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**The Enigma of the Other:**  
J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*  
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Published in 1983, *Life and Times of Michael K* is undoubtedly linked to the social turmoil in South African in the 1980s. Compared with the ambiguity of the setting in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the lack of explicit historical reference in *Foe*, *Life and Times of Michael K* could be viewed as an attempt to address the social and political injustices, which leads some critics to locate this novel in the tradition of realism. Nevertheless, both the inaction of the oppressed protagonist and the shift in the structure of the narrative away from realism are disturbing to those who expect revelation rather than confusion. Indeed, the tension between realism and metafiction emerges, as the novel gestures toward the metafictional reflection on the nature of textuality, the problematic of authority, and the ethics of representing the other. The movement from realism to metafiction is manifest in the movement of the protagonist, Michael K, from the urban space to the abandoned country, which registers a movement from the political present to the ethical future, in order to suggest a critique of the inherent violence in realism and history and an ethics of representing the other.

It is incontestable that Michael K's story is embedded in the social and political contexts of modern South Africa. In

*Life and Times of Michael K*, the urban space is almost fragmented by bombings and looting; the incident of a military jeep hitting a boy triggers the outbreak of protest; civilians' movement from district to district is controlled by the means of the pass law; the compulsory military service and the imagined civil war point to the bleak picture of what the future holds; the presence of the homeless and the destitute taking up the urban space signifies the return of the repressed. All of these depictions reflect the historical 1980s of South Africa. With these realistic depictions in mind, Susan VanZanten Gallagher endeavors to defend the novel against the accusation of its lack in the revolutionary impulse<sup>1</sup>, regarding this novel as an apocalyptic parable, which reflects the chaos and the hope for salvation (145-6). Gallagher is right in highlighting Coetzee's exposure of the structural injustice and political oppression in South Africa; however, what's understated (though not completely ignored) in her defense of Coetzee's social criticism is Coetzee's suspicion of the realistic approach to representing the other<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, self-referentiality and the sense of failure in representation

<sup>1</sup> Mainly, Gallagher responds to Godimer's disappointment with the novel's lack of the focus on the war, with the "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions [that] rises with the insistence of the song of cicadas to the climax of this novel" (qtd. in Gallagher, 145). Dominic Head also points out Sheila Roberts's comment as one example of critics' disappointment with the lack of political edge of the novel, whose fabulistic nature distances it from the life of ordinary reader (96).

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee admits his lack of interest in the mode of realism in an inter-

and interpretation are brought to the fore in the second section, the medical officer's narrative, and thus change our view on Coetzee's most overtly realistic representation of the suffering, oppressed other in this novel.

Coetzee's fiction has aroused criticism on its ahistorical and apolitical tendency, which might not be politically correct in the politically charged milieu of South Africa. Indeed, Coetzee could hardly fit into the literary movement represented by white South African novelists, who aim to portray political oppression realistically with a view to correcting the wrongs. As David Attwell delineates the debate on realism in the South African literary context, "life under apartheid seems to demand a realistic documentation of oppression" and the white liberal tradition has adopted various forms of realism "as the unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa" (11). Nor could Coetzee have the legitimate position to be included in the movement of Black consciousness launched in the 1970s, focusing on "self-recovery and self-affirmation in response to the negations of racism" (Attwell 28). What underlies the allegedly ahistorical and apolitical tendency in Coetzee's fiction is his doubt on the relation between literature and history which dictates an ideological imperative. His stance is illuminated in the essay, "The Novel Today," as he states, "intimes of intense of ideological pressure like the present,

view, as he says, "I don't have much interest in, or can't seriously engage myself with, the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the 'real world'" (qtd. in Gallagher, 145).

when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry" (3). What Coetzee rejects is the ideological demand on the writer to engage with the South African history of colonization. It doesn't follow, though, that Coetzee intends to eschew any engagement with history, which is almost impossible. By defining an appropriate relation between the novel and history as rivalry, Coetzee envisages

a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and even tuates in conclusions that are checkable by history. [...] In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process [...] perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history-in other words, demythologizing history. ("The Novel Today," 3)

Clearly, the question that Coetzee poses is fundamental, that is, what is history. Coetzee has a different conception of history that is deeply influenced by deconstruction; as he claims,

history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form

of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other. ("The Novel Today," 4)

