegaard's conception of dialectic as the dialectic "between subjectivity and its 'meaning'" (*Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* 30). In this conception, Adorno contends, objective history is excluded for a passionate striving of a truth whose contours escapes the subject's control. Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard is geared mainly toward what he takes to be Kierkegaard's abstract understanding of particularity, on the one hand, and the sacrificial conception of subjectivity, on the other. According to Adorno, Kierkegaard's radical conception of particularity remains blind to what it owes its existence, i.e., the universal, which according to Adorno, is nothing but society and its forces. According to Adorno, Kierkegaard and the existential philosophies that followed suit failed to overcome the rhetoric of abstraction that sacrificed the particular to the universal, nature to nominal categories, and body and its suffering to concepts of the mind. Sacrifice remains, Adorno contends, as "the innermost cell of his [Kierkegaard's] thought" (110). Far from overcoming Hegelian idealism, Adorno contends, Kierkegaard's subjectivity and his philosophy remain caught within the coordinates of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness whose contours Hegel had captured to the letter: "One could state accurately that the Kierkegaardian interiority is the Unhappy Consciousness of the Hegelian phenomenology, fixed and pried from the dialectic. But Kierkegaard thus falls under Hegel's unmitigated critique of that step of spirit" ("Kierkegaard Once More" 65). After a lengthy quotation from Hegel's *Phenomenology* where Hegel describes the dialectic of Unhappy Consciousness, Adorno adds the following:

Hegel struck a blow to his future mortal enemy by prophetically fabricating him from the movement of his own philosophy, down to his most idiosyncratic features. If Hegel reproaches the Unhappy Consciousness—as a blind actor opposed to its context—with abstractness, then the Kierkegaardian particular becomes even more literally abstract. What its possible content could be arises from the world, to which the absolute particular is said

to be in absolute opposition. If it refrains completely from it, then its apparent concretion, that of the pure this-there [*Diesda*], becomes something wholly indeterminate. (66)

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the paradoxical, in fact, absurd core of Christianity's narrative and his conception of freedom precisely as this passionate embracing of this absurd narrative can indeed be read as a variant of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. In this respect, Adorno's position here is consistent with his understanding of Kierkegaard in his early work. In *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetics*, Adorno states that subordinating the body and the aesthetic sphere to the autonomy of the spirit and the spiritual are the very demarcations of Kierkegaard's conception of subjectivity: "Kierkegaard's absolute self is mere spirit. The individual is not the sensuously developed person, and no property is accorded to him beyond the bare necessities. Inwardness does not consist in its fullness but is ruled over by an ascetic spiritualism" (51). Lacking "in its fullness," Adorno adds later, "[b]odiless spirit for him becomes the burden that drags him into despair" (52). This spirit, correspondingly, comes into being as a result of the exclusion of history and historical consciousness. Adorno reads Kierkegaard's metaphoric/aesthetic conceptions of nineteenth century indoors, "*intérieur*," in his early writings *à la lettre*, as indicative of Kierkegaard's philosophic conception of inwardness with its failures and limitations.¹²¹ The spiritual "*intérieur*" of Kierkegaard's philosophy excludes or rather sublimates the body and the bodily, which bear the marks of history, to the spiritual. The images of the "*intérieur*," Adorno contends, become the signs of petrified bourgeois privilege and subjectivity, who, confined in itself, cowers from the hostile forces of the market.¹²²

Despite his consistent critique of Kierkegaard, Adorno attempted to preserve the truth-

¹²¹ See, in particular, section 2 of the book, "Construction of Inwardness" (24-46). Adorno pays particular attention to "The Seducer's Diary" in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.

¹²² For a detailed exploration of Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard's aesthetics and interiority, see Peter E. Gordon's excellent account in *Adorno and Existence*.

content of Kierkegaard's concept of inwardness. Adorno, especially in his later writings, did not consider Kierkegaard merely as a bourgeois philosopher. In his emphasis on inwardness and subjectivity Kierkegaard, Adorno contends, was not just a philosopher of bourgeois interiority but, like Marx, also a visionary capable of perceiving the destructive forces of the market:

The world in the face of which Kierkegaard held the Christian doctrine that pretends to have realized it—this world in which the subject, as he called it, came to an end is the society of high capitalism, which, at the same time, without the two thinkers knowing one another, Marx analyzed. Against the absolute being-for-another of the commodity world, the absolute being-for-itself of the Kierkegaardian individual is conceived. In its perverted form, this is the imprint of the perverted form of the whole. Therefore Kierkegaard's critique is not obsolete In the church upon which he cast his idiosyncratic gaze, he was arguably the first to discover the phenomenon of neutralization. ("Kierkegaard Once More" 71)

Adorno realized that the society of the spectacle has colonized the subject's inwardness and his freedom. Images of the culture industry and its noise, i.e., popular music, have colonized the space wherein the subject's power of imagination previously reigned supreme. The fantasy lens of the camera and the silver screen now form the interiority of the subject. The subject becomes merely an extension of the culture industry and its aesthetic paraphernalia. It is in this light that Adorno, in his posthumous work *Aesthetic Theory*, validates the necessity of inwardness for the aesthetic work proper. Despite its problems and limitations, Adorno regards the immanence of the modern artwork with its share of inwardness as art's defense against society to which the artwork, nevertheless, owes its existence. In the following lines, Adorno summarizes his position on the antimonial nature of inwardness which is, nonetheless, in his account, essential to the formation of subjectivity and that of the art of work.

Yet art is scarcely imaginable without the element of inwardness. Benjamin once said that in his opinion inwardness could go fly a kite. This was directed against Kierkegaard and the “philosophy of inwardness” that claimed him as their founder, even though that term would have been as antipathetic to the theologian as the word ontology. Benjamin had in mind abstract subjectivity that powerlessly sets itself up as substance. But his comment is no more the whole truth than abstract subjectivity is. Spirit—certainly Benjamin’s own—must enter itself if it is to be able to negate what is opaque Even inwardness participates in dialectics, though not as Kierkegaard thought. The result of the liquidation of inwardness was by no means the surfacing of a type of person cured of ideology but rather one who never became an individual in the first place This casts a reconciling light on the category of inwardness in art. (116)

Authentic art, thus, he concludes is inconceivable without inwardness and the subjective expression. Without a strong subjectivity and without art’s immanence, both of which are definitely inconceivable without inwardness, there is no dialectic and absolutely no hope or vantage point beyond the forces of the market. Adorno’s understanding of inwardness and that of Kierkegaard’s has a particular relevance in Lesson VII as Coetzee’s/Elizabeth’s conception of inwardness is likewise poised against the culture industry and its correlate, modern subjectivity. Lesson VII is an attempt at reconceiving this understanding of inwardness and by consequence that of Eros. The lesson can be read as to recast Kierkegaard’s vertical conception of subjectivity that ostracizes the forces of history and that of society, along a horizontal line that understands our subjectivity in terms of its construction by the other.¹²³

¹²³ Kierkegaard’s idealist core consists in its particular conception of particularity as human particularity in distinction from the animal particularity. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard’s conception of inwardness remains trapped within the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. It has been my intention so far to show that Coetzee’s female heroines can be regarded as variations

Once again, it is Elizabeth's outright literalism, i.e. dialectical demeanor, that carries the burden of lesson VII. Elizabeth Costello's literalism, which makes the idea of Eros and that of inwardness possible, here works by way of association and remembrance of various events and narratives rather than by way of abstract logic or reasoning. Elizabeth literalism pays homage to the discourse of the body, i.e., to the sensory and the sensual. The sensory and associative movement of events, ideas, and concepts are cast within Lesson VII by way of free indirect speech. This constellation of associative movements and narrative techniques make possible the experience of an alternative conception of inwardness and, by consequence, an alternative understanding of Eros. Following Mitchell's and Duncan's lead, Elizabeth endeavors to cast, understand and, in fact, (re)-interpret the ideas of myth, gods, human, Eros/erotic, mind and body in the context of our modernity.¹²⁴ Elizabeth, in fact, endeavors to reconceive an alternative understanding of truth, Eros, cosmos, and cosmology. Elizabeth's literalism becomes apparent in the following lines early on in Lesson VII. She meditates on the intercourse between the human and the divine. She expresses her "curiosity" in the following words:

What intrigues her is less the metaphysics than the mechanics, the practicalities of congress across a gap in being. Bad enough to have a full-grown male swan jabbing webbed feet into your backside while he has his way, or a one-ton bull leaning his moaning weight on you; how, when the god does not care to change shape but remains his awesome self, does the human body accommodate itself to the blast of his desire? (184)

on the theme of the Unhappy Consciousness or can be regarded as an inverted Unhappy Consciousnesses precisely because they refuse to delimit particularity to human particularity/body or subdue the human body to spirit.

¹²⁴ My intention at this point is not to carry out a comparative analysis of these poems and the text of the novel. For the consideration of space and the purposes of this argument, I will follow Elizabeth's Costello's own point of contention here, i.e., her insistence for a literal understanding of the sexual/erotic encounter between the human and the divine.

The question is the following: how can the human body accommodate the divine? This is Hegel's question of the Unhappy Consciousness and, in a certain sense, the question posed in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.¹²⁵ Yet, Elizabeth's stress is once again on the sensory and the somatic. This consistent stress on one's corporeality, the body we share with animals, can be read as an inversion of the Unhappy Consciousness. This inversion is the very gesture that ties the otherwise loose structure of the lessons. It is precisely the sensory, i.e., the somatic and the physical, thus captured in Elizabeth's literalism, which forms the allegorical texture of the Lessons. By taking the metaphor *à la lettre*, Elizabeth resists what de Man defines as the literalization of metaphor. What shines forth as a result of this resistance is the being of things, to use Adorno's and Benjamin's favorite term, their "expression," rather than the common metaphors that function as the stand-in between things and their significations. It is in this sense that lesson VII pays its homage to Kafka. Being an ardent admirer of Kierkegaard, Kafka reconceived/inverted the notion of inwardness by debunking the vertical/symbolic conception of subjectivity. Kafka places animals and humans along a horizontal relationship. This is where Kafka's and Coetzee's/Elizabeth's literalism collide.¹²⁶

Elizabeth's literalism, in fact, serves to tie the continuity of aggressive sexuality and lack of inwardness in Greek culture to our contemporary culture. For all their difference, Greek

¹²⁵ As Mulhall aptly puts it, the crux of Mitchell's poem lies in "her (our?) drive to find words for that which is dark, and should perhaps remain dark" as well as "her desire to acknowledge the embedders of the ideal in the real—love in sex, thought in matter . . . ideas in the body" (215-216). In this reading, Mitchell's poem can be said to capture the problematics of the Unhappy Consciousness and aesthetic representation worked out in Lesson VII and, in fact, throughout the lessons.

