

*J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett:
Nothingness, Minimalism
and Indeterminacy*

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I. Coetzee and Modernist Writing

ALLUDING TO CONRAD'S *Heart of Darkness*, Stephen Watson observes that "all of Europe' . . . has gone into the making of Coetzee" (25). Coetzee himself acknowledges the extent to which he has been influenced by European and North American literature, particularly modernist writing. In 1993, he wrote a deeply appreciative and personal "Homage" to several writers, including Rilke, Musil, Pound, Faulkner, Ford and Beckett. Coetzee's "Homage" opens with a carefully worded yet striking declaration:

This is about some of the writers without whom I would not be the person *I am*, writers without whom *I* would, in a certain sense, not exist. An acknowledgment, therefore, of literary paternity.

(1; emphasis added)

Coetzee's modernist precursors were, then, the fathers who provided the indispensable seed not only to create Coetzee as a writer ("the person *I am*"), but his basic being as a subject ("*I* would . . . exist"). The latter half of this proposition is a sign of the intimate relationship that Coetzee perceives between his writing and his personhood, specifically of the notion that the basis of his self is founded in writing and language. Such a belief in the mutual inextricability of language and self undergirds the interest in autobiography which Coetzee demonstrates in critical works like *Doubling the Point* (see 17-9, 243-93, 391-5) and, indeed, in the latter half of his axiom, "[A]ll autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (*Doubling* 391).

It is thus vital to examine Coetzee's ties to modernism. Neil Lazarus, for instance, has argued that white South African writing in the apartheid era shares with modernist writing the impulse to constitute resistance through textual density and difficulty. Lazarus draws upon Adorno's theory of "aesthetic modernism" (134) to explain Coetzee's fiction in terms of its "modernist irreducibility" (136). Coetzee conceptualizes his relationship to his modernist precursors in far more personal terms; in "Homage" he writes that,

in 1960 there was no South African writer, novelist or poet, to whom I as a young man could turn for a significant and vital lead in how to respond to, how to feel about, and therefore how to write about, my homeland. Certain times and places throw up writers who measure up to the challenge they provide, others do not. Australia threw up Patrick White, a writer who could go into the heart of the country and return with a version of that country powerful enough for his readers to believe in and take a lead from. South Africa threw up nothing comparable; or rather, South Africa produced two or three or four versions of the land which today I regard as, and even thirty years ago suspected to be, false and corrupt. . . . The writers I have mentioned thus far taught me to hear, feel, write. (8)

This view of modernist texts may be at variance with the more usual suspicion maintained towards metropolitan cultural forms. Yet in "Homage," Coetzee makes it clear that in modernism, he found qualities of authenticity and vitality, as well as groundbreaking formal innovations, that he could use, both in his personal life and in his fiction, to mediate his own perceptions of South African reality. As a result of reading Rilke and Musil, Coetzee was stirred by the sense "that the possible really had no limits" (2), and inspired by the modernist emphasis upon "pushing at the bounds of the possible" (3). Adapted to the context of Coetzee's homeland, these impressions reappear as glimpses of potential escape and freedom amidst the omnipresent strictures of apartheid. Thus Coetzee has said of himself as a writer, "I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations

... of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light" (*Doubling* 341). Coetzee constructs these representations by refashioning the idioms, motifs, forms and concerns of modernist writing into a vital and relevant epistemology for the latter-day writer.

In this essay, I will focus on Coetzee's ties with one of the modernist fathers he invokes in "Homage": Samuel Beckett, who is arguably, with the exception of Kafka, Coetzee's most important literary precursor.¹ Coetzee has engaged with Beckett in an academic context, having written a doctoral thesis and several essays on Beckett.² His comments on Beckett often reflect an engagement with his precursor at a more personal level:

Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing — that must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose. Most writers absorb influence through their skin. With me there has also been a more conscious process of absorption. Or shall I say, my linguistic training enabled me to see the effects I was undergoing with a degree of consciousness. The essays I wrote on Beckett's style aren't only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of the word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. (*Doubling* 25)

While many critics have observed the strong influence of Beckett on Coetzee's writing, only Paul A. Cantor and Steven G. Kellman have examined the relationship at length. Kellman's study views both Beckett and Coetzee as translingual writers — authors "whose linguistic medium is a matter of choice" (162) and whose novels show a primary concern with "the boundaries between one language and another, and the limits of language" (161). Kellman compares Beckett's decision to write in French rather than English, to Coetzee's decision to write in English rather than Afrikaans. Cantor focuses on the common postmodern features he finds in Beckett and Coetzee, such as how both writers put into question their own representations of reality. Cantor writes, "Anyone familiar with Beckett will recognise that Coetzee derives these narrative techniques and strategies from him, especially his trilogy" (87).

