CHAPTER-4

LANGUAGE

AND

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE
Ideas are certainly important—who would deny that?—but the fact is, the ideas that operates in the novels and poems, once they are unpicked from the context and laid out on the laboratory table, usually turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal. Whereas a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self, ultimately, indistinguishable from the self. (Coetzee, “Homage” 7)

Steve G. Kellman says, “The relations between words and thought, the boundaries between one language and another, and the limits of language have been central to Coetzee’s concerns as both a novelist and a scholar” (161). It is hardly controversial to claim that much of Coetzee’s appeal is related to his highly developed sense of the nature and possibilities of language. His interest and expertise in linguistics, explicit in his literary criticism, are implicit everywhere in his fiction. As he told Sevy:

Much of my academic training was in Linguistics. And in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than in the literary side of my academic profession. I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don’t see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer. ("Interview de J. M. Coetzee" 43-44)

In Doubling the Point, Coetzee admits that he “quite laboriously searches out the right word”:

I do believe in sparseness—more sparseness than Ford Madox practiced. Spare prose and a spare, thrifty world: it’s an unattractive
part of my makeup that has exasperated people who have had to share their lives with me. (DP 20)

Exasperating perhaps on a personal level, but sparseness is one of the salient characteristics of Coetzee’s prose. However, James Wood, in his essay “Coetzee’s Disgrace: a few skeptical thoughts” writes,

Coetzee is always praised for his dignified bleakness, for the tautness or carefulness or grim efficacy of his prose, which is certainly good enough to empress the superfluous acreage of many supposedly richer stylists. But there is a point beyond which pressurized shorthand is no longer enrichment but an impoverishment, and an unnatural containment. It is the point at which ellipsis becomes a formalism, a kind of aestheticism, in which fiction is no longer presenting complexity into its own-certain language. (249)

In Disgrace the description of Melanie’s boyfriend is an example of Coetzee’s terse style. He is described as ‘tall and wiry... a thin goatee and an ear-ring... black leather jacket’. (D 25) However, James Wood argues that this kind of sketch is required for this minor character in this context. According to him it is not necessary to present complexity in every aspect of a novel. The ‘free indirect style’ in which the novel is narrated means that this description is not an ‘objective’ view of the character from a disinterested narrator but Lurie’s own impression, encompassing not only the boyfriend’s physical appearance but some hint of his insolence and the threat he represents, conveyed by the tautness of the language. In Foe, Susan’s environment is sketched in a sparse and generalised fashion. For instance, her description of Foe’s "refuge" is as follows:
The room was lit by a single window, through which poured the afternoon sun. The view was to the north, over the roofs of Whitechapel. For furniture there was a table and chair, and a bed, slovenly made; one corner of the room was curtained off. (113)

Despite the generally acknowledge sparseness in Coetzee’s prose, there is a certain tendency to flights of the imagination, always, of course, on the part of the character. James Wood says,

Coetzee’s chaste, exact, ashen prose may look like the very embers of restraint, but it is drawn, again and again, to passionate extremity… Coetzee seems compelled to test his celebrated restraint against subjects and ideas whose extremity challenges novelistic representation. (James Wood 140)

The other characteristic which marks the novels of Coetzee is that it has an extremely learned flavor. Coetzee is a well-educated man, and it shows in every little allusion and reference that he makes. Coetzee’s writing exemplifies the amazing amount of content that he has read, researched, and absorbed over the course of his career. With their powers combined, these elements – pithiness, immediacy, and bookishness – make for a unique readable writing style. His, Waiting for the Barbarians, is inspired by Cavafy’s poem and use allusions from Kafka’s The Castle and The Trail to describe the inner workings and limits of the human heart, mind, and soul. It presents the universal truths of the human condition. His writing is simple, clean and straight to the point but underneath that straightforward veneer, his words reveal some real complex ideas and emotions. In disgrace, David, the protagonist was taking care after the dogs at the clinic of Bev Shaw. We got the impression that
David has grown attached to the dog. He seems to feel sorry for the creature as they are to put to death. Coetzee describes this moment in his characteristic style:

He opens the cage door, ‘Come’, he says, opens his arms. The dog wags his crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. ‘Come’.

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery, ‘I thought you would save him for another week’, says Bev. ‘Are you giving him up?’