¹²⁶ In his exploration of the affinities between Adorno, Kafka, and Kierkegaard, Peter Gordon aptly regards Adorno's conception of inverse theology as "inverting Kierkegaard's theological disdain for the unredeemed world into a practice of this-worldly criticism that, much like its theistic counterpart, refuses all worldly consolation" (182). This lesson, I believe, equally can be read as a practice in what Adorno characterized as "inverse theology."

society and contemporary culture thrive on the persistence/insistence of images at the expense of the suffering body. She meditates on the Greek's lack of inwardness in the context of Duncan's 1963 visit to the University of Melbourne when she first heard him read his poem. The point which intrigued her the most when she heard Robert Duncan, what she really wanted to discuss with poet, "was not girls visited by gods but the much rarer phenomenon of men condescended to by goddesses" (184). She has Anchises in mind as an example. She imagines Anchises' response to the experience in the form of the hypothetical, as a response that might have been a truer depiction of Anchises' reaction to his experience with the divine than that portrayed by the Greek poet in which Anchises keeps his silence: "One would have thought that, after that unforeseen and unforgettable episode in his hut on Mount Ida, Anchises. . . would have wanted to talk about nothing else, to whoever would listen: how he had fucked a goddess, the most succulent in the whole stable, fucked her all night long, got her pregnant too." What Elizabeth finds puzzling is Anchises's lack of responsiveness to the experience since the experience has left no mark on his soul. Anchises's lack of responsiveness lays bare his lack of inwardness or interiority. In describing what Anchises's typical response should have looked like, Elizabeth, furthermore/however, draws our attention to patriarchal discourse and aggressive sexuality, to "[m]en and their leering talk." She immediately connects her thoughts to our modern context, our infatuation with the images of the culture industry. She remembers a film she has watched whose source she cannot locate but whose aesthetics resembles the works of Nathanael West. The reference to Nathanael West is significant as his works portray the destructive potentials of the culture industry, the society of the spectacle and its celebrity culture.¹²⁷ The movie Elizabeth has

¹²⁷ I have, in particular, West's novels *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* in mind, both of which have been adapted to the screen.

in mind depicts a “Hollywood sex goddess” who “ends up in the common ward of a madhouse, drugged, lobotomized, strapped to her bed, while orderlies sell tickets for ten minutes a time with her” (185). Elizabeth describes the aggression that acts through the characters. This aggression that is not unfamiliar at all to the American audience:

‘*I wanna fuck a movie star!*’ pants one of their customers, shoving his dollars at them. In his voice the ugly underside of idolatry: malice, murderous resentment. Bring an immortal down to earth, show her what life is really like, bang her till she is raw. *Take that! Take that!* A scene they excised from the televised version, so close to the bone of America does it cut. (185)¹²⁸

Elizabeth’s reference to Anchises, therefore, highlights male aggression and its continuity with the images of the culture industry. Elizabeth’s reference to Anchises’s story, therefore, highlights the lack of inwardness, which was a feature of Greek culture and is persistent in a different guise in the society of the spectacle. The key point is the following: in both cultures the insistence on, and, in fact, the infatuation with images takes the place of one’s interiority. Rather than keeping his silence, Anchises, Elizabeth reflects, should have been plagued with troubling thoughts and never-ending questions precisely because of the uncommon nature of the experience, i.e., an experience involving intercourse between “two orders of being” (185). Anchises, according to the poet, however, was untroubled with the experience and lead a normal life. It is for this reason that Elizabeth blames the Greeks for “their lack of inwardness” (187). It is in this light that she juxtaposes Anchises’s depiction in the Greek narrative to the Virgin Mary’s impregnation in the Christian narrative:

¹²⁸ The reference to the figure of movie star may remind one of Hitler’s reference to the same figure in Paul West’s novel. In both texts, alluded to in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, violence and the culture industry are tied together. Elizabeth Costello’s reference, thus, links the idea of image and aggression to Adorno’s understanding of *Bilderverbot* discussed in lessons V and VI.

She calls it their lack of inwardness. Anchises has been intimate with a divine being, as intimate as intimate can be. Not a common experience. In the whole of Christian mythology, setting aside the Apocrypha, there is only one parallel event, and that in a commoner form, with the male god - rather impersonally, rather distantly, it must be said - impregnating the mortal woman. *Magnificat Dominum anima mea*, Mary is reputed to have said afterwards, perhaps misheard from *Magnam me facit Dominus*. That is pretty much all she says in the Gospels, this maid who is matchless, as though struck dumb for the rest of her life by what befell her. (187)

Contrary to Greek mythology which dismisses the experience of intercourse between the mortal and the divine, the Christian narrative pays homage to the occult nature of the experience. Here Elizabeth obviously follows upon her meditations on Greek art, Christianity, and the politics of representation which were initially triggered by her discussion with her sister. This is another place where, Elizabeth thinks, the Greeks fail to meet the human. Having the Christian narrative in mind, Elizabeth poses the question of inwardness in terms that are once again reminiscent of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness: "Inwardness. Can we *be one with* a god profoundly enough, to apprehend, to *get a sense of*, a god's being?" (187). Nevertheless, the question of inwardness, Elizabeth meditates, has lost its popularity in contemporary society.

Like Kierkegaard and Kant before him, Elizabeth is not ready to give up on the idea/reality of gods, albeit for different reasons. Elizabeth finds the concept of gods, and, in fact, belief in them to be necessary for the idea of inwardness and that of Eros. More properly put, as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, she cannot let go of the concept of the divine. The question which occupies her mind and which she takes to be "a Kantian kind of question" is the following: "Are there other modes of being besides what we call the human into which we can enter; and if there are not, what does that say about us and our limitations?" This is, in fact,

another somewhat amenable reference to Kant, the philosopher of interiority, in Coetzee's narrative. In a sweeping reference to modern Western philosophy, Elizabeth considers Kant as the progenitor of the philosophy of inwardness: "If her ear is right, then inwardness started its run with the man from Königsberg and ended, more or less, with Wittgenstein the Viennese destroyer" (188).

Elizabeth, in fact, inverts the traditional conception of human subjectivity and of inwardness, i.e., a conception of human subjectivity and inwardness which is based upon some version of the Great Chain of Being, be it religious or scientific. For the rest of Lesson VII, Elizabeth endeavors to construct the idea of inwardness/Eros by placing the gods, humans, and animals along a horizontal line, or along the same axis, thus debunking the hierarchy between gods, animals and the human. In fact, animals/animism can be said to function as the copula that ties together and, thus, defines or brings into being gods and humans. Initially, Elizabeth attempts to put the gods alongside the same axis as the humans. Despite her admiration for Friedrich Hölderlin, Elizabeth disagrees with the poet's idea that the gods have lost interest in us "modern folk." Elizabeth thinks Hölderlin's idea to be "too innocent" and "not alert enough to the cunning of history." Does Elizabeth's reference to "the cunning of history" underline Hölderlin's blindness to the historical context of this loss? If yes, what are the consequences of accepting this loss, i.e., accepting it "at face value"? This is the very crisis to which Kant tried to find an answer. Elizabeth, nevertheless, rejects Hölderlin's position by stating that "[w]hen we are stirred to lament the loss of the gods, it is more than likely the gods who are doing the stirring. The gods have not retreated: They cannot afford to" (188). Despite the fact that Hölderlin conceived god's *apatheia*, Elizabeth thinks, Hölderlin fails "to see the effects of *apatheia* on their erotic life." Gods are curious about us precisely because it is we humans who live "the more urgently." We live with more intensity because of the reality of death in our lives which manifests itself most

prominently as “the *frisson* of death” in our lovemaking: “In marking us down for death, the gods gave us an edge over them.” Elizabeth, in fact, tries to bring down the gods from their pedestal, i.e. the fact that we assume that they have “an edge” over us, to put them on the same axis as the rest of the created (189). In this light, Elizabeth contemplates that the gods to which we ascribe omniscience, in fact, lack that quality:

We think of them as omniscient, these gods, but the truth is they know very little, and what they know know only in the most general of ways. No body of learning they can call their own, no philosophy, properly speaking. Their cosmology an assortment of commonplaces. Their sole expertise in astral flight, their sole homegrown science anthropology. They specialize in humankind because of what we have and they lack; they study us because they are envious. (189)

Elizabeth, nevertheless, does not forgo our need for or deny our reliance upon the beyond. Without gods, or, our conception of gods, we would not be able to have a life. Put differently, inwardness and Eros are inconceivable without the idea of the beyond. She contends that we are equally curious about gods. The irony is captured in the following: “As for us, do they guess (what irony) that what makes our embraces so intense, so unforgettable, is the glimpse they give us of a life we imagine as theirs, a life we call . . . *the beyond*?” In this context, Elizabeth is reminded of two scenes in Joyce’s *Ulysses* that deal with the idea of the beyond. The first is a reference to Martha Clifford, Leopold Bloom’s pen friend, who misspells “word” for “world.”¹²⁹

¹²⁹ In “Lotus Eaters,” the fifth chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom has started a flirtatious correspondence with a pen friend who signs her name as Martha Clifford. Martha’s letter seems to address Leopold’s use of explicit sexual language: “I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that. I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?” (63) The misspelling, this “other world,” is commonly interpreted in the scholarship as the world of sexual and erotic desires.