My essay will focus on Coetzee's highly self-conscious re-writing of Beckett, especially in *Life & Times of Michael K*, to demonstrate that Beckettian paradigms, adapted to the South African context, provide Coetzee with vital modes of feeling, perceiving and responding to circumstances in his homeland. As a general rule, Coetzee simultaneously transplants Beckett's metaphysical and epistemological paradigms into South African political reality, and reconfigures them into moral and political paradigms more relevant to the South African context. The depth of the relationship between the two writers is indicated not only by Coetzee's re-writing of Beckett into the broad socio-political context of South Africa but also, as we shall see, into his personal circumstances as a white South African.

Cantor asserts that "of all [Coetzee's] novels, *In the Heart of the Country* comes closest to Beckett in style and substance" (85). It is certainly true that *In the Heart of the Country* is strongly influenced by Beckett's trilogy novels (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*): one can point to its use of the first-person monologue, to the radical isolation of the protagonist, Magda, and to the narrative's shifting, unreliable realities. Cantor also stresses the novel's postmodern "presentation of multiple realities" (97) as inspired by the Beckett trilogy. While I agree with these points, *In the Heart of the Country* ultimately strikes me as a fledgling writer's crude attempt to imitate Beckett's early prose. It is in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and particularly in *Michael K*, that Coetzee most masterfully adapts Beckettian paradigms to interrogate South African political realities. For example, in *Barbarians*, Coetzee uses narrative unreliability to analyze truth-telling within the context of torture and witness under apartheid.³ Beckett's philosophical concern with language and truth are thus transplanted by Coetzee into a political context where the stakes of narrative veracity and reliability are immediate and tangible.

In this essay, however, I will focus on *Michael K*, which I consider the most Beckettian of Coetzee's novels. I do not intend to overlook the influence on this novel of Kafka who is, as noted above, Coetzee's other key precursor. As Kellman observes, "Michael K . . . is, onomastically, a more obvious child of Franz Kafka than Beckett" (165). Merivale, who examines

the motifs of the burrow and the hunger artist in Coetzee's novel, considers Kafka to be "plainly the central intertextual problematic" (152) of *Michael K*. Coetzee's own appreciation of Kafka, found in his comments on his essay on Kafka's "The Burrow," suggests how Kafka's short story may be a source of inspiration for the theme of escape and freedom in *Michael K*:

Kafka at least hints that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one's own language, perhaps to report back on what it is like to think outside language itself. . . . What is interesting is the liberating possibility Kafka opens up. (*Doubling* 198)

However, *Michael K* is also saturated with references and allusions to the Beckett trilogy, particularly to *Molloy*, leaving the reader with no doubt that *Michael K* is, to a significant extent, a conscious re-writing of *Molloy*. Like *Molloy*, *Michael K* recounts the episodic encounters of an itinerant tramp-like protagonist who ekes out a vagrant and minimal existence. The boggy Irish landscape reappears as the South African Karoo; Molloy and Moran's bicycles substitute for K's self-constructed burrow; and the famous store of sucking stones in Molloy's pockets are transformed into K's "seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket" (*Michael K* 182). Both characters conclude their much scaled-down odysseys in their mother's rooms. The reader of *Michael K* can delight not only in tracing specific references within it to its precursor, *Molloy*, but also in tracing how, as I have noted, Coetzee adapts key Beckettian aesthetic and philosophical paradigms to the South African context. I will argue that in *Michael K*, Coetzee specifically invokes three Beckettian paradigms — nothingness, minimalism, and indeterminacy — and envisions their operation within South African reality.

Meanwhile, to be aware that Coetzee's literary creation, Michael K, is simultaneously a reconfiguration of Kafka's hunger artist and Beckett's Molloy alerts us to Coetzee's conception of K as, at one level, a thoroughly intertextual character whose identity is derived from multiple precursor texts. Indeed, Michael K's function as a locus of different textual strands is metafictionally signaled by the ambiguous, anonymous, open-ended letter — "K" — in his name.