‘Yes. I am giving him up.’ (D 62-64)

The Chomskyan notion of deep structure, therefore, seems to have initiated Coetzee's drift away from either realist or romantic conceptions of authorial creativity. Instead of being the independent producer of literary language, the writer sets discourses in motion, pursuing their inner logic, sometimes setting several discourses in parallel—as in Dusklands, where the interest lies in the critical distance set up between different discourses. Coetzee's cultural displacement seems to have precluded him from taking up unreservedly the political model that Chomsky also represented; however, he was influenced, no doubt, by Chomsky's American Power and the New Mandarins, which, in questioning the role of 'objective' scholarship in the context of the Vietnam War, is close to the concerns represented by Eugene Dawn's 'mythography'. All told, generative grammar seems to have enabled Coetzee to disconnect the notion of discourse from the autonomous subject of liberalism, a move confirmed by later reading in Continental structuralism and post-Structuralism. He then speaks of the curious effect of generative grammar on his emerging ambition to write:
I read Noam Chomsky and Jerrold Katz and the new universal grammarians and reached the point of asking myself: If a latter-day ark were ever commissioned to take the best that mankind had to offer and make a fresh start on the farther planets, if it ever came down to that, might we not leave Shakespeare's plays and Beethoven's quartets behind to make room for the last aboriginal speaker of Dyirbal, even though that might be a fat old woman who scratched herself and smelled bad? It seemed an odd position for a student of English, the greatest imperial language of them all, to be falling into. It was a doubly odd position for someone with literary ambitions, albeit of the vaguest—ambitions to speak one day, somehow, in his own voice—to discover himself suspecting that languages spoke people or at the very least spoke through them. ("How I Learned about America", 9)

Coetzee's precursors in bringing linguistic studies into the field of colonial relations go back to the period of high imperialism and the work of orientalists such as Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan. In Said's account in Orientalism, the successes of the orientalist philology of the nineteenth century included "comparative grammar, the reclassification of languages into families, and the final rejection of the divine origins of language" these achievements, in Renan especially, linked orientalism definitively with the ideals of progress and scientific knowledge (135). Although Renan's "philological laboratory" was a significant contribution to the extension and consolidation of European discursive authority, Coetzee, projecting himself now into colonialism's dying moments, follows the tracks left by this tradition and finds evidence of cultural relativism. Coetzee's early linguistic studies, therefore, put him in touch with the source of the historical process he inwardly knows,
enabling him to find Europe's authority dispersed and undermined in the deep structures of the languages of the nonmetropolitan world. Sophie Mayroux points out that:

Coetzee’s sentences are meant to achieve a precise effect, to build stone by stone the microcosm of each novel, in the same way as a data-processing programme proceeds towards a given goal from one instruction to another is akin to a puritanical ethos. (qtd. in Dooley 94)

She adds that people are tended to mislead his style as austere or bleak. Coetzee has used long strings of rhetorical questions, the way they present a character’s preoccupations and anxieties, often in a comic vein. He often uses an extended metaphor or strings of similes to convey a character’s feelings in an almost exuberant way that can seem to contradict those feelings. After the attack in disgrace, Lurie experiences “a taste of what it will be like to be an old man”:

Slumped on a plastic chair amid the stench of chicken feathers and rotting apples, he feels his interest in the world draining form him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding. When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spider web, brittle to the torch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away. (D 107)

Such a pile-up of figurative images might seem unexpected in a writer known for his sparseness. Images like fly-casing, rice-chaff are the images of lightness counteracts his despair at the same time, making the ending seem less painful, perhaps unconsciously providing himself with consolation for the heavy, grey mood which has descended on him. Despite the jocular tone, he has a serious point. As he
pointed out in doubling the point that dud metaphors like the race and the jungle are used by government to urge people to work harder and make more money.