This typographical error, Elizabeth believes is telling in that if she had not liked to be “swept off to another world by a demon lover,” she would have not have engaged in the act of writing in the first place. The other reference is to Leopold Bloom’s act of peeking between the legs of Greek statutes which Elizabeth takes to happen in Dublin Public Library. The question Leopold apparently wants to figure out, Elizabeth meditates, is the following: “If Apollo has a marble cock and balls, does Artemis, . . . have an orifice to match?”¹³⁰ Nevertheless, what he is really curious about, Elizabeth believes, “is whether congress is possible with the divine.” This curiosity, Elizabeth thinks, is reciprocal. The gods equally “peek at us all the time, peek even between our legs, full of curiosity, full of envy; sometimes go so far as to rattle our earthly cage” (190). Our desire for gods and their desire for us, therefore, runs both ways.

Elizabeth once again reflects on the place of this desire in our modern context. Elizabeth

¹³⁰ Elizabeth gets the details wrong, though not necessarily the spirit of the event she has in mind. In the eighth episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “Lestrygonians,” Leopold Bloom reflects on the difference between the mortal and the immortal and the human and the divine. After meditating on the beauty of the “shapely goddesses” and their “curves,” he goes on to compare earthly vs. godly food and human vs. divine digestive systems: “Lovely forms of women sculpted Junonians. Immortal lovely. And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind: food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food: have to feed it like stoking an engine. They have no. never looked. I’ll look today. Keeper won’t see. Bend down and let something drop. See if she” (144-145). Later, on his way to the National library, he sneaks into the National Museum to avoid Blazes Boylan, Molly Bloom’s lover. It is in the National Museum where he sneaks a peek at the statue of Aphrodite. In the ninth episode, “Scylla and Charybdis,” we realize that he has been seen by Mulligan: “I found him over in the museum where I went to hail the foamborn Aphrodite. . . . I fear me, he is Grecker than the Greeks” (165). The incident happens, therefore, in the National Museum—not the Duplin Public Library—and Bloom’s interest is in checking the anus of the goddess—not her vagina. This passage, however, resonates with Elizabeth’s meditations here in Lesson VII. It also reminds us of Elizabeth’s earlier reference to Kafka and Red Petrer “as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies,” which I take to be indicative of the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness (75). In the same spirit, Elizabeth deliberates on the state of her body in Lesson VIII as follows: “That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle, lumbering monster that has been given to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood” (210).

compares her erotic longing for the gods to the present-day idea(l) of romance and its exemplary site, the dating agencies:

Where in the world today does one find such immortal longings as hers used to be? Not in the personal columns, for sure. 'SWF, 5' 8", thirties, brunette, into astrology, biking, seeks SWM, 35–45 for friendship, fun, adventure.' Nowhere: 'DWF, 5' 8", sixties, runs to death and death meets her as fast, seeks G, immortal, earthly form immaterial, for ends to which no words suffice.' In the editorial office they would frown. Indecent desires, they would say, and toss her in the same basket as the pederasts. (191)

It seems that the desire for the "winged Eros," being of a reciprocal nature, has been replaced by self-interest and narcissism (191). The loss of Eros in our modern context, Elizabeth reminds us, is premised upon our loss of belief in the existence of gods and our sense of inwardness. If there is no desire for the beyond, we remain trapped within the prison house of our context. There is no way to go beyond oneself without a belief in the reality of the beyond.

Elizabeth's concern, as it becomes apparent in the next chapter, is also a concern about literature and the arts. Literature has no value without a belief in the possibility and, more precisely, the reality of the beyond. What is literature if not a desire to transcend our earthly context, our milieu? To win back Eros, to make it relevant to our lives once again, Elizabeth, therefore, feels compelled to replace this modern narrative of loss. She, thus, must encounter the philosopher whose very words proclaimed the death of God, i.e., Friedrich Nietzsche.

We do not call on the gods because we no longer believe in them. She hates sentences that hinge on *because*. The jaws of the trap snap shut, but the mouse, every time, has escaped. And what an irrelevancy anyway! How misguided! Worse than Hölderlin! Who cares what we believe? The sole question is whether the gods will continue to believe in us, whether we can keep alive the last flicker of the flame that once used to burn in them. (191)

Elizabeth's position can be seen to offer multiple counters to Nietzsche's claim about the death of God.¹³¹ First, a lack of belief in the beyond annuls the possibility of a good life in that it makes impossible or irrelevant, contrary to what Nietzsche preached, the creation of new values. By annulling a conception of the beyond, we remained trapped within the circuit of the daily and the routine. Correspondingly a lack of belief in the beyond makes art impossible but also irrelevant to our modern context. Without a belief in the beyond, i.e. gods, art would fail to create a space for the creation of new values. Above all, Nietzsche's conclusion is predicated on the word/conjunction "*because*;" it falls within the modes of formal logic and instrumental rationality. What escapes this logic/trap in *Elizabeth Costello*, what this logic cannot apprehend/comprehend, are the none-human others, in Elizabeth's analogy here, "the mouse."¹³²

What Elizabeth substitutes for the word "because" is a copula that entails animals, one that follows the spirit of animism. It is in this sense that Elizabeth revisits Newtonian physics and his cosmology by the end of this lesson. In his essay "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language," Coetzee makes reference to the controversy over Newton's conception of gravity that followed the first edition of *Principia*. The controversy was centered around the word "*attract* or a synonym equally metaphoric" (185). To the great thinkers of

¹³¹ Elizabeth Costello's reference here is to Nietzsche's contentious claim in *The Gay Science* that "God is Dead" (199). In 'Book Five: We Fearless Ones' of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that since "the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable" all the conceptions, beliefs, and institutions "built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown into it" are destined to fall (199). Throughout his oeuvre, Nietzsche, in fact, vehemently criticized traditional European moral values, most particularly, the Christian moral values and their detrimental influence on philosophical moral theory and commonsense morality. Human beings, Nietzsche believed, are value-creating creatures. Nietzsche, nevertheless, assigned the task of creating alternative values to philosophers. For Nietzsche's most extensive critique of traditional/Christian morality and his suggestions for alternative values see *The Gay Science*, *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Beyond Good and Evil*.

¹³² In both Adorno and Coetzee what escapes the claws of identity logic are the none-human others, particularly animals.

mechanistic philosophy—Robert Boyle, Christian Huygen, E. J. Dijksterhuis, and Leibniz—Coetzee argues, Newtonian physics failed miserably as it remained trapped within medieval physics that used “animistic explanatory principle involving concepts like sympathy and antipathy” (185). Coetzee goes on to explore Newton’s ambivalences and failures to describe the ultimate cause of gravitational force and highlights his inability to find words or syntactic structures that could adequately describe the movement of the cosmic bodies without incorporating metaphors of animism.¹³³ What Elizabeth does here, in fact, is to read once again the metaphors of animism *à la lettre*, which to Elizabeth, could be regarded as the correct interpretation of what Newtonian physics describes or, in other words, what it shares with the philosophical perspective of animism:

Strange how, as desire relaxes its grip on her body, she sees more and more clearly a universe ruled by desire. *Haven’t you read your Newton*, she would like to say to the people in the dating agency (would like to say to Nietzsche too if she could get in touch with him)? *Desire runs both ways: A pulls B because B pulls A, and vice versa: that is how you go about building a universe.* Or if *desire* is still too rude a word, then what of *appetency*? Appetency and chance: a powerful duo, more than powerful enough to build a cosmology on, from the atoms and the little things with nonsense names that make up atoms to Alpha Centauri and Cassiopeia and the great dark back of beyond. The gods and ourselves, whirled helplessly around by the winds of chance, yet pulled equally towards each other, towards not only B and C and D but towards X and Y and Z and Omega too.

¹³³ In this essay, however, Coetzee’s main objective is to analyze the linguistic relativity thesis, (“Von Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”), the idea that there is a seamless continuity between one’s psychology, science, metaphysics and the structure of one’s language. To test this hypothesis, Coetzee looks into Newton’s attempts at capturing the laws of physics and mathematical language into the syntax of English and Latin.

Not the least thing, not the last thing but is called to by love. (191-192)

In this description, Elizabeth obviously deviates from the protocols of mechanistic philosophy and science. She is not concerned with the discovery or an explanation of absolute causes. The best we can do, Elizabeth seems to be telling us, is to understand these forces within such terms as “appetency and chance,” terms that can hardly be regarded as proper definitions of heavenly bodies in mechanistic terms. What Elizabeth perceives, however, is a plain field of bodies animated by this mediate, mediating, indeed, reciprocal force called “desire,” “appetency and chance.” In Elizabeth description, this is what Newton’s description of the universe really amounts to. The language of animism, in fact, debunks, the hierarchical conceptions of the universe and that of creation, the idea of the great chain of being and the religious and scientific discourse that places reason as the supreme principle of the universe.

Elizabeth, thus, reinvents the idea of inwardness, reasserts the primacy of the gods and the beyond, debunks the hierarchical division between the gods, human and the animal, and thus, re-inscribes the primacy of the body via animistic terms such as “desire,” “appetency and chance.” What replaces the vertical, i.e. Kierkegaardian understanding of inwardness and subjectivity, is the horizontal construction of inwardness by its other, by way of the animal as its copula. In other words, Coetzee’s inwardness/Eros does not require the primal sacrificial gesture/act. His inwardness does not rest on the concept of human particularity distinct from the lamb’s existence. Put differently, we are what we are by what we share with others, with nature and the animal others. The copula that ties the world of creatures is that of animism. In this sense, this conception of subjectivity is poised against the biblical God and what Adorno regarded as Kierkegaard’s subjective philosophy, the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness. From a different perspective, Elizabeth’s discourse can be seen as a defense of literature or as an attempt to rescue literature and the arts from the drudgery of modern daily existence. The name of the game

Elizabeth plays is allegory. In other words, the logic of allegory is poised against a symbolic, hence vertical, conception of the literary and the subject/author. This gesture obviously places Coetzee in the tradition of Kierkegaard (albeit, inversely), Kafka, Benjamin, and Adorno. What is literature without a concern for the possibility of inwardness, without a belief in the beyond and without incorporating the forces of Eros? Literature after all desires “that other world.”