II. Personalizing Beckett's Aesthetics of Nothingness

Coetzee has written that reading Beckett's early prose (as distinct from Beckett's dramatic writings and his later post-trilogy prose) provided him with "a sensuous delight that hasn't dimmed over the years" (*Doubling* 20). Beckett's attraction for Coetzee lies not only in the affording of aesthetic delight but, intriguingly enough, extends to a level of *autobiographical identification* with Beckett's texts. Coetzee relates to Beckett not only as an artistic precursor but also in a personal capacity. He finds his social situation in South Africa to be uncannily enough mirrored in the plight of Beckett's protagonists.⁵

In the brief third-person autobiography in *Doubling the Point* (391-5), Coetzee portrays himself as someone who, because of his racial and social marginality, is able to express himself only from a position of radical alienation. He represents himself as a person characterized by the trademark Beckettian tropes of blindness, disability and impotence:

In the first half of this story — a story spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind but, written as he is as a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled, disqualified — a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority. (*Doubling* 392)

This passage echoes the opening passage of Beckett's trilogy in which Molloy describes himself:

This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one. All grows dim. A little more and you'll go blind. It's in the head. It doesn't work any more, it says, I don't work anymore. You go dumb as well and sounds fade. (*Molloy* 8)

While the sense of blindness, disability and impotence in Beckett arises largely out of existential alienation, in Coetzee it stems from social marginalization. Coetzee's profound sense of marginality within South Africa emerges not only from his being a minority white South African, but also from his experience of alienation from the dominant Afrikaner nationalism of his early boyhood. He writes of himself in the autobiography that,

a sense of being alien goes far back in his memories. . . . His years in rural Worcester (1948-1951) as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism, a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English, provoke in him uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused; by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality. (People of his parents' kind were thundered at from the pulpit as *volksverraaiers*, traitors of the people. . . .) (*Doubling* 393)

During his adolescence in Cape Town, Coetzee also feels marginalized "as a Protestant enrolled in a Catholic high school" (*Doubling* 393). Coetzee explains that all of this "confirms his (quite accurate) sense of being outside a culture that at this moment in history is confidently setting about enforcing itself as the core culture of the land" (*Doubling* 394). Thus, while Coetzee as a white South African may feel disqualified from speaking for the black populations in South Africa, his sense of impotence is compounded by his simultaneous alienation from the white communities of South Africa. His parents, he remembers, "have no foothold in either Afrikaans or English social circles" (*Doubling* 394). Feeling like a virtual outsider within his own country, Coetzee the writer can identify with and even personalize Beckett's well-known aesthetic creed that although "there is nothing to express, . . . nothing from which to express, no power to express," still there is "the obligation to express" (*Disjecta* 139). Coetzee conceives his own predicament as a writer to be mirrored in Beckett's gloss of his aesthetic creed:

The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot [write], since he is obliged to [write]. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event [writes], since he is obliged to [write]. (*Disjecta* 142)⁴

Coetzee identifies not only with Beckett's impotence and disqualification, but also with his "obligation to express" which, remaining a philosophical enigma for Beckett (see *Disjecta* 142), takes on a pronounced ethical significance for Coetzee. Even though Coetzee may feel a profound sense of social alienation, impotence and disqualification, he must still write

about the pressing ethical questions of South Africa in the apartheid era. We may see Coetzee as a man and writer guilt-ridden, deeply affected by the injustices and horrors of South Africa's racial politics, skeptical of his authority or position to say anything, yet faced with "the [moral] obligation to express." Beckett's difficulty, impotence and failure of expression along with the deeply felt obligation to express, arising from existential alienation, is adapted to Coetzee's socio-political context, where social disqualification exists in tension with a writer's moral obligation to respond to social injustice. In Coetzee, we find Beckett's aesthetic creed of nothingness re-read as a social and moral dilemma.

While Coetzee ultimately reads Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness as a moral dilemma, he also knows that it can lend itself to the formulation of writing (or art) as a tempting form of escapism from social reality. Indeed, what may also be attractive to Coetzee in Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness (though it is not acted upon) is its implied fantasy of constructing a (paradoxical) fiction of zero as a way of escaping from genuine social responsibility and commitment. Through this trick, the writer may pretend to fulfill "the obligation to express" while having ultimately expressed "nothing." Coetzee sees the possibility of "writing of nothing" being realized in Beckett's *Watt*, a favorite work of his in the Beckett corpus. Of this early novel, Coetzee has said:

Watt trembles on the edge of realizing Flaubert's dream of 'a book about nothing, a book without external attachments,' held together by 'the internal force of style.' The rhythm of A against B submerges *Watt* in its lulling plangencies: the style of the book is narcissistic reverie. (*Doubling* 47)

Watt's obsessively self-canceling style, which "pits question against proposition, rejoinder against question, objection against rejoinder, qualification against objection and so on" (*Doubling* 47), enacts for Coetzee the attractive possibility of a writing of zero. In *Watt*, Beckett may seem to be fulfilling "the obligation to express," yet the text ultimately adds up to an expression of nothing. Translated into South Africa, Beckett's consummate "book about nothing" reveals to Coetzee how the author, while

appearing to fulfill the obligation to write, may still remain insulated from social reality. Coetzee, however, is only too ready to confess such a pretence. *Watt's* style, he acknowledges, is "narcissistic reverie." Coetzee knows that the unstated political context of such "a book about nothing" is precisely its self-insulation from social reality and its attendant responsibilities.