**Translingualism and Bilingualism**

Translinguals are not only a large and important category of authors. As acutely conscious of their links to others within the group as to the problematic of language, they constitute a tradition, not an arbitrary assemblage. J.M.Coetzee is a vivid demonstration of how literary Translingualism is in fact a legacy rather than a taxonomic contrivance. The possibility of thinking outside language itself is what tantalizes the narrator of *Foe*, Coetzee’s revision of *Robinson Crusoe* as a metafiction. The central theme and action of this self-conscious narrative is the construction of experience through language, even while the text reconstructs Defoe’s eighteenth-century novel through the languages of gender and race. The familiar ordeal of ship wrecked isolation is reconceived through the eyes of a white woman and a mute slave, Friday. Susan fails to crack the semiotic code as she says, “this is not a place of words” (*F* 112). In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the translingual aspiration – to think beyond a given language of Coetzee is expressed is in the episode where the magistrate excavates and collects “slips of white poplar-wood, each about eight inches by two inches, many of them wound about with lengths of strings” (*WFB* 110). The Magistrate studies this slips of wood but he is defeated in every attempt at cryptography, he cannot break their code. When Colonel Joll insists on an interpretation of the slips, the magistrate offers an ornate allegorical reading so patently contrived as to mock the entire enterprise of semiotics. Michael K is mute in a society where racist whites control al discourse. He is spare of speech, and even when he does attempt to say something he cannot. But translingualism sensitized
Coetzee to the powers and deficiencies of any system, linguistic or political. To adopt another language is to cultivate empathy for alternative modes of apprehension. Like Beckett, Coetzee has been able to move from one language to another. In his novels, all words are problematic and provisional.

Many of Coetzee’s characters wield language self-consciously, especially the narrators and third-person focalizers. Many are writers or scholars or linguists who think about the etymology of other words they use and are conscious of the vocabulary of other languages. Coetzee is bilingual by heritage, growing up in an extended family in which both English and Afrikaans were spoken. Asked about the meaning of “being sent to an Afrikaner school, consigned, as you put it, to an Afrikaner life,” (B 38) Coetzee responded that it meant

First of all being consigned to the Afrikaner half of the school I was attending but, more frighteningly, it would have meant being drawn into the bosom of the Dutch Reformed Church and the National Party, of the whole cultural crusade of the times to erect a distinct and unique white Afrikaner national being. And for a rather timid child this was an alarming prospect. (B 38)

The novel’s (Disgrace) free indirect narration conveys a curious sense that word choices are imperfect, still in the process of being made: words are handled with a meticulous and even burdensome awareness of their morphological, semantic, and cultural complexities. The word "friend," for instance, appears with its full etymology ("Modern English friend from Old English freond, from freon, to love" 102)-information that estranges both the word itself and the basic human bond that it defines. A similarly intense and destabilizing scrutiny seems to be demanded by
the novel's many italicized foreign words. They are used with such deliberation that the reader cannot but pause to wonder whether these lexical strangers have any place in or purchase on the ‘new South Africa’-whether the cultural values in which they are embedded are at all translatable. A striking case in point is eingewurzelt (rooted in), the adjective David Lurie reaches for when he tries to characterize Lucy's neighbor Ettinger, a surly "man of the earth," shotgun at his side, determined to stick it out on his parcel of the Eastern Cape (117). The word, redolent with notions of organic community and peasant tradition, is intended to affirm the man's tenacity. But the very fact that it is a German word effectively undermines its dictionary definition: Ettinger's origins, as Lurie subsequently muses, may be too European for him to survive without a brood of sons on the post-apartheid platteland.

The lexicon of the novel thus seems to suggest a point that is frequently reiterated in Coetzee's scholarly writing, that meanings are not necessarily transferable from one language to another and that full translation is impossible (DP 182). It is a point that bears rather sinister implications if one views the novel in the way Zoe Wicomb does in her rich and troubling essay on Disgrace-as a meditation not only on the process of translation, but also on what is (for Wicomb) the intimately related process of a historical transition from apartheid to democracy (“Translation” 4). The novel's instances of linguistic erudition—the foreign words, the interest in etymology, and also the recurrent reflections on the perfective form of the verb—are of course "in character": they serve as markers of David Lurie's academic and cosmopolitan mode of thought. But a foregrounding of linguistic questions has in fact been a consistent feature of Coetzee's intervention in and critique of the South African pastoral over the years.6 This preoccupation is evident as early as "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" (1974), the second section of which is presented as
J. M. Coetzee's translation of the work of a pious nationalist historian, bent on celebrating the legacy of his eighteenth-century ancestor. A crucial passage in this scholarly spoof describes South African rural life as a set of "durable relations" in which farmer and servant "dance in slow parallel through time" (D, 115). This dance is gestural (involving a deferentially "tipped hat," a "shuffle," and so forth), but also linguistic. The narrator marvels at the fact that the Hottentot language has no word for "yes," and that the speech of servants still bears the trace of this grammatical peculiarity in the way they signify assent, by repeating the last phrase of the master's command: "The Hottentot language has perished, but one can still hear these antiphonal closes on the farms of the Western Cape, in Afrikaans: 'Drive them to the north camp.' 'To the north camp, my master'" (115). It is obvious why this grammatical form should seem so orderly and fitting to the nationalist ideologue: the servant's voice is reduced to an echo of the master's and thus cannot disturb the latter's timeless idyll.