Lesson VIII is titled “At the Gate.” In Lesson VIII, Elizabeth finds herself in a literary Hades. What better fate does one deserve for taking/putting everything *à la lettre* but find oneself in a literary afterlife? This is, of course, an unavoidable position once you choose a career as a writer. Being an ardent supporter of poetry, of the poetics of inwardness and that of Eros, Elizabeth finds herself in the very belly of a literary world. She is once again on trial but this time by an actual tribunal of judges in a world that resembles a Kafkaesque universe. In order to be able to pass through the gate, she is being asked to make a statement of belief. Like her female counterparts, Susan Barton in *Foe* and Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Costello figures as a writer who is also being written into a story. She complains about the narrative in which she is being tangled as “[e]xcessively literary” (200). As such, she figures once again as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative. While she feels confined to the letters of the narrative and its world, Elizabeth Costello appears as a character with a penchant for freedom. Here she tries to resist the powers whose goal is to sacrifice the sensuous particular to an abstraction of the mind. Again, the discourse of abstraction rests upon devouring/sacrificing the animal other. Correspondingly, belief here operates for the writer as the supreme abstraction, as what distinguishes, in the words of the guard as well as a member of the panel of the judges, humans from “cattle” (194). The panel of judges endeavor to interpolate her as a subject of belief. Because Elizabeth is a writer, they critique her position for lacking commitment. This is a good test for someone who upholds an unreserved belief in the existence of the gods and that of the

beyond. Having embraced the winged Eros and a politics of inwardness, Elizabeth Costello, as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, must now find how her stance fares with the forces of abstraction, with the forces that tend to resolve the sensuous and the erotic and the literary, in general, to a message or a set of abstractions.

Elizabeth finds herself plunged in a world wherein everything is “prefabricated” and “predetermined” (193 & 198). The *mise en scène* of the whole chapter as well as its characters seem to come “out a book”:

Exactly, she thinks to herself, what one would expect in an obscure Italian or Austro-Italian border town in the year 1912. Out of a book, just as the bunkhouse with its straw mattresses and forty-watt bulb is out of a book, and the whole courtroom business too, down to the dozy bailiff. Is it all being mounted for her sake, because she is a writer? Is it someone’s idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés? (206)

She is implicated in this world as a literary character. To her mind, everything from the scenery, the characters, and motions of the court seem to be staged. Familiar as the woman in the bunk is where she sleeps, which she takes to be a “*Kapo*,” or the young woman Elizabeth sees later in the bunk, she cannot pin down who they are (211). Likewise, her memory has failed her. She cannot remember what she carries in her black suitcase or whether she has ever learned Esperanto. She does not know whether the language that she or others use is English, Italian or Esperanto. Her failure of memory can be read as a signal of her implication in a literary universe as a character. She has been thrown into a world not of her making wherein a “performance will be required of her; she hopes she can pick up the cues” (198). The reference to the term “performance,” of course, reminds one of John’s many references to his mother’s animality in the scenes where she

had to put up a show in academic settings.¹³⁴ Elizabeth, therefore, is a petitioner at the gate and, thus, confined to the letter of the text. The question is the following: How does Elizabeth resist the demands set upon her by this world and its tribunal of judges? How does she withstand the claws (clause) of identity thinking? In other words, how does she resist the sacrificial ritual of individuation?

Elizabeth Costello's sensibility towards her animal body, i.e., what marks her as the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, in fact, holds the key to her resistance towards the forces of abstraction. Her body is her only assurance.

For the moment, all she hears is the slow thud of the blood in her ears, just as all she feels is the soft touch of the sun on her skin. That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle, lumbering monster that has been given to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood. Not only is she *in* this body, this thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be, she somehow *is* this body. . . .

Somehow; but how? How on earth can bodies not only keep themselves clean using blood (*blood!*) but cogitate upon the mystery of their existence and make utterances about it and now and again even have little ecstasies? (210)¹³⁵

¹³⁴ John's meditations in Lesson I is significant in this respect: "He thinks of her as a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance" (54-55).

¹³⁵ Note the similarity between these lines and Elizabeth's description of Red Peter and Kafka earlier: "It is as hard to imagine the child of Red Peter as to imagine the child of Franz Kafka himself. Hybrids are, or ought to be, sterile; and Kafka saw both himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies. The stare that we meet in all the surviving photographs of Kafka is a stare of pure surprise: surprise, astonishment, alarm. Of all men Kafka is the most insecure in his humanity. *This*, he seems to

Whatever lacks authenticity in this world, it is definitely not Elizabeth's body or the bodies of others, humans or animals. Elizabeth's body testifies to Elizabeth's kinship to the other sentient beings. It is this consciousness that enables her, to use Adorno's words, "to revile man as animal," here, in particular, the tribunal of judges (Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophy of Music* 80). She compares her judges, which represent the forces of abstraction, i.e. "belief" in this chapter, "to creatures out of Grandville: Crocodile, ass, raven, deathwatch beetle." Her vision obviously has its roots in her knowledge as the Unhappy Consciousness of the ideological/aesthetic ramifications inherent in subscribing to abstractions. The reference to the French cartoonist, J. J. Grandville, is significant in that Grandville was a precursor to the movement of surrealism and a notable influence on its major figures. He was also a significant influence on Kafka and Lewis Carroll, whose texts are clearly referred to in Lesson VIII. In his representation of anthropomorphic objects/animals and severed bodies, Grandville's work, in fact, concretized what Adorno was to announce later. Grandville captured the objectifying gaze that transforms itself into second-nature, into an object, in the process of objectifying the other. Grandville's cartoons, in fact, narrate "the dialectic of enlightenment." His work can be read as an ingenious critique of instrumental rationality and the reifying social order of which it is a part. The second image in the chapter "Une Éclipse Conjugale" from Grandville's graphic novel *Une Autre Monde* portrays the erotic embrace of the sun and the moon in the sky which is juxtaposed to various instruments of observation and measurement on earth representing the banality of instrumental rationality (94). As such Elizabeth's re-reading of Newtonian physics in lesson VII resonates with Grandville's advocacy of the spirit of animism in his depiction of the loving embrace of the sun and the moon. In a cartoon "L'homme Descend vers La Brute" ("Man Descending towards the Brute") say: *this is the image of God?*" (75). As we have seen so far, Coetzee has a penchant for the depiction of such hybrid figures.

published in *Magasin Pittoresque* (108), Granville portrays a youth's devolvment into a low-browed ape with his vision blocked by the last figure. The image, fact, corresponds to what Mrs. Curren describes as the "evolution backward" in her reference to the Afrikaans woman she sees in a car.¹³⁶

As the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative, she is highly sensitive about her confinement in a world that is defined by the protocols of identity thinking. She is being trapped within the letters of identity thinking, a type of thinking that endeavors to reduce objects and experiences to one or another abstraction. Her place of residence and the courthouse are the very spaces that symbolically represent Elizabeth's imprisonment within the letters/claws (clause) of identity thinking. The residence, to which she has been assigned, "is a windowless room, long and low On either side are bunks in two tiers, knocked together out of tired-looking wood painted in the dark rust colour she associates with rolling stock" (197). The dormitory, "the bunkhouse", is "hot" and "airless" with a "poky little washroom at the back" (205 & 208). Her feeling toward this place is one of disgust and revulsion. She sees similarities between her place of residence to "any of the gulags" or "camps of the Third Reich." She also thinks of the woman, whom she takes to be responsible for the place, as a "Kapo" (197 & 211).

Correspondingly, the courtroom can be read as the courtroom of identity thinking. The windows of the courtroom "are all closed," which make the courtroom "stuffy."¹³⁷ The emblem

¹³⁶ "As the other car drove off at last, the woman turned to glare at me. Her face not unattractive yet ugly: closed, bunched, as if afraid that light, air, life itself were going to gather and strike her. Not a face but an expression, yet an expression worn so long as to be hers, her. A thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside, a thickening become thickness. Evolution, but evolution backward. Fish from the primitive depths (I am sure you know this) grew patches of skin sensitive to the fingerings of light, patches that in time became eyes. Now, in South Africa, I see eyes clouding over again, scales thickening on them, as the land explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep" (*Age of Iron* 127).

¹³⁷ Elizabeth's description of the bunkhouse and the courtroom resembles Adorno's description of identity thinking and the modern subject in terms of metaphors of confinement. In his critique

on the wall of the room which comprises of “two shields, two crossed spears and what looks like an emu but is probably meant to be a nobler bird, bearing a laurel wreath in its beak” can equally be read as the symbol of war and identity (198). The emblem may stand for the coat of arms symbolizing power and authority. The bird can be read as another totemic symbol representing national identity. It can, therefore, serve the symbolic function of protecting the state against the enemies. What this court of identity thinking amounts to, however, is nothing but a “court of paradox” (223). This court is not interested in the discourse of the beyond. When Elizabeth Costello represents herself, following Milosz, as “a secretary of the invisible” and as a “dictation secretary,” who is merely “waiting for the call,” the jury, contrary to Elizabeth’s expectations, evades the implications of Elizabeth’s discourse (199 & 200). The court, as Elizabeth realizes, is not interested in the “powers beyond us” or in the question of “whose call” (200). The court’s discourse is confined to the dictums of this world, this side of reality, rather than what may lie beyond or outside it. In fact, what this literary world of identity thinking amounts to is, as Elizabeth beautifully puts it, not so much a “Kafkaesque” universe but “the superficies of Kafka” (209). This world is comprised of nothing but a never-ending chain of literary “clichés”: “The whole thing put together from clichés, with not a speck of originality” (197). In other words, a literary work/world fettered to the fetish of identity thinking is only equivalent to a set of clichés or nonsensical contradictions.

of the Kantian notion of subjectivity, for example, which is, in fact, a reiteration of the Hegelian critique of the Kantian philosophy and the moral view of the world, Adorno describes Western metaphysics and its subjectivity in the following terms: “Except among heretics, all Western metaphysics has been peephole metaphysics. The subject—a mere limited moment—was locked up in its own self by that metaphysics, imprisoned for all eternity to punish it for its deification. As through the crenels of a parapet, the subject gazes upon a black sky in which the star of the idea, or of Being, is said to rise. And yet it is the very wall around the subject that casts its shadow on whatever the subject conjures: the shadow of reification, which a subjective philosophy will then helplessly fight again” (*Negative Dialectics* 139-140).