In *Michael K*, Coetzee invokes Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness and alludes to the possibility that it may be used as an excuse for escapism.⁶ Despite having been ordered off the veld, K re-enters it to find himself in a vast empty land where he imagines himself living the rest of his life in a state of Beckettian nothingness:

Sometimes the only sound he could hear was that of his trousers whipping together.

From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty. . . .

I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, everyday would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say. (*Michael K* 46)

A similar moment occurs when, having escaped from the Visagie grandson to the mountains, K sits at the mouth of a cave and enters a state of Beckettian nothingness:

Now, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing. (*Michael K* 69)

In both instances, K is tempted to escape from the South African historical process into a Beckettian state of nothingness. This re-reading of Beckettian aesthetics as insulation from history provides Coetzee with the fantasy of a utopian escape from the painful dilemmas he experiences as a writer in South Africa. Coetzee hints at his desire to escape from history when he recounts, in the autobiography, his early ambition to become a mathematician:

As a teenager, this person, this subject, the subject of this story, this I . . . decides to become, if at all possible, a scientist, and doggedly pursues a career in mathematics, though his talent there is no more than modest. How do I read this resolve? I say: he is trying to find a capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world. (*Doubling* 392-3)

Coetzee's escapist longings find occasional expression in *K*. During *K*'s first stay on the Visagie farm, he imagines that he is finally living "in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war [had] slipped further and further into forgetfulness" (*Michael K* 60). During his second stay, *K* experiences moments in which he sees himself "living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner" (*Michael K* 116). As these passages indicate, the attraction of Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness for Coetzee lies in its capacity to be adapted into a paradigm of historical insulation and escape.

As noted earlier, the initial "K" is an open-ended sign that alludes to multiple prior texts. I would now like to add, on the basis of the significant autobiographical echoes in *Michael K*, supplemented by Coetzee's own axiom that "all writing is autobiography," that "K" also alludes to Coetzee himself. Coetzee's recent full-length autobiography, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, makes clear the autobiographical dimension of *Michael K*: *K*'s closeness to his mother, his love of the farm, his experiences in the classroom can be traced to Coetzee's childhood as revealed by *Boyhood*. Even as Nadine Gordimer's literalistic orientation leads her to read "K" as referring strictly to "Kotze or Koekemoer" (139), which are common names in Cape Town, Merivale in a footnote cites Arnim Mennecke's observation that "Kotze" is another form of "Coetzee" (165). *K* is also a disguised signature for Coetzee and *Michael K* is in certain respects veiled autobiography. Coetzee's own escapist longings find elliptical expression in *K*'s momentary escapes from South African history. These episodes of escape are conceptualized via a subtle, if private, re-reading of Beckett's famous aesthetics of nothingness.

The lure of formulating an escapist paradigm notwithstanding, *Michael K* is about the impossibility of total escape. This denial of total escape in Coetzee's fiction finds its parallel in Coetzee's qualification that Beckett's aesthetic creed of total nothingness cannot ultimately be realized:

The art of Samuel Beckett has become an art of zero, as we all know. We also know that an art of zero is impossible. A thousand words under a title and a publisher's imprint, the very act of moving pen over paper, are affirmations of a kind. (*Doubling* 43)

Beckett would be agreeable to Coetzee's qualification to his aesthetic creed — he has himself admitted the logical impossibility of an expression of nothing (see *Disjecta* 139). In his personal adaptation of the Beckettian creed, Coetzee does not overlook its problematic formulation as a self-contradiction. He embraces its internal tension as a means to reflect his historic-ethical dilemma rather than glossing over it to yield an effective formulation of insulation from South African history.

The impossibility of escape into a state of absolute nothingness is registered in *Michael K*. Despite being immersed in the seeming Beckettian nothingness of the mountains, K does not escape history entirely: "Straining his eyes he could sometimes make out the dot of a vehicle crawling down the main street of the toy town on the plain below" (*Michael K* 66). The "dot" of the vehicle is the minimal, irreducible trace of history and civilization in K's life. Just as "an art of zero is impossible" for the writer, total insulation from historical or ethical engagement is equally impossible for K. When the Visagie grandson returns to repossess the farm, K learns that there is no land in South Africa that has not been colonized by history: "I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson" (*Michael K* 61). In a comment on *Michael K*, Coetzee notes that "K can't hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of South Africa has been surveyed and mapped" ("Two Interviews" 456). Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness ultimately does not translate for Coetzee into a paradigm of historical zero but rather into the historical tension and dilemma of moral obligation despite socio-political impotence and disqualification.