In a word, Coetzee refuses to take history as a priori truth, which could be represented. Rather, history is constructed in discourse with a view to justifying domination of one group over the others. Specifically, in the South African context, Afrikaner history is constructed and functions as a myth that eradicates and silences the existence of the native Africans, and that bolsters Afrikaner nationalism and its ideology of apartheid (Gallagher 25). History is by no means an objective recording of what's been happening in the past. Hence, the authority of "official" history should be displaced. The dilemma ensues, nevertheless, when history is viewed as just one example of the discursive and linguistic construction, that is, how the oppressed or the silenced come to claim their "history" of oppression, or how the novel can claim to tell the truth without occupying the problematic position of authority. With these questions in mind, thus, the relation of the novel to history should be put into question so that novelistic writing would not be a means of perpetuating the colonial history of domination when the novel aims to undo the wrongs.

Further, the allegedly ahistorical tendency should not be viewed as an escape from history by universalizing the South African situation, although Coetzee does express that he is inclined "to see the South African situation as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonial-

ism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism" (qtd. in Watson, 35). That Coetzee relates the colonial history of South Africa to a universal phenomenon leads to an imperative inquiry into the idea of dominating the other and the idea of colonizing the land in the history of European imperialism. Coetzee's claim that the South African situation is one manifestation of colonialism is not to obscure the specificity of the South African situation. Rather, it is an attempt to probe into the rooted binarisms between the subject and the object, between becoming and being, between the colonizer and the colonized, which justify European colonialism. Stephan Watson identifies Coetzee's position as "the colonizer who refuses," and whose ambivalence arises from the split between being and becoming (50). All of these binary oppositions originate from "the Cartesian project of separating subject from object, self from world in a dualism which privileged the first of the two terms and thereby assured his domination of nature and any other obstacle he might confront," which subsequently set the colonizing project of the West in motion (Watson 41). Therefore, to challenge the colonizing project of the West needs to interrogate the underlying pre-suppositions.

Coetzee's fiction endeavors to unmask the power structure on which the representation and knowledge of the other relies. To some extent, realism, as a mode of representation, replicates such power structure. The rudimentary rules of realism are the presumed existence of the omniscient subject, whether in the first-person or third-person narrator, who can

probe into the consciousness of the character and represent it by means of language. Once the omniscient subject fails to know and the transparency of language is no longer guaranteed, realism could by no means sustain its aim to represent reality. Thus, the rejection of realism is a political gesture in the context of colonialism. As Watson puts it, "the deconstruction of realism, then, is evidently intended, at the most basic level of language itself, as an act of decolonization and, as such, is very much part of its political meaning" (39). In other words, the lack of realism in Coetzee's fiction doesn't undermine its political impulse. Indeed, Coetzee's works are always concerned with the questions of representation and "truth" in the context of colonialism. David Attwell aptly points out that reflexivity and referentiality are not necessarily in contradiction with each other in Coetzee's works, in which reflexivity is a key element, "directed at 'the mechanics and assumptions of composing, interpreting, structuring, positing'" (18). From this point of view, Coetzee's rejection of realism doesn't mean that his fiction shuns reality, but it intends to challenge the assumptions about realistic representation which, more significantly, involves the authority of interpretation. As Dominic Head sums up Coetzee's concern in *Life and Times of Michael K*,

[t]here is a principle of what Coetzee has termed 'limited omniscience' in the novel, a third-person narrative in which the extent of the narrator's knowledge about Michael K's story is unclear. In fact, an important impetus of the novel is to raise

doubts about this knowledge; but there is still a convention of realism which suggests appropriation in the narrative mediation of sections 1 and 3, akin, perhaps, to the medical officer's overt attempts at appropriation in section 2. (98-99)

In other words, the third-person narrator's insufficient knowledge parallels the medical officer's failure to interpret. Even in the first and third sections, the purpose of "lingering realism" in the novel, to use Head's phrase (98), is to expose the problematic of realism.