As in Elizabeth's reaction to the Communion and the presence of the "television crew" at the church scene in Lesson V, Elizabeth's bodily reactions to this world reveals the true nature of this world and highlights Elizabeth's relation to it. Following her first trial, Elizabeth once again loses her appetite:

Today the very thought of eating feels her with distaste. Her body feels unpleasantly heavy, unpleasantly corporeal.

Is a new career beginning to beckon: as one of the thin folks, the compulsive fasters, the hunger artists? (215)

The reference to Kafka's "Hunger Artist" is revealing in that Elizabeth's body reacts to the carnivorous nature of this world soon after Elizabeth's first trial. Correspondingly, she gets a headache during her second trial whose cause she ascribes to her exposure to "too many heady abstractions" and which she takes to be "a warning from nature" (205). Elizabeth's sensory/bodily reaction, therefore, makes her well-aware of the sacrificial nature of this world of identity thinking and its correlates, reified subjectivity and sickness. Elizabeth's desire, therefore, consists in passing through and beyond the "gate" of identity thinking.

Elizabeth, in fact, is not willing to sacrifice the bodily and the sensory faculties to the forces of abstractions. It is in this spirit that she lays out her case before the court as "a secretary of the invisible." In her defense against a jury that advocates a politics of commitment in literature, which, in this version, tends to reduce literary commitment to a message as/and an expression of an author's belief, she states that beliefs function as an "obstacle" in her role as a writer and that in her role as a "dictation secretary," she occupies a somewhat passive role (200). Her role involves turning her attention "inward" listening for the "voices" of the beyond, i.e., "the invisible" (210). What she has to do is to "test" the "soundness" of what she hears (199). She, thus, substitute 'voice' for "thought" and "listening" for "abstracting" from particularity. What

this procedure involves is, of course, not clear. What is clear is that Elizabeth's description, should we take her words seriously, involves a sensory act of listening to establish the "truth" of the voice. Later, she tests her vision of the frogs using the same strategy: "She tries a test that seems to work when she is writing: to send out a word into the darkness and listen for what kind of sound comes back. Like a foundryman tapping a bell: is it cracked or healthy? The frogs: what tone do the frogs give off?" (219). It is Elizabeth's insistence on this truth that angers her judges: "'I said nothing about voices,' says the man. 'I asked you about your thoughts,'" states one of the judges angrily (202).

Elizabeth's reverence for the sensory, the emotive, and the sensuous particular is most apparent in her meditations on the Odysseus's journey to Hades. In her attempt to turn her attention "inward," to figure out an answer to the demands of the tribunal, Elizabeth registers her long-life trouble with understanding Odysseus's act of sacrificing his "favourite ram" in his journey to the underworld.¹³⁸ The following description follows the context of her meditation on her body as part of what I referred to as Elizabeth's dialectics of the Unhappy Consciousness:

She believes, most unquestionably, in the ram, the ram dragged by its master down to this terrible place. The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive though right now it is dying. If she believes in the ram, then does she believe in its blood too, this sacred liquid, sticky, dark, almost black, pumped out in gouts on to soil where nothing will grow? The favourite ram of the king of Ithaca, so runs the story, yet treated in the end as a mere bag of blood, to be cut open and poured from. . . . For that, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to

¹³⁸ Elizabeth's account, strictly speaking, does not accord with Homer's narrative in its details. Following Circe's guidance, Odysseus sacrifices a ram and a black ewe to seek knowledge of home return from Tiresias. Odysseus does promise, however, to sacrifice his "best young heifer" to the dead and "a pure black sheep" to Tiresias once in Ithaca as part of the ritual (280. 20-40). Needless to say that the differences in details do not change Elizabeth's meaning here.

die. (211)

This is the closest Elizabeth gets to the concept of belief, a term which she revises by the end of the chapter. As Mulhall rightly puts it, Elizabeth's bodily sensitivity "naturally connects the thud of her blood with that of her fellow creatures, nonhuman animals, such as the ram whose throat Odysseus cuts in Hades in order that its blood might allow him consult the dead seer, Tiresias" (224). Once again, the body functions as the index of "kindness to animals," of Elizabeth's visceral recognition of the suffering of the animals.¹³⁹ As Mulhall highlights, even though the ram is literary, the ram is real at the same time (225). This description is, in fact, part of what I what referred to as the aesthetic politics inherent in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, i.e., the desire of the text to collide the domain of the fictional and the real.¹⁴⁰ As convincing as this vision might be to us or to the judges, Elizabeth Costello refuses to use it in the court to convince her judges. This decision may lie in Elizabeth's reluctance to sacrifice the sensuous particular to the forces of abstraction. Unlike Odysseus, she refuses to offer the ram's blood to get a pass beyond the gate. It is her desire to avoid the sacrificial gesture of individuation. This reading can explain Elizabeth's choice for her belief in the ram depicted in Homer's *Odyssey* rather than a belief in Abraham's sacrificing of the ram, in particular, Kierkegaard's rendering of the story in *Fear and Trembling*. If there is to be a passage beyond the gate, it must not involve the sacrificing gesture

¹³⁹ Mulhall's reading resonates with my reading of Elizabeth's valorization of the bodily and the sensory at this point: "Like Kafka's ape, Hughes's panther and the cattle she has accompanied in her imagination through our industrial abattoirs, Homer's ram sends a shiver of recognition down her back, a shiver of indubitable kinship—the commonality of mortal beings" (225).

¹⁴⁰ The tie between Coetzee's aesthetic politics and the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness is apparent in Elizabeth's description of the gate: "Despite her unbelief, she had expected that what lay beyond this door fashioned of teak and brass but also no doubt of the tissue of allegory would be unimaginable" (196). For a person who is entangled in a literary universe, the brass door is real. It is her literary background as a writer that enables her to occupy this dual position: to be both inside and outside the text.

of the subject which always sacrifices nature, human and nonhuman others in its passage.

Elizabeth, thus, refuses the hero's homecoming story by which the subject assumes the apparent status of the full subject, which is, in truth, only an empty shell of a subject as Adorno and Horkheimer conceive it to be. What lies beyond the gate, as Elizabeth is granted a glimpse by the guard, is not after all the light of home or that of heavens as seen by Dante: "[not] a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it. But the light is not unimaginable at all. It is merely brilliant, more brilliant perhaps than the varieties of light she has known hitherto, but not of another order, not more brilliant than, say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly" (196).

Elizabeth's revision of the term "belief" for "fidelities" towards the end of the chapter also takes its direction from Elizabeth's reverence for the primacy of the sensuous and the particular (224). In order to satisfy her judges, she decides to follow the advice of the woman in the bunkhouse: "They [the judges] may say they demand belief, but in practice they will be satisfied with passion. Show them passion and they will let you through" (213). Elizabeth, thus, settles on telling a story about the "mud frogs of the Dulgannon" which she passes, contrary to the truth, as a personal childhood experience. Despite being untrue as an autobiographical story, Elizabeth's story shows reverence for the particular and the sensuous. Elizabeth's story, of course, fails to impress her judges as they realize the lie behind the description. Most importantly, Elizabeth's story fails since the judges translate the story into a series of abstractions. Nevertheless, the mud frogs grow on Elizabeth's mind and imagination unplanned, precisely because of Elizabeth's reverence of the sensuous particular: "The mud frogs of the Dulgannon are a new departure for her. Give them time: they might yet be made to ring true. For there is something about them that obscurely engages her, something about their mud tombs and the fingers of their hands, fingers that end in little balls, soft, wet, mucous" (219).

Elizabeth's fidelity toward the particular has something to do with her sensuous

receptivity to the objects of perception or imagination. Elizabeth, it seems, feels a certain affinity with Keats's idea of "negative capability." Earlier in lesson I, John, Elizabeth's son, compares her to Keats, "the great advocate of blank receptiveness" (4).¹⁴¹ Elizabeth's description of herself earlier as "the secretary of the invisible," also speaks of her particular attentiveness/receptivity to the objects of perception/imagination. In a letter to his brothers, George and Tom (1817) Keats praised Shakespeare as a genius possessing this capability:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (193-194)

Leaving aside the history of controversy over what Keats meant by negative capability, Keats' description, nevertheless, can be read as attempt to address or get beyond the aporia/ambivalence that plagued romantic poetry: To what does poetry owe its origin or primacy, the human subject/poet or nature? Roughly put, Keats' formulation might be read as a critique of the subjective imposition of meaning, subjective expression, the poet's personal feelings, impressions, and intentions, among others, on nature or the objects of poetic description.¹⁴² Keats might be regarded as the romantic poet who reserved an exceptional reverence for the primacy of

¹⁴¹ "She has washed her hair and brushed it back. It still looks greasy, but honourably greasy, like a navvy's or a mechanic's. Already on her face the passive look that, if you saw it in a young girl, you would call withdrawn. A face without personality, the kind that photographers have to work on to lend distinction. Like Keats, he thinks, the great advocate of blank receptiveness" (4).

¹⁴² For a discussion of this aporia, see Paul de Man's seminal essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*.

the object. No wonder that Elizabeth shows the least resistance when her position is described as one of negative capability by one of the judges. She also uses the image of autumn from Keats's "Ode to Autumn" as a metaphor to describe her state of mind as movement from one belief to another: "Her mind, when she is truly herself, appears to pass from one belief to the next, pausing, balancing, then moving on. A picture comes to her of a girl crossing a stream; it comes together with a line from Keats: *Keeping steady her laden head across a brook*" (222). Nevertheless, what is being added in Elizabeth's adaptation of Keats's metaphor is an emphasis on movement and mutability rather than the romantic emphasis on eternity or permanence. As Elizabeth reminds us in her reading of Borge's "The Library of Babel" in Lesson I, the ideals of eternal thoughts, feelings, and emotions, in one word, meanings are no longer relevant to our world (17).