III. The Minimal Self and Its Evasion of History

Coetzee's flirting with a utopian escapism which he ultimately does not pursue points us to the constructive political use that he does make out of Beckettian aesthetics. If escape into a historical zero is neither desirable nor possible, Coetzee nevertheless recognizes that Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness privileges a radical negating impulse which he interprets as having

significant political implications when translated into the South African context. One key insight is that Beckett's aesthetics of negation can undergird an ideology of dispossession and relinquishment. Coetzee for instance re-interprets Beckett's complaint about "[t]he [artist's] malady of wanting to know what to do and the malady of wanting to be able to do it" (*Disjecta* 140) in terms of an ideological preference for decolonization and relinquishment. Beckett's view that the writer should relinquish artistic control, i.e. his famous poetics of failure, is adapted by Coetzee into the South African context as effective ideological ammunition against the colonial ideology of acquisition and control.

Interestingly, in *Michael K*, Coetzee does not apply the ideology of relinquishment to the colonizer but to the colonized K, so that the party who is already dispossessed experiences further dispossession. Politics in *Michael K* is conceived not in terms of power acquisition and contestation but in the paradoxical agency of being able to be dispossessed of history. Relinquishing history and yet facing the impossibility of being a historical zero, K acquires the politically efficacious state of a minimal historical being.

Michael K's notion of a minimal historical self has distinct origins in the Beckett trilogy, particularly *Molloy*. Molloy is the prototypical minimal self, a being in whom negation and relinquishment are at work at all possible planes of existence. In his body, senses, appetite, locomotion, possessions, knowledge, certainty, speech, social stature, Molloy experiences reduction, diminishment, decline and deterioration with unvarying consistency. As Molloy recognizes, "the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, the creature you were in the beginning, and the middle" (*Molloy* 32). Coetzee's K is modeled after Beckett's Molloy. On all possible levels of existence — the self, body, appetite, sexual desire, needs, wants, daily activities, possessions, thoughts, consciousness, speech, his engagement with history, politics and ideology — K knows what it is like to operate at the level of the minimal. The medical officer's characterization of K as "[t]he obscurest of the obscure," with "[n]o papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you

are" (*Michael K* 142) is a reformulation from *Molloy* of the police sergeant's "discovery that [Molloy] had no papers . . . , nor any occupation, nor any domicile, that [his] surname escaped [him]" (*Molloy* 22). Coetzee consciously echoes Beckett's trademark reiteration of the negative. K's minimal being is further underscored by Coetzee's use of metaphors connoting smallness. He is variously referred to as "a little old man" (129), "a pebble" (135), "an insect" (135), "an ant" (83), "a termite" (66), "a little speck" (97) "a mouse" (136), "a snail" (112), "a parasite dozing in the gut" (116) and "an earthworm" (182).

Coetzee adapts Beckett's concept of a minimal being into the context of South Africa and envisions a political function for such a being. Against the supersaturation and inevitability of history, ideology and politics in South Africa, the minimal being has the capacity to limit and even at some points relinquish his participation in these "camps" (though he does not enter an absolutely ahistorical realm). Again, K's ability to elude politics via his minimal being can be directly traced to characteristics found in his predecessor Molloy. We may recall the scene in *Molloy* where, amid the bustle of human activity in Lousse's garden, Molloy slips into the indifferent state of an object:

Men were always busy there, working at I know not what. . . . And in the midst of those men I drifted like a dead leaf on springs, or else I lay down on the ground, and then they stepped gingerly over me as though I had been a bed of rare flowers. (*Molloy* 52)

In *Michael K*, the garden is re-written by Coetzee as the resettlement camp and K, like Molloy, falls into a state of thinglike existence:

K brought his mattress out and lay next to the hut in the shade with an arm over his face while the camp lived its life around him. He lay so still that the smaller children, having first kept their distance, next tried to rouse him, and, when he would not be roused, incorporated his body into the game. They clambered over him and fell as if he were part of the earth. Still hiding his face, he rolled over and found that he could doze even with little bodies riding on his back. He found unexpected pleasure in these games.