The question follows why the self-conscious white writer tackles the problematic binarism, which is ultimately the colonizer's dilemma, by tracing the life of the non-white protagonist. It is not simply a projection of the colonizing mind onto the colonized. In his novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee creates a white first-person female narrator, who is obsessed with the puzzle of being. The obsession and puzzlement originates from the question of language being an access to truth, or the representation of the truth. Magda has been baffled by the puzzle of being, which has no language, no voice to explicate itself. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the white magistrate confronts the enigma of the other, embodied by the silent, racialized female other, who refuses to tell her story, particularly in the master's language. In both novels, the master's status is destabilized without the recognition of the other. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee's concern with the representation of the other is even more remarkable, particularly how the representation of the other can be

appropriated to hold up the master's narrative. Thus, his turn to the portrayal of the non-white protagonist is part of the project to interrogate the question of language, of truth, of the other. To some degree, Coetzee even succeeds in exposing the ambivalence of his own position as a white novelist in South Africa through the metafictional framework.

It might not be an exaggeration to say *Life and Times of Michael K* demonstrates Coetzee's gesture of deconstructing realism. While the title promises an involvement with such genres as the historical novel and the bildungsroman, the narrative gradually breaks down the rubric of these genres. To critics' disappointment, the life of Michael K comprises not so much of rebellion against or engagement with the times as to be worth celebrating his heroism. In a word, the text itself refuses to fulfill the requirements which the title denotes. The "retreat" of Coetzee's writing from realism is in parallel with Michael K's escape from the urban space to the abandoned country as well as his subsequent escape from all sorts of camps. While the portrayal of an oppressed protagonist wins applause from those who expect literature to be a social criticism, Michael K's eventual resistance to get in contact with his social and political milieu marks him as an anti-hero. The lack of any revolutionary solutions to the structural injustices renders both the text and Michael K's body vulnerable to attack. In fact, the text and the body are in a similar relation to history and politics. Michael K's precarious life on the verge of being devoured by history and politics corresponds to Coetzee's disbelief in the domination of his-

tory over the novel.

Even in its most realistic representation, the narrative gradually steps toward questioning such a realistic representation. In the city of Cape Town, where Michael K works for the municipal government as a gardener, the third-person narrator straightforwardly represents Michael K's life in the mode of realism. The streets, the buildings and Anna K's place are all depicted in detail and the bombing and looting is portrayed truthfully and objectively. When the time comes that Anna K desires to return to her hometown in the country and when the permits are delayed, till they would never arrive, we find that there is a repeated, enclosed circuit in the narrative of Michael K's life: waiting and hiding in Anna's room-inquiry at the police station-waiting and hiding in Anna's room. This circuit could go on and on if they didn't decide to leave without the permits. Still, without the permits, once they set off, they could be driven back to the starting point by the police at the checkpoint. Such enclosed circuit goes against the convention of the realistic plot, with the beginning, the middle and the end, which registers the development with a sense of teleology and thus endows it with significance. Instead, the narrative gives a sense that there is nowhere to go, and the sense of teleology, if there is, is repeatedly disrupted, so is the sense of meaning. Thus, the realistic representation of the enclosed circuit paradoxically employs the mode of realism to destroy the teleological revelation that realism aims to reach. If there is a possibility to break down the repeated circuit, it is the escape both from confinement,

imposed by the pass law, and from the claustrophobic enclosure in Anna's room, which indeed prompts the narrative to move forward.

Life in the city of Cape Town, exemplified by the enclosure in Anna's room, is simultaneously effected by and deflected from history. There is no denying that Anna's and Michael K's lives are conditioned by the racial injustice of the white dominating and oppressing the colored.

Nonetheless, frequently Michael K is seen to be absorbed into a world uncontaminated by political domination and revolution. At the beginning, the third-person narrator tells us about Michael K's work as a gardener; as the narrative goes, "sometimes on Saturdays he failed to hear the boom of the noon gun and went on working by himself all through the afternoon" (4). Before Michael K sets off to Prince Albert, there are several passages intensely focusing on how Michael K makes the cart to carry his mother on their trip. These passages are remarkably self-contained and even disconnected with the uprising chaos and the surveillance of the police. Later, Michael K returns to the farm in Prince Albert, and he is described as living as a gardener by the rising and setting of the sun, "in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the War and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness" (60). While he cultivates the abandoned land, Michael K hides himself even more carefully than before. Those moments when Michael K is absorbed into a world of self-containment could be seen as the obstinacy that resists historical containment.