Having lost her/our confidence in the romantic conception of poetry or subjectivity in our era, it is the term "fidelity" in the plural, i.e., "fidelities," which best describes Elizabeth's "situation," her relationship to the world and her profession:

'But as a writer,' she persists – 'what chance do I stand as a writer, with the special problems of a writer, the special fidelities?'

Fidelities. Now that she has brought it out, she recognizes it as the word on which all hinges. (224)

The term "fidelities" is more on the side of the sensuous than on the side of faith or belief which connote a subscription to systems of abstract ideas and principles. The term "fidelity" in the plural, particularly in the context of Lesson VIII, sides with the idea of receptivity while connoting reverence for mutability and movement. It connotes an openness to the objects of perception rather than a blind subscription to an abstract set of received ideas or cultural mores. The term "fidelities" speaks of a sensibility that strives to move beyond this side of reality to

“that other world” (190). It can be read as a movement beyond our inherited concepts and prejudices. As such, the term can be read to be hospitable towards nature and the nonhuman others. It refuses to sacrifice the animal other/nature, i.e., the non-identical, to abstract or nominal categories.

The lesson, nevertheless, ends with the enigmatic “vision” of a wounded animal at the far side of the gate:

She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable mangleings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (224-225)

This last vision, much like the rest of Elizabeth’s visions, is allegorical in nature, and, thus, cannot be assigned a final meaning or interpretation. It can, however, be read as to register Elizabeth’s ambivalence towards not of literary language as such but of literature and literary representations. The vision of “the gate” and of the “old dog,” which she “does not trust,” stands contraposed to the vision of the universe and of “appetency and chance” at the end of lesson VII in which Elizabeth rejoices (192). The vision of the “old dog” whose “lion-coloured hide [is] scarred by innumerable mangling” may signify the fact that literary discourse/representation—given the fact that Elizabeth’s vision is part of a literary world, nonetheless, to borrow a term from Mulhall, relies on the “wounded animal” or the wounding of the animal others. The vision may stand for the idea that in its approach for the other, in its attempt to establish its aesthetic boundaries, literature and literary representation cannot but mutilate nature and animal others. In this reading, what lies at the margins of the work of literature is the wounded animal. The

multiple meanings of the term “mangle” are, in fact, consistent with this reading. Besides its primary meaning, i.e., “to hack, cut, lacerate, or mutilate (a person or animal) by repeated blows. . .,” OED lists the following definition: “To make (words) almost unrecognizable by mispronunciation; to spoil, corrupt, misrepresent, or do violence to (a text or extract, or the meaning or essence of something) . . .” (“Mangle, v1”). The textual violence, thus, seems to coexist with the physical violence done to humans and animal others. In this way, Elizabeth’s refusal to trust the vision may be read as Elizabeth’s reluctance of admitting the truth represented by this vision, hence her later utterance of the expletive: “a curse on literature!” Throughout the lesson, Elizabeth reflects on and at times complains about the world and the figures represented in Lesson VIII as “literary” or in terms of “clichés.” However, it is now the status of literature as such that is under question. The image of the dog, in fact, can be read a preface to the “Postscript” that follows Lesson VIII which includes an excerpt from Hofmannsthal’s *The Letter of Lord Chandos* to which Coetzee adds another fictional letter written by Lord Chandos’s wife, Lady Chandos. The reference to the wounded dog can be read as linking Elizabeth’s concerns here with that of Hofmannsthal’s conception of sacrifice and literary representation.¹⁴³ The figure of the dog is also familiar to Coetzee through Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog” and *Trial*. In the

¹⁴³ Marla Alexandra Burks highlights the presence of animals and their relation to the concept of sacrifice and aesthetic representation in Hofmannsthal’s works. In particular, she argues that what underlies Hofmannsthal’s treatment of animals is the author’s consistent stress on a sense of “social responsibility” in a context that takes the “equality of all beings” seriously. In this respect, she highlights the presence of animals in a number of Hofmannsthal’s works including “Der Wanderer” in *Augenblicke in Griechenland*, *Andreas*, and the *Letter of Lord Chandos*. In this context and, interestingly for our reference here, Burks highlights Hofmannsthal’s reference to Glibet Murray’s *The Rise of the Greek Epic* which appears an epigraph in “Der Wanderer”: “this second section of *Augenblicke in Griechenland* . . . does not actually begin with the title ‘Der Wanderer.’ Set above this section heading is an epigraph in Greek: εἰδὶ καὶ κυνῶν ἐρινύες, a quote Hofmannsthal had taken from Gilbert Murray’s *The Rise of the Greek Epic*: ‘There is vengeance in heaven for an injured dog’” (141-142).

latter work, Kafka captures K.'s final words and his sense of shame as a sacrificial object in the following words: "like a dog! He said. It was as if his shame would live on after him" (165).

Dogs also figure prominently in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* wherein they exercise an unwarranted presence on the mind of its (anti)hero, David Lurie. The anagram God-dog, against whose possible meaning Elizabeth warns us, is also invoked by Elizabeth's counterpart, Mrs. Curren, in *Age of Iron*. In the novel, Mrs. Curren sees herself as being "written out, bled dry" She, then, describes herself as "the bitch in her time" and the God as "the male [dog]" lost in a maze (137-138).¹⁴⁴ Does the image of the dog highlight Elizabeth's reluctance to concede to the idea that there is no way out of the logic of sacrifice, in particular in reference to the question of writing and literary representation? Or does Elizabeth believe that there is actually a way out of this conundrum of mangling and mutilation? These questions take us to last section of *Elizabeth Costello*, i.e., the Postscript.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ "I have written about blood before, I know. I have written about everything, I am written out, bled dry, and still I go on. This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze, scurrying up and down the branches and tunnels, scratching and whining at the same old places, tiring, tired. Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze. I smell God and God smells me. I am the bitch in her time, God the male. God smells me, he can think of nothing else but finding me and taking me. Up and down the branches he bounds, scratching at the mesh. But he is lost as I am lost" (137-138).

¹⁴⁵ My reference to the motif of the wounded animal and, in particular, the figure of the dog and its relevance to the passage that ends Lesson VIII is obviously not exhaustive. The list can go on. Nevertheless, the question that seems to be posed here, after all, is the question of aesthetic representation and that of sacrificing the other, here animals.

Conclusion

The Incommensurable as Suffering Nature, *Elizabeth Costello's* Postscript

The last section of Coetzee's novel or book of lessons is a postscript. The postscript is comprised of two texts. The first text is an excerpt from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's well-known work *Ein Brief* (A Letter) commonly referred to as *The Letter of Lord Chandos*. It is a fictional letter written by a fictional character by the name Philip, Lord Chandos, addressed to Francis Bacon in the year 1603. The letter records Lord Chandos's attempt to explain his mental crisis which has resulted in his inability to use words, and by consequence, has led to his cessation of literary activity. Commonly regarded as an expression of high modernism, the letter is often read, though not exclusively, as a paradigmatic text alluding to the what is regarded in the history of modern aesthetics as the "language-crisis," i.e., the loss of trust in language as a vehicle capable of containing truth or of representing reality. The second letter, which has no external reference and that appears solely in *Elizabeth Costello*, is another fictional letter written by a Lady Chandos, Lord Chandos's wife, to Francis Bacon signed as Elizabeth C. in the same year. It addresses some of the problems discussed in *The Letter of Lord Chandos*. The letter, furthermore, includes an account of Lady Chandos's concern with her husband's crisis and highlights their mutual "afflictions" (229). The letter ends with a plea for help from Francis Bacon: "Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us" (230). In fact, the last section of the novel makes one more attempt to get beyond the logic of sacrifice in terms of aesthetic representation. As against conceiving the incommensurable as the merely sensuous entity (as in Lesson VIII) or the merely abstract concept, it attempts to get beyond art's *imagerie* or symbolic immanence by making suffering nature the very index of the incommensurable. It does so through a language that attempts to express mimetically this very suffering. This language comes to us through the corporeal mental suffering of a subject who, nonetheless, fails to express itself/its suffering at

every turn.

A lot depends on how we interpret the postscript and its place in the novel. Some critics have connected *Elizabeth Costello* to Hofmannsthal's *Letter* as a whole highlighting the novel's lack of finality and open-endedness. On the one hand, they have emphasized the novel's continuity with Hofmannsthal's *Letter* and the general theme of "the language crisis" as attestations to the problematics inherent in literary language and literary representation. On the other hand, they have correctly tried to emphasize and, in fact, understand the difference between Lady Chandos's letter and her husband's.¹⁴⁶ There have also been attempts to find resonances of the whole novel in the postscript, which is equally a worthwhile strategy.¹⁴⁷ While I acknowledge these attempts to be helpful for the understanding of Coetzee's novel and its postscript, I believe it is equally of prime importance to follow the novel's emphasis, direction, or point of contention at every turn. I ask two specific questions: a) what does this particular choice of excerpt from Hofmannsthal's *Letter* tell us/emphasize in terms of the dynamics of the novel, especially in relation to Lady's Chandos's letter? In other words, is it not possible to read the choice of lines from Hofmannsthal's *Letter* as part of the aesthetic politics of the novel? And, most importantly b) what does the second letter, in fact, Lady Chandos's voice, add to the first letter (the excerpt) and the novel, to lesson VIII, in particular? What are we to make of Lady Chandos's voice when she herself insists that her intention in writing the letter is to add to her husband's letter: "Ask me not how, but a copy of that letter has come under my sight, and now I add my voice to his" (227). We should take this adding of her voice very seriously.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Dirk Kloppe's excellent essay, "'We are Not Made for Revelation': Letters to Francis Bacon in the Postscript to J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*" and Stephen Mulhall's insightful discussion in *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (231-239).

¹⁴⁷ See, for instance, Robert Pippin's brilliant essay "Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*."