These early investigations of language choice and rules of address are revisited in Boyhood (which records a curious horror at the grammatical restrictions on the use of the second person that I discussed above). They are suggestive too for a reading of Disgrace, where a related set of sociolinguistic issues is explored in a context of profound social transformation. The very fact that the farm in the novel is located in the Eastern Cape is significant in this regard. Whereas the Karoo region, the setting for In the Heart of the Country and crucial parts of Life and Times of Michael K. and Boyhood, is diglossic (the linguistic choice is between English and Afrikaans), the Eastern Cape is multiglossic (the linguistic choices include English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa, as well as the nonstandard English of isiXhosa speakers). The difficult—perhaps impossibly difficult adjustments that the novel's white characters
are forced to make are registered in terms of linguistic competence or failure in the multilingual environment of post-apartheid South Africa. It is significant that at the novel's most extreme moment of crisis, when Lurie is ignominiously locked in the lavatory, unable to protect his daughter from sexual violation, his anguished thoughts should turn to his linguistic unpreparedness for such a catastrophe: He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. (95) At this moment Lurie's failure to translate is complete: he is bereft of any terms in which to articulate this experience, other than the most cartoonish colonial stereotypes about the incomprehensible otherness of savages and their "lingo." And before too long, even this ridiculous, hopelessly dated vocabulary falls apart, and he is reduced to "hurling out shapeless bellows that have no words behind them" (96). The more subtle failures of linguistic competence in the novel, however, are also revealing. A case in point is the interchange that occurs when Lurie first confronts Petrus with the news of the rape and burglary that took place, suspiciously, in the latter's absence: He strolls over, exchanges greetings. "You must have heard, we had a big robbery on Wednesday while you were away." "Yes," says Petrus, "I heard. It is very bad, a very bad thing. But you are all right now." Is he all right? Is Lucy all right? Is Petrus asking a question? It does not sound like a question, but he cannot take it otherwise, not decently. The question is, what is the answer? "I am alive," he says. "As long as one is alive one is all right, I suppose. So yes, I am all right." He pauses, waits, allows a silence to develop, a silence which Petrus ought to fill with the next question: And how is Lucy? He is wrong. "Will Lucy go to the market tomorrow?"
asks Petrus (114-15). The implications of this dialogue are striking, especially if we compare it to the "well-regulated demands and responses" of the colonial pastoral (Gordimer, Conservationist, 58). If the narrator of In the Heart of the Country has to communicate with her servants in terms of "gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded" (7), so much more so Lurie, who finds himself in a situation where the rules of address have become unfathomable, since the relationships at stake are in a profound state of flux. Petrus is, after all, "his own master" (114), and this new and rather paradoxical subject position is expressed in his refusal to dance the old conversational dance, of question and answer, utterance and echo. Multilingualism has been converted into a reason for misery and self-deprecation by character like David Lurie. He reflects that his knowledge of European languages is of no use in communicating with the men who have locked him in Lucy's lavatory: "He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa" (D 95). This represents one more stage in his increasing consciousness of inadequately his education has prepared him for life in modern South Africa.