While life in the city for Michael K is inevitably oppressed by the injustice of the social and political systems, his move to the country is, metaphorically, a move out of history. Ironically, as he moves out of history, he is confronted by all the attempts to incorporate him into discourse and thus into history. His escape from history, whether intentional or passive, is what puzzles the medical officer in the second section. As he narrates in an imagined letter to Michael K,

[w]e have all tumbled over the lip into the cauldron of history; only you, following your idiot light, bidding your time in an orphanage (who would have thought of that as a hiding place?) evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, have managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does. We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum, your clothes and your packet of pumpkin seeds too, with a label; there ought to be a plaque nailed to the racetrack wall commemorating your stay here. But that is not the way it is going to be. The truth is that you are going to perish in obscurity and buried in a nameless hole in a corner of the racecourse, transport to the acres of Woltemade being out of the question nowadays, and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I

appeal to you, Michael: *yield*. (152, emphasis original)

Could the sense of forgetfulness be a means of resistance to the political power, to the historical containment? Or does history forget him? What Michael K represents is a mode of being that history fails to incorporate, but paradoxically it leads to obscurity. This is the ambivalence that the medical officer exposes in his attitude toward history. History is not only what devours individuality but also what constitutes one's status. For example, in the historical context of South Africa, Afrikaner history erases black Africans in double senses; that is, black Africans are recognized either as non-existing or as the other. Either way, the recognition of black Africans is always a misrecognition. To reject the status of the other, the subordinate risk being totally erased from history. Likewise, in Michael K's case, to be in history means to be recruited as the other, which is the reason for his escape; however, rejection to be the other doesn't mean that he has other options. His rejection to be the other leads to his being erased, being buried in obscurity. This is the double bind in which the colonizer places the colonized, as Michael K is simultaneously elusive and subjected to the medical officer's narrative. Nevertheless, juxtaposed with the medical officer's ambivalence toward and obsession with historical being, Michael K's real achievement, i.e. his escape from history, a history of conquest and domination, is highlighted. Indeed, the novel valorizes historylessness by questioning the value of becoming a historical being.

In the passage I have quoted above, the medical officer points out the significance of naming in history. Naming is the mechanism by which history functions to superimpose a status or a role on the subject. With a name, the subject secures a place in history. Without a name, as the medical officer says, one's being seems to escape from history, "buried in a nameless hole." Interestingly, nameless is exactly the opposite of what has been happening to Michael K. Indeed, either nameless or overnaming destabilizes the system. In his journey from Cape Town to Prince Albert and in his drifting from one camp to another, Michael K has been misidentified with different names or labels. In Jakkalsdrif Relocation Camp, he is listed as "Michael Visagie-CM-40-NFA-unemployed" (70). Later, the soldiers find him in his "hole" and believe that he is simply a vagrant, a lost soul (120). In Rehabilitation Camp, Noel calls him "Michaels," an arsonist (131). The medical officer identifies him as a stick insect, a stone, a pebble, and a storage man (150). Trains of signifiers turn out to be a malfunction, since the overflow of names and identities fail to pin down who Michael K is. It almost amounts to disruption between the signifier and the signified.

Unable to be identified, however, Michael K does not lead a life immune to historical and political forces. As a matter of fact, Michael K has been subjected to physical discipline all the time. His childhood experience in the orphanage is constituted by regulations and rules. On his trip to Prince Albert, he is captured and sent to the camps several times, to

be recruited as a cheap labor, and his movement is to be confined so that he would not join the guerrilla. The camp is part of the political control of space and people's bodies. Besides Jakkalsdrif camp, which provides cheap labor, the rehabilitation camp is set up to restore the sick, the wounded body back to its normal functions. All these camps serve as social, spatial control in relation to apartheid. Michael K's escape from the camps can be seen as resistance and liberation, a means to elude political control over his body. As Dominic Head notes, Michael K's elusiveness establishes "a utopian zone," which is beyond the control of discipline (104).