It is in this respect that I intend to highlight and pursue even more intently, despite their outstanding similarities, the difference between Lady Chandos's letter and her husband's. The difference between the two letters, in fact, lies in their point of emphasis rather than in their explicit content or, in better words, in the specific problematics they raise. Yet, the difference in their focus has further consequences and, as I will argue, manifests itself at the level of style. While the excerpt focuses, if not exclusively, on the tie between the inexpressible and subject's revelation in the beautiful, Lady Chandos's letter emphasizes the tie between the inexpressible and that of the subject's "afflictions" (229). In its homage to the beautiful object, or the object perceived as beautiful, Hofmannsthal's conception of symbol, as many have argued, relies upon the sacrifice of the subject to the object. Even if we accept the highly contentious idea of his *Letter* as indicative of Hofmannsthal's change of aesthetic perception from his earlier work, the *Letter*, as underlined by the excerpt chosen, still, to a certain degree, adheres to this conception of the beautiful and the symbolic. On the other hand, what lady Chandos's voice adds to Hofmannsthal's text and the novel itself, despite its constant negations, is a certain inscription of, to use her word, "affliction" into the text (227, 228 & 229). To counter the logic of symbol and that of sacrifice implicit in the excerpt, Lady Chandos's letter can, in fact, be read as inscribing the suffering of the subject (the suffering individual) into the space of writing as part of the objectivity of the text which, ultimately, reveals itself in the mutations and contortions of discourse. To do so, Lady Chandos's letter embraces the allegorical mode of representation whose work of negation pays homage to the incommensurable, hence showcasing the subject's "fidelities" to the world of suffering nature and animals rather merely paying homage to the particular and the merely sensuous as portrayed in Lesson VIII. In this sense, the postscript can be read as one final attempt to move beyond the logic of sacrifice. It, thus, seeks to transcend the lessons reached in the previous eight lessons. Therefore, it cannot be read merely as a summation

or replication of the previous lessons.

Once again, we are faced with the Unhappy Consciousness of the narrative. The ultimate divide here is between the flesh and its meanings. What happens when this consciousness and its language are written into the text? More specifically, what are the aesthetic implications of the Unhappy Consciousness at this point in the narrative? Primarily, the inscription of the Unhappy Consciousness enables the text to counter the sacrificial discourse immanent in the symbolic representation of the object, whether the symbolic is understood in its romantic sense or its neo-romantic (aestheticist) modernist sense. Roughly put, the romantic notion of the symbol sacrificed the objects of the world to the subject's meanings and intentions. The symbol, in this conception, aligns the object, nature/life, the world, God and the word along the subject's axis of meanings and intentions. In the romanticist's conception of symbol, the world became the object of the poet's expressions and feelings. By contrast, in the neo-romantic/aestheticist conception of symbol, as Adorno argues in his "George-Hofmannsthal's Correspondence", the very conception of the symbolic is premised on the opposite direction: "Instead of things yielding as symbols of subjectivity, subjectivity yields as the symbol of things, prepares itself to rigidify ultimately into the thing which society has in any case made of it" (222). The problem with this conception of the symbolic lies in what Adorno refers to as Hofmannsthal's "gory theory of the symbol" (222). Adorno quotes a lengthy passage from Hofmannsthal's *Das Gespräch über Gedichte* which crystalizes, as many have argued, Hofmannsthal's own conception of the symbolic. The passage—which records the conversation between the main interlocutors of the text, Gabriel and Clemen—is reminiscent of Elizabeth Costello's earlier meditations about the sacrifice of the ram in Homer's *Odyssey* in the last lesson. Despite its differences from Homer's *Odyssey*, Hofmannsthal's text, likewise, takes its dictum from the logic of sacrifice. The passage relates the origin of the symbol to the first person who attempted to sacrifice himself to appease the vengeful

gods. Caught in the dread and confusion of the moment, in the darkness of “his lowly hut” and “half unconsciously,” he sacrifices the ram by mistake. For “one moment” he confuses the ram’s blood for his own, where his “voluptuous triumph” is mixed with the “dying moans of the animal” For an instant, he experiences his death in the animal.

‘And then, drunk with dread and savagery and the nearness of death, his hands clutched once again, half unconsciously, at the woolly warm fleece of the ram. And this animal, this life, this thing breathing in the dark, blood—warm, so close to him, so familiar—suddenly the knife tore through the throat and the warm blood spurted over both the animal’s fleece and the man’s breast, then his arms—and for one moment he must have thought that it was his own blood; for that moment, in which a sound of voluptuous triumph issued from his throat to mix with the dying moans of the animal, he must have mistaken the voluptuousness of a heightened life for the first convulsion of death; for a moment he must have died in the animal, for only thus could the animal die for him. . . . Henceforth, the animal died the symbolic sacrificial death. But everything rests on the fact that he, too, died in the animal, for one moment. . . . That is the root of all poetry . . . He died in the animal. And we dissolve in symbols. Is this how you meant it?’—‘Certainly. In so far as they have the power to enchant us.’ (qtd. in Adorno, “The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence” 221-222)

In this account, the symbolic act goes beyond a linguistic game and, thus, in fact, involves the dissolution of the subject in the object. The problem with this conception is that the subject has to abandon itself and its sense of inwardness to assimilate itself to, and in Adorno’s words, “dissolve itself in the world of things” (222). The subject, Adorno argues, renounces its own

autonomy and abandons itself to the order of the immediate, to life as an abstraction.¹⁴⁸

Ultimately, Hofmannsthal's aesthetic, in Adorno's account, merely mirrors "waning subjectivity" in the face of the social forces or the market (222).¹⁴⁹ A strong subjectivity is a prerequisite for Adorno's negative dialectics. Having turned against "inwardness," Hofmannsthal's poetry, thus, remains confined to the order of the immediate (217). While social realism falls prey to dictates of the immediate and the empirical, Hofmannsthal's poetry can be read as a second-order empiricism or "naïve realism" (217). In its ties to the sensuously beautiful, Hofmannsthal's poetry can be read as an inverse image of naturalism. Both symbolism and naturalist modes of representation are tied to the order of the sensuous. While the former gives its allegiance to the beautiful, the latter gives itself to the ugly. Both are restricted to the context of the real.

By inscribing the Unhappy Consciousness into the texture of the postscript, the novel, in fact, avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of romanticism and aestheticism. While *The Letter of Lord Chandos* writes out the subject or the subjectivity of the author, sacrificing the subject to the order of life and the metaphysical, Lady Chandos's letter reinscribes the subject and its anxiety as

¹⁴⁸ In his seminal work, *The Look of Things: Poetry and Vision around 1900*, Carsten Strathausen, despite his divergence from Adorno's reading of Hofmannsthal's poetry and the poetry of the period at large, agrees with Adorno on this point: "Aestheticism succumbs to just one more of the many metaphysical notions it originally had sought to render superfluous. Life, like nature, God, or the holy spirit, is envisioned both everywhere and nowhere and thus hardly distinct from earlier philosophical ideals or scientific theorems. Moreover, in spite of its antisubjective tone, modernist poetry still advocates a narcissistic ideal of the poetic self, this time founded on the alleged lack of subjectivity rather than the reflection of its imaginary wholeness" (144).

¹⁴⁹ "In the past, autonomy demanded that the inviolable externality of the object be overcome by subjecting it to one's own will. The economic competitor survived by anticipating fluctuations in the market, even if he could not do anything about them. The modern poet lets himself be overwhelmed by the power of things as though he were an outsider being swallowed by a cartel. Both win the semblance of security; the poet, however, without sensing its opposite. The 'ciphers, which language is powerless to dissolve'—namely those, which exhaust themselves in the signification of their objects—become a *menetekel* to Hofmannsthal" (222).

the divide between its word and its flesh. In a sense, the dialectic between the flesh and its meaning is what characterizes Elizabeth Costello's language and the discourse of the eight lessons. The fact that lady Chandos has signed its letter as Elizabeth C. might be read as Lady Chandos's relation or "kindness to" Elizabeth Costello. It is equally possible to read Elizabeth Costello as the author of the letter and of Lady Chandos. As I have discussed throughout, choosing an Unhappy Consciousness, as the main focalizer of the story is significant precisely because in its dialectic the subject is compelled to reflect upon its own subjectivity/objectivity (objectification) at the core of and as a result of its own objectifying activity. This consciousness posits its own nullity or nothingness at the same time that it endeavors to justify and establish itself as subject, therein lies the unhappiness of the subject. Lady Chandos's letter does not fall into an alleged lack of subjectivity (as an elitist ideal of the poetic self), neither does it collapse into the romantic conception of wholeness. In the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness, the subject can at least have a feeling for what it has sacrificed in the process to become a subject. It is this very sacrifice that feeds the constant pangs and compulsions of the Unhappy Consciousness. Instead of "the gory" metaphysics of the symbol, with its imperative to sacrifice the poetic subject, what Lady Chandos reveals is that the subject under the current historical constellation is always already sacrificed. This is exactly why Elizabeth Costello finds herself in a Kafkaesque universe in Lesson VIII. In its symptoms, in her anxiety above all, Lady Chandos is a witness to a history whose generation has relied upon sacrificing others: nature, animals, human others, and one's own (reified) subjectivity. The sacrificial nature of this history is underlined in the line where Lady Chandos expresses a hope for a different time in an indefinite future where the subject, who is fully present to its "afflictions," can possibly come to be able to bear the scars of history: "There may come a time when such *extreme souls* as I write of may be able to bear their afflictions, but that time is not now. It will be a time, if ever it comes, when giants or

perhaps angels stride the earth (I cease to hold myself back, I am tired now, I yield myself to the figures, do you see, Sir, how I am taken over? . . .)” (229). Yet, even the expression of this wish falls short of itself precisely because the language to express it is not present, hence the parenthetical digression that proceeds for almost half a page.

Indeed, the language of the Unhappy Consciousness can best find expression within a discourse that fails to coincide with itself. What we see in Lady Chandos’s letter is an incessant chain of metaphoric substitutions and vignettes, excessively visceral representations, indeed, which, nevertheless, fail to communicate the experience of the subject, each falling to the order of “[a]lways it is not what I say but something else”:

We are not meant to live thus, Sir. *Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another (*like a contagion*, I say: barely did I hold myself back from saying, *a plague of rats*, for rats are everywhere about us these days).