(*Michael K* 84)

Though interned, K's severely reduced consciousness enables him to exist in a pleasurable state of indifference to human

activity and history. His minimal appetite frees him from work and thus from the exploitation of the resettlement camp: as he retorts to the guard, "I don't need to eat all the time. When I need to eat, I'll work" (*Michael K* 85). The minimal being, whose tendency is to relinquish rather than acquire, to lose rather than possess, enjoys the freedom of loosing himself from the exigencies of politics and history.

K's detachment from history is of course never absolute. Though severely reduced, his state of consciousness is still a minimal one rather than a total extinction into nothingness. His pleasurable lapse into an indifferent sleep, for example, ends when the children find another distraction and desert him (*Michael K* 84-5). The minimal state confers freedom though not an absolute freedom. K is never wholly free from hunger but insofar as his needs are minimal, he has the freedom to choose when and whether he wants to eat. Coetzee maintains a distinction between the positive freedom of K's minimal historical state and the negative utopianism of being in absolute historical nothingness.

K's freedom lies in the fact that his minimal needs enable him to retain agency over his involvement in history. For example, at the close of the novel, K thinks: "I have become an object of charity. . . . Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me" (*Michael K* 181). But K intends to elude this objectification of the self: "I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too" (*Michael K* 182). K's refusal to accept patronizing charity recalls Molloy's diatribe against the social worker who offers him food while he is in prison:

Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, free, gratis and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (*Molloy* 24)

Though Molloy despairs at ever eluding these persistent social workers who "pursue you to the ends of the earth," at one point

he successfully refuses the charity of a woman at the beach: "I think one of them one day, detaching herself from her companions, came and offered me something to eat and then I looked at her in silence, until she went away" (*Molloy* 75). In a parallel scene in Coetzee's novel, K returns to the coastal Sea Point and is charitably offered food by a group of loitering derelicts who decide to "adopt" him. Though K accepts some of the food they offer, the head-guy, "December," realizes: "It is difficult to be kind . . . to a person who wants nothing" (*Michael K* 179). Coetzee rewrites the Beckettian situation of "him who has nothing" into the "person who wants nothing," positively revaluing the concept of a self with minimal needs. Such a self is able to deny more effectively the objectifying effects of both charities and camps exercised upon it, retaining its agency in historical participation.

IV. K's Indeterminate Identity

In addition to Beckett's minimalism, Coetzee also draws on Beckett's penchant for epistemological indeterminacy, particularly in *Molloy*, to formulate, in *Michael K*, a politics of historical evasion. Even as we observe Coetzee's transplantation of Beckettian paradigms of indeterminacy into a more emphatically politicized content, we should note that Beckett himself, as Coetzee too discerns, had already understood the political implications of Molloy's amorphousness. As Molloy wonders, "Were [the police] of the opinion that it was useless to prosecute me? To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter" (*Molloy* 24). Molloy, as a result of his amorphousness, is particularly effective in escaping the law — an idea that is central to Coetzee's conception of K. Molloy's elusiveness arises from the difficulty of making names, words or labels stick to him; as Molloy observes, "[M]y sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate" (*Molloy* 31). Moran — Molloy's pursuer and interpreter — is only too familiar with Molloy's impenetrable identity:

Of these two names, Molloy and Mollose, the second seemed to me perhaps the more correct. But barely. What I heard, in my soul I suppose, where the acoustics are so bad, was a first syllable, Mol,

very clear, followed almost at once by a second very thick, as though gobbled by the first, and which might have been oy as it might have been ose, or one, or even oc. (*Molloy* 112)

Molloy, Mollose, Mollone or Molloc? Beckett's text never gives a determinate answer as to the identity of its protagonist. In *Michael K*, Coetzee alludes to this indeterminacy of name-endings in the medical officer's confusion of Michael and Michaels, in K's own confusion of Prince Albert and Prince Alfred (9), as well as in K's inability to determine the name of the owner of the farm his mother lived on: is it Mr Vosloo, Mrs Vosloo, Mr Visser, or the Visagies (50)? The question of the farm owner's identity is never settled and K is never sure whether he successfully returns his mother's ashes to the correct farm, leaving in suspension the question of her rest (*Michael K* 116).