Further, the camp functions as a metaphor where the social and the allegorical converge. Besides its political effects of spatial control and physical discipline, the allegorical meaning of the camp is deeply related to how history intends to ostracize the ugly. It functions to render the presence of the homeless, the oppressed, the destitute, and the marginal as absent. Lying out of sight of the town on a road that leads nowhere else, the camp is designed to contain those people in order to rid of them. Michael K imagines people in the camp digging a big hole, climbing into it, and being buried and covered over, as the narrator lays out his thoughts,

If these people really wanted to be rid of us, he thought (curiously he watched the thought begin to unfold itself in his head, like a plant growing), if they really wanted to forget us forever, they would have to give us picks and spades and command us to dig; then, when we had exhausted ourselves

digging, and had dug a great hold in the middle of the camp, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down; and when we were lying there, all of us, they would have to break down the huts and tents and tear down the fence and throw the huts and the fence and the tents as well as every last thing we had owned upon us, and cover us with earth, and flatten the earth. Then, perhaps, they might begin to forget about us. (94)

Seeing through the mechanism of encampment, Michael K grasps its purpose of forgetting what's thought to be the dregs of the community. To forget them is the purpose of the camp, but Michael K pushes the idea of forgetting to the extreme. And it is not a coincidence that after Michael K escapes from the Jakkalsdrif camp and returns to the Visagies farm, lying at the dam, he comes to realize that the house is never a safe place for him, that he must live in a hole, hide by day and leave no trace of his existence. In a sense, Michael K chooses to be forgotten, so that he would not be exploited and oppressed by the system. If society intends to forget people like him, Michael K counteracts by literally disappearing. To disappear, he lives on the minimalist subsistence, and even frequently he turns into an animal being. Also, fasting parallels disappearing in the sense that fasting disrupts the connection between the inner and the outer worlds, since eating would render the person dependent on the food and the outside world.

It is arguable whether Michael K's disappearing so as to be forgotten can be an act of effective rebellion, since he coun-

ters by surrendering to, rather than revolting against, the political power. On the other hand, the power that intends to dominate Michael K's body could not sustain itself, for the more the body obeys, the further the body retreats. As the medical officer indicates, the originality of Michael K's resistance lies in the fact that he does not resist at all:

As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and didn't pretend to be, not even a hero of fasting. In fact, you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. (163)

To resist, paradoxically, Michael K chooses to obey. In a sense, the logic of domination already prescribes a form of revolution; thus, revolution is not beyond the imagination of the power of domination and is always subsumed under it. But Michael K's counteraction adopts a different logic, trying to go beyond the duality of domination and revolution to the extent that this dominated body can no longer be dominated or exploited.

Parallel to his escape from the camps, Michael K's resistance to yield his story is a way to elude any interpretation. The resistance to tell his story gains its strength by turning it

into a metafictional question of what constitutes a story. In the first section, Michael K reflects on his inability to tell a story. Imagining the stories of becoming, like the adventures, the victories, the defeats and the escapes those joining the guerilla would tell, extremely unlike the story of his being, Michael K comes to realize that

[b]etween this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (109-110)

Storytelling is an act of announcing one's existence and proving the substance of one's being. Without stories, there remains only nothingness. In the first section, the sense of nothingness becomes the gap in the narrative. Like Michael K who so often listens to the silence surrounding him, the reader confronts Michael K sleeping for a lot of time while nothing happens, which is not part of the conventional action in the narrative. Hence, the gap that Michael K feels in his story could also be the gap that the third-person narrator faces. Similarly, in the medical officer's monologue, this nothingness disturbs him. In other words, Michael K is the embodiment of the gap which the narrator and the medical officer have to fill in with words and meanings, but in vain.