Like a wayfarer (hold the figure in mind, I pray you), like a wayfarer I step into a mill, dark and disused, and feel of a sudden the floorboards, rotten with the wetness, give way beneath my feet and plunge me into the racing mill-waters; yet as I am that (a wayfarer in a mill) I am also not that; nor is it a contagion that comes continually upon me or a plague of rats or flaming swords, but something else. *Always it is not what I say but something else.* (228)

We are, in fact, not faced with metaphoric substitutions in the strict sense of the term. The “tenor” for whose elaboration a vehicle must be deployed is not absent but is wordless. The very words, i.e., “sorrow” and “affliction,” for whose elaboration these various images are deployed, are themselves merely substitutes for that wordless tenor (227). In other words, if all metaphors fail to express or communicate anything of the tenor, the tenor together with its subject, here exemplified by Lord Chandos and Lady Chandos, merely fall within, to borrow an expression

from Lord Chandos, “whirlpools” of words (Hofmannsthal 74 & 79). As such, Lady Chandos’s language is distinctively characterized by its attempt to break through the realm of the symbolic.

The dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness and its language here can be read as one that strives to move beyond and, in fact, transcend the economy of desire. While the economy of desire is conceived within the symbolic mode of representation as one of penetrating the being of the other in both letters, the desire to move beyond the economy of desire is conceived in terms of ideas “flowing[ing] over into one another” by Lord Chandos in Hofmannsthal’s *The Letter* and as an existential modality of “interpenetrate[ing] and being interpenetrate[ed] by fellow creatures” in Lady Chandos’s words in *Elizabeth Costello* (73 & 229). Voicing her husband’s ideas, the figure of allegory does not merely appear as a figure of speech, but one that defines the existential relationship of the human subject with its others along an axis of equality and shared existence:

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*our Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? *We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun. (229)

This point becomes clearer if we realize that the master/slave relationship in Coetzee oeuvre is often figured as a spatial relationship in an economy of desire. In *Dusklands*, for example, Jacobus Coetzee, the colonial explorer of the second narrative, describes his relationship to the

“savages” and to space in the following words: “Savages do not have guns. This is the effective meaning of savagery, which we may define as enslavement to space, as one speaks obversely of the explorer’s mastery of space. The relation of master and savage is a spatial relation” (96)

Being an explorer of the hinterland, his eyes devour the horizon: “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” (94). The metaphor of devouring is often concomitant with that of penetration in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* and, in fact, Coetzee’s oeuvre. In other words, penetration and devouring are modalities of this spatial relationship. Correspondingly, the master/slave relation and the failure immanent to the master/slave relation in getting recognition is defined by Eugene Dawn, the anti-hero of the first narrative of *Dusklands*, as follows:

We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew of between ourselves and our objects. From this tragic ignorance we sought deliverance. Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist; that since whatever we embraced wilted, we were all that existed. We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality: if you will prove yourself, we shouted, you will prove us too, and we will love you endlessly and shower you with gifts. (24)

Similarly, both Lord Chandos’s letter and that of Lady Chandos’s contain passages that explore in explicit terms the failure of Lord Chandos to get recognition through the economy of desire.

Lady Chandos describes this failure in the following terms:

How did our sorrows come to be? There was a time, I remember, before this time of affliction, when he would gaze like one bewitched at paintings of sirens and dryads, craving to enter their naked, glistening bodies. But where in Wiltshire will we find a siren or a dryad for him to try? Perforce I became his dryad: it was I whom he entered when he

sought to enter her, I who felt his tears on my shoulder when again he could not find her in me. (227)

It seems that we have made a full circle back to the question with which we started this research, i.e. Susan Barton's question in *Foe*: "Without desire how is possible to make a story?" (88) What the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness persists in is an attempt to overcome the economy of desire and that of the master/slave relationship.¹⁵⁰ What the Unhappy Consciousness verges upon here is a different economy of relationship with other sentient beings, a shared existence (being) that places us along an axis of equality with our animal others. Instead of destroying, devouring or possessing the sentient others, one has to learn to accommodate oneself with a mode of existence that hitherto has had no parallel in the history of humanity. The problem Lady Chandos has to contend with is that she is compelled to use the language of desire, which has shaped and has been shaped by our history, to get beyond this very economy of desire. Ultimately, this language proves to be unfit to describe her and her husband's feelings and emotions, i.e. their "afflictions." As readers and literary scholars of Coetzee's texts, we are compelled to share the same insecurities and deficiencies. At every turn, Coetzee, effectively pushes the problems he raises within his texts onto his readers.

This failure yet excess of language that houses and, in fact, mimetically writes the pains of the subject on the texture of the text is, in fact, what I regard as the allegorical texture of Lady Chandos's letter. The mimetic contortions of words at the level of syntax, to use Adorno's words on Kafka again, effectively "shoot towards" the reader ("Notes on Kafka" 245). The pages acquire faces that relentlessly gaze into the soul of the reader. As such, this mimetic quality of the

¹⁵⁰ It is noteworthy to be reminded of the fact that in her discussion with her son, *Elizabeth Costello* refers to animals as our "slave populations," drawing a correspondence between the treatment of animals and slaves (104).

text falls within what Adorno characterizes as the mimetic bearing of artworks: “artistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain” (*Aesthetic Theory* 110). The relationship between Lady Chandos’s letter and the reader is, therefore, reciprocal: Lady Chandos’s letter gazes at us as we gaze at it. This reciprocal gaze constitutes the distinctive difference between Lady Chandos’s letter and that of her husband’s. As such Lady Chandos’s letter and *Elizabeth Costello*, by consequence, can be said to partake in what Adorno identifies as the distinctive feature of “artistic expression”: “Art is expressive when what is objective, subjectively mediated, speaks, whether this be sadness, energy, or longing. Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks. They turn this countenance only toward those who return its gaze, even when they are composed in happy tones or glorify the *vie opportune* of rococo” (111).

The mimetic comportment of the letter, its “artistic expression,” can ultimately be read as “dissonance” working against, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, the text’s “immanent *imagerie*” (110 & 102). It is not realism or symbolic allegiance that is the target in the postscript but art’s “semblance character” as such, i.e. art’s attempt to resemble its own elements (100-118). The mimetic contortions of the text, immanent in the incessant chain of metaphors that fail one after another, announce the ban on images of suffering. These metaphors denounce the concept of art as a self-enclosed autonomous entity. They refuse to become the triumphant chorus capable of expressing the voice of suffering. Suffering nature, thus, refuses to succumb to the artwork as an image.

The incommensurable exceeds the bounds of the merely sensuous or the merely beautiful in Lady Chandos’s letter. Suffering nature rather becomes the index of the incommensurable as the “*Presences of the Infinite*” (230). The letter resists its confinement to the order of the immediate, the decorative and the ornamental. Lady Chandos’s letter, in fact, resists its

confinement to the decorative via the figures of animals and insects. It is this sense that Lady Chandos's letter can be seen as belonging to the tradition of Kafka and Hofmannsthal— of course, by pushing the aesthetic logic of the latter further. In Lord Chandos's letter animals are not the only creatures that call upon the subject as an index of the incommensurable. Lord Chandos notes that "*inanimate creatures*" also can press towards him; therefore, they can equally become the cause of his revelation in the mystical and the beautiful (226 qtd. in Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*). As such Lord Chandos's description risks falling within the context of the merely sensuous and the merely decorative, of paying respect to idols/images of beauty. In Lord Chandos's letter, beauty is not to be made commensurable as an object to be known, but it can be tied to the context of the mystical to be incorporated as an image, despite being inadequate, as an element of technique. In contrast, Lady Chandos's letter does not make any references to a revelation in inanimate objects. Lady Chandos's letter only pays its due to animals. The bulk of metaphors used are either drawn from animals or principles of animism. "Dogs," "rats," "fleas" and "beetles" "crawl through" the text as much as they crawl upon its characters (226, 228, 229, & 230). These creatures "crawl through" the text to guard the incommensurable. It is worthwhile to remember the specific function these animals play in Coetzee's text. Previously, in her conversation with her son, Elizabeth had described rats as beings that will probably outlive us. In reference to Nietzsche and the gods, the mouse was figured as a being that evaded the logic of causality and the "because" in lesson VII. The dog, as a possible reference to Hofmannsthal and Kafka, among others, appeared as a being representing the mutilation of nature, animals, and humans. It also highlighted the fact of this mutilation at the margins of literary discourse. And finally, "beetles," can be read as a reference to or serve as a reminder to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Impossible as it is to find adequate expression for the subject's "affliction (s)," to override the incommensurable, the postscript does not give itself to the context of the beautiful and the

mystical.

The text overcomes its confinement to the beautiful or the decorative by not forfeiting the intentional subject. There is a fine line here. While the text withstands the tendency to sacrifice the object to the intention of the subject, the text, in the same breath, does not sacrifice the subject to the order of the immediate. As the Unhappy Consciousness of the postscript, Lady Chandos's desire to be saved. As such, Lady Chandos's desire mirrors those of its siblings, i.e. Susan Barton, Mrs. Curren and Elizabeth Costello, who are as much obsessed with their own salvation. This obsession, nevertheless, allows the text to overstep and resist to what it owes its "semblance character," i.e. the element of technique, which despite its necessity, according to Adorno, entails "the domination of nature" (*Aesthetic Theory*).¹⁵¹ In other words, there is more to the text than the deployment of technique for the sake of beauty. The suffering of the subject, once objectified, while coming to us as an element of technique, tends to overstep the bounds of the technical and becomes the voice of suffering. Intention thus conceived is a category of suffering nature. It is only then that the work of art can withstand, if not transcend, the context of the merely sensuous and the merely technical. Lady Chandos's plea for help is not merely a technical issue but comes from an urgency to be saved: "Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us" (230).

¹⁵¹ According to Adorno, "the domination of nature" is one of the difficulties that works of art have to contend with. It is a motif that runs throughout Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

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