The question asked regarding Molloy — who ultimately is he? — could just as well be addressed to Michael K. The core of K's identity seems to be wrapped in a similar impenetrable namelessness. Coetzee's narrator observes of K that always, "when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained" (*Michael K* 110). K's identity, then, like Molloy's, is resistant to words and naming. Though a plethora of labels and identities are applied to K, they are "eaten up" and K's fundamental "namelessness" persists. In the course of the novel, he is rightly or mistakenly perceived as a dutiful son, an idiot, a prisoner, a member of a labor gang, a child, a trespasser, a runaway, a savage, a farm servant, a spy, a rebel, a gardener. In addition, numerous metaphors are generated to identify him. The medical officer alone, for example, calls K a "stone," "pebble," "parasite," "lizard," "insect," "stick insect," "mouse," "duckling," "runt," "fledgling," "rag doll," "bunny-rabbit," "coelacanth," "the last man to speak Yaqui," "a genuine little man of earth." As Leon de Kock observes:

Michael K, a South African Houdini, seems to be an escape artist from meaning. . . . The terms of meaning, the interpretation, are *put upon* Michael, just as the camps enclose him, yet he slips away every time an attempt is made to pin him down. (45)

The “namelessness” at the core of Molloy’s identity, which makes it useless for the police to prosecute him, is used to characterize Michael K in a context where the political stakes are much higher. The political uses of Beckett’s paradigm of indeterminate identity receive fuller amplification in Coetzee’s adaptation of Molloy in Michael K.

Critics generally trace K’s ability to evade meaning and interpretation to Coetzee’s imaginative and resourceful allegorization of poststructuralist theory. In the passage quoted above, for example, the tendency is to see the novel’s motif of the “gap” or the “hole” as a fictional allegorization of the poststructuralist concept of absence, a strategic alliance which serves to undermine any conception of K’s identity as ever being whole or fully present. I do not disagree that there is a strong poststructuralist register to Coetzee’s conception of K. In this essay, however, my interest is to point out the text’s connection to Beckettian indeterminacy.⁷

Coetzee further emphasizes K’s indeterminate identity in his account of the relationship between Michael K and the medical officer, which parallels the relationship between Molloy and Moran. In *Michael K*, the medical officer, burdened with the guilt of running the rehabilitation camp, envies K’s ability to escape from the physical camps and the war. At one point, the medical officer imagines how he too could “slip into overalls and tennis shoes and clamber over the wall” to become like K, leading the hardy existence of a tramp:

The night that Michaels made his break, I should have followed. It is vain to plead that I was not ready. If I had taken Michaels seriously I would always have been ready. I would have had a bundle at hand at all times, with a change of clothing and a purse full of money and a box of matches and a can of sardines. I would never have let him out of my sight. When he slept I would have slept across the door-sill; when he woke I would have watched. And when he stole off I would have stolen off behind him. (*Michael K* 161)

The image of the medical officer, traversing the South African veld after K in his tennis shoes and a purse of money, recalls the middle-class Moran tramping the Irish plains after Molloy. The medical officer’s imagined scenario of how he can become like

Michael K echoes Moran's decline from his comfortable circumstances to a dispossessed state like Molloy's. Like Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* and the Magistrate in *Barbarians*, the medical officer and Michael K are Coetzee's delightful additions to Beckett's series of M-characters (Murphy, Molloy, Moran, Malone). In addition, the medical officer and Michael K, like Moran and Molloy, are intriguingly conceived in a relation which involves a play of sameness and difference. Critics of *Molloy* invariably observe that while Moran declines to a state that is teasingly similar to Molloy's, the identification between the two characters is never complete. Steven Connor refers to the "problematic relationship of *near-identity*" (58) between Moran and Molloy. For instance, Connor observes that while both Molloy and Moran ride bicycles which they eventually lose, "Molloy's is green, chainless and without cable-brakes, while Moran's has no specified color but has a carrier" (58). Both Molloy and Moran have problems riding because of stiff legs but "Molloy rides his bicycle one-legged [while] Moran makes his son do the peddling" (58). In another example, Connor notes that

[B]oth [Molloy and Moran] meet a shepherd, complete with shepherd and flock, both ask a question of the shepherd, both think about butchering, slaughter and black sheep, and both fall into a reverie as they think about what will happen. [However,] Molloy is discovered by the shepherd in the morning, while Moran comes across the shepherd at evening; Moran receives a reply to his question, while Molloy receives no reply. (58-9)

Beckett teases us with an impression of similarity between Molloy and Moran; yet, when we examine the figures more closely, we see irreconcilable difference. Leslie Hill concludes that the relationship between the two "is a case not so much of merging identities but aporetic doubling" (68). The play of near-identity yet irreconcilable difference between Molloy and Moran is one of the chief highlights of *Molloy*. In *Michael K*, Coetzee echoes this dynamic of near-identity-yet-difference when the medical officer imagines himself living in K's dispossessed state, yet still clings to the thought of keeping "a purse full of money . . . and a can of sardines."