Again, Michael K's silence, resulting from his refusal to tell his story, leaves him in a double bind. On the one hand, silence is the sign of Michael K's resistance by means of elusiveness in order to escape the containment in discourse. On the other hand, silence has been imposed by the colonizer on the colonized as a way to subject the colonized to erasure. As Dominic Head reminds us, his silence is also the sign of oppression (98). Thus, it is always crucial for the colonized to reclaim a voice to speak out their own story. Nevertheless, the novel doesn't directly render Michael K's story intelligible but, instead, lays bare the logic of silence as well as the mechanism behind story-telling so as to challenge the notion of truth. As I have mentioned above that the nothingness, signified by Michael K's rejection to yield his story, disturbs the medical officer, what's relevant is that the sense of nothingness also arises from the failure of telling the truth, which should constitute the core of Michael K's story and thus his existence. From the first to the second section, there is a tendency toward meditating on the role of language as the medium that constitutes one's story and one's truth. In Michael K's reflection on his life in Huis Norenus, he is confronted with the "mystery"-the math question-failing to understand what the language means. Language is insufficient to render the math question understandable. His puzzlement is also reflected in the medical officer's inability to understand Michael K, who is inarticulate, not clever with words. In the interrogation of what role Michael K plays in relation to the guerrilla, the mystery that Michael K poses almost drives the

medical officer to punch words out of him. To him, storytelling leads to the revelation of truth, which is constituted in language; thus, Michael K's inability to tell a story results from the fact that he has no access to the power of language. By contrasting the speechless Michael K with the articulate medical officer, the question of authority is highlighted, whether the authority of telling a story or that of interpretation. Michael K's mute presence, as Teresa Dovey suggests, becomes the site where the medical officer could tell Michael K's story in his terms and, by extension, the author could construct the text (267). It is the metafictional element introduced in the second section that has the capacity to, in David Attwell's words, "get behind" itself and to displace the power of language in terms of constructing and interpreting a story, such that Michael K is left uncontained at the point of closure (99).

Here remains the dilemma. While Coetzee succeeds in rendering Michael K as elusive and resistant to history and discourse by unmasking the constitutive power of language, Michael K's story is still left unspoken and unspeakable, like those silenced others in the camp. But once he enters the system of signification, he is subjected to the power of interpretation. His otherness is described as an inanimate object by the narrator in the second section, like a stone, a pebble, enveloped in itself and its interior life. Representing his otherness and decipher it amounts to violent penetration into the interior. Coetzee's novel exposes the violence implicated in representing the other, especially when representation is

based on the oppositional, binary structure which is entrenched in "dualisms, such as a subject and an object, an interrogator and someone to interrogate, an interpreter and someone to interpret" (Marais 44). After the challenge against such kind of representation, the urgent question is how to understand and represent the silenced other and the suffering without subscribing to these dualisms.

Within the core of the novel lies the presence of otherness and suffering, which is never successfully translated into the narrative, hence the discursive system, of which Coetzee's novel unavoidably partake no matter how much effort it puts to deconstruct itself. In the narrative, otherness and suffering materialize as Anna's ashes, which couldn't be articulated. Michael K finds it difficult to tell her story; even when he tries to, words fall short. Silence seems to be a more appropriate expression for the ashes, and those who happen to know what Michael K has carried with him could say nothing but remain silent. But still silence and the untold story must be heard. Likewise, the sense that otherness and suffering can't be fully represented must be felt. Anna's ashes are the material form of otherness, suffering, oppression, and silence that can't be incorporated into words. In a sense, Michael K's inability to tell his mother's story should be understood as a refusal to mourn for a trauma in terms that tend to negate the pain of suffering. Sam Durrant's concern with the problem of historical narratives is relevant here. As Durrant suggests, historical narratives, by translating the traumatic past into discourse in order to remember, ultimate-

ly put trauma in oblivion. Thus, Coetzee's novel attempts to remain "speechless before history," to remember its own inability to remember and thus draws attention to its own incompleteness, "the silence at their core" (Durrant 29). In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Anna K's ashes are the silence at the core—the moment of refusing to talk. Even though the ashes are scattered over the land, the form that Anna K's ashes take is still physical, as they are transformed into the soil that nourishes Michael K's idea of gardening. In this sense, the idea of gardening has its symbolic meaning. It signifies the relation between humans and the earth as a way for Michael K to constitute his own meaning, and it's linked to the mother, the loss of the mother, the ashes.

In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee expresses his concern with the contest of interpretations between the political and the ethical (*Doubling the Point*, 336). In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the emphasis on the ethical representation of the other is underlined in Coetzee's hesitation to subscribe to politics for the solution to the oppression of the other. However, in this novel, the ethical is political, since the imperative of envisioning a new ethics requires political as well as philosophical reflection on, or even subversion of, the underpinnings of realism.

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