Coetzee permits his sophisticated narrator the realization that the new relationships in post-apartheid South Africa require a new lexicon. In trying to define exactly "what Petrus is, strictly speaking," and to determine what the man's precise relationship to Lucy and to Lurie himself might be, he decides that the word that will serve best is "neighbor" (116). The word choice is potentially a good one: the word is derived from the Old English word neah (near) and bur (dwell, farm), and its etymology implies something quite revolutionary in the South African context: the fact that a black man may also be a boereenwatnabyboer (one who farms nearby)—and not the boer's antagonist and other. But the living out of this new term and this
new relationship proves difficult; the implicit recognition of sameness in the word "neighbor" eventually becomes strained and frayed. "Too close," Lurie eventually comes to think. "We live too close to Petrus. It is like sharing a house with strangers, sharing noises, sharing smells" (127). And when it becomes clear that these "strangers" may in fact become actual kin—that Petrus may be the uncle of Lurie's grandson (the child conceived as a result of the rape)—the adjustments required become too much for the professor to bear. The unstated hankering for the old definitions and the old grammars of deference and domination that one senses in the conversation with Petrus becomes explicit in the scene where Lurie discovers Pollux, the retarded rapist and Petrus's relative, spying on Lucy. The submerged but not forgotten language of the white master erupts. Flying into a rage, Lurie shouts: "Swine! ... You filthy swine!" Phrases that all his life he has avoided suddenly seem just and right: "Teach him a lesson, Show him his place" (206). He reverts, linguistically, to the time when white farmers knew how to "have ... it out" (116) with servants, and social positions were—for some, at least—comfortably fixed. But however right it might seem to Lurie, the phrase "teach him a lesson" can no longer have its old meaning. This is, after all, a novel in which the very idea of teaching has been rendered problematic by Lurie's affair with his student, and where the idea of the "lesson," and especially the lesson of history, though often invoked, is always enigmatic.

**Influences**

While attending the University of Texas, Coetzee discovered Beckett's manuscripts of Watt, the book that first attracted him to Beckett. He studied these manuscripts meticulously and wrote his master's thesis about Beckett's prose work, The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis. Unfortunately,
and perhaps by Coetzee’s own wish, his thesis was never published but remains in the library of the University of Texas. A shorter essay about the Watt manuscripts has been made available, along with some other essays. In the 1970s, before his first novel *Duskland* was published, Coetzee wrote three short essays on Beckett which have been reprinted in the collection “Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews” (1992). At the same time *Duskland* was published, he wrote a fourth one that can be read as more of an experiment involving computers than a literary essay. All four of these pieces are concerned with the technical aspect of Beckett’s writing. The fact that Coetzee has refrained from a thematical analysis is striking because there seem to be quite a few overlapping themes between the two authors. Coetzee has paid most attention to Beckett’s technical and stylistical approach to writing fiction. There are, however, a number of thematical influences to be found as well. He is a writer deeply indebted to Beckett’s prose, but has had the ‘imaginative courage’ to move it beyond solipsism, and reinterpret it in terms of the dynamics of embodied life: the life that has to confront not only the otherness of the self, but the otherness of the beings that one lives alongside, and thus the political question of what it means to live in a community. But while the Tokyo lecture gives us Coetzee’s view of what is most at stake in his encounter with Beckett—his solipsism, the ‘anguished . . . comedy’ of his prose—it is short on detail. Coetzee was not only fascinated with but also appalled by the sceptical and disintegrative energies of Beckett’s prose. In another essay of this period, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style’ (1973), he tried to make sense of his profoundly mixed feelings by introducing an important distinction—a distinction which will in fact remain the basis of his approach to Beckett right up to, and including, the Tokyo lecture. His distinction is between Beckett the programmatic anti-realist (a Beckett he denigrates)
and another, more compelling Beckett whose prose is poised unsettlingly between realism and anti-realism. The distinction turns around The Unnamable, which is now featured as a ‘limit’ text in Beckett’s oeuvre: after The Unnamable, in Coetzee’s judgement, Beckett tips over into an automated programme-writing. As an example, Coetzee cites a line from Imagination Dead Imagine (1965): ‘Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit.’

What he claims is that, while Beckett’s characteristic negation of the cultural principle that informs the novel’s conventions (‘The Word in all its magical autonomy’) had been designed as a refusal of the fake transcendence they offer, this process of negation contains a temptation towards its own variety of fakeness. In the texts that follow The Unnamable, such as Imagination Dead Imagine, Ping (1966), and Lessness (1969), Coetzee finds an increasing ‘formalization or stylisation of autodestruction: that is, as the text becomes nothing but a destructive commentary upon itself