The Moran/Molloy dynamic of near-identity is subtly incorporated into the medical officer's interpretations of K's identity. The medical officer arrives at a reading of K that seems identical to K's own reading of himself. Yet, in the spirit of the Moran/Molloy dynamic, these two readings are ultimately suspended in a state of irreconcilable difference. For instance, K at one point thinks of himself as being "like a lizard under a stone" (116). The medical officer seems to echo K when he refers to K "sitting on the grass holding his face up to the sun like a lizard basking" (132). Yet, in one case, the lizard is under a stone while, in the other, it is basking in the sun. Coetzee creates many such pairs of figures, each appearing to suggest the medical officer's success in interpreting K as K interprets himself, yet ultimately pointing to a persistent gap in the medical officer's hermeneutic understanding. Consider, for example, the following pair of figurative descriptions of K — the first by K himself and the second by the medical officer:

He thought of himself as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust. (*Michael K* 97)

He is like a stone, a pebble that [has] lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time. (*Michael K* 135)

In both descriptions, K is of inorganic geological matter, diminished in scale and quietly indifferent to events around him. Yet, while K is small in both descriptions, he is merely little in one but infinitesimal in the other. While K is compared to geological matter in both descriptions, he is a "pebble" in one but a "speck" in the other.

Coetzee uses Beckett's Moran/Molloy dynamic to underpin the medical officer's hermeneutic relation to Michael K. To recognize this deliberate intertextual connection is to grasp the certainty of the medical officer's hermeneutic failure and of K's evasion of hermeneutic capture. The medical officer's hermeneutic relation to K is asymptotic: while his interpretations appear to approach an accurate reading of K, they never fully identify the evasive K. The medical officer and Michael K, like Moran and Molloy, are suspended in a relation of irreconcilable difference. By examining *Michael K's* relation to its precursor text

by Beckett, one achieves a more complex understanding of K's consummate ability to elude efforts to interpret his identity, an ability often mentioned in poststructuralist readings of the novel.

Unlike certain post-colonial writers who take a more adversarial stance towards their European precursors, Coetzee in *Michael K* does not approach Beckett in a spirit of confrontation, nor are his adaptations of Beckett mechanically derivative. Rather, Coetzee is remarkably adept at using the strategies of his European modernist precursor to address his own personal and historical circumstances.

NOTES

- 1 Among the numerous critics who have commented on Kafka's influence on Coetzee's fiction are Attwell, Clayton, Dovey, Penner, Head, and Merivale. Given Kafka's widely-observed impact on Coetzee, he becomes a glaring omission from Coetzee's "Homage" to the modernists. I would like to speculate that Coetzee's omission of Kafka may signal an anxiety in relation to a much venerated precursor. Coetzee's ambivalence toward Kafka is reflected in his often-quoted comment on the use of Kafka in *Life & Times of Michael K*: "You ask about the impact of Kafka on my own fiction. I acknowledge it, and acknowledge it with what I hope is a proper humility. As a writer I am not worthy to loose the latchet of Kafka's shoe. But I have no regrets about the use of the letter K in *Michael K*, *hubris* though it may seem. There is no monopoly in the letter K; or to put it another way, it is as much possible to center the universe on the town of Prince Albert in the Cape as on Prague" (*Doubling* 199). Coetzee is far more comfortable in acknowledging Beckett's impact on his life and writing.
- 2 Coetzee's doctoral thesis is entitled *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis*. Three of Coetzee's academic essays on Beckett are collected in *Doubling the Point* (31-49).
- 3 For a discussion of state-condoned torture in *Barbarians*, see Gallagher, 112-35.
- 4 Here and elsewhere, I substitute "write" for "paint."
- 5 Another example of Beckett's ability to mirror South Africa, in this instance at the national level, is suggested by Neil Lazarus' observation of performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in South Africa: "[W]hen produced in South Africa[,] Beckett's play always seems to take on an ulterior life of its own, as though there were some inner logic that compelled it in this particular situation to disclose its fiercely partisan muscle under its slender existential frame. In a manichean society, in which the objects of waiting are starkly different for the powerful and the powerless, for rich and poor, white and black, Beckett's play shows itself to be unambiguously on the side of the oppressed" (133). Lazarus' comment also highlights the oppositional character of Beckett's writing which comes into prominence when it is transplanted into South Africa. As we shall see, this is a dimension of Beckett that Coetzee also crystallizes in his adaptation of Beckett in *Michael K*.
- 6 In his analysis of *Barbarians*, Lance Olsen calls attention to another echo of Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness, when he observes that in the Magistrate's narrative, "[w]e are in a monologue with nowhere to go, nothing to say, no one to say it to . . ." (55).
- 7 For a reading that examines the relationship between *Michael K* and post-structuralism, see Attwell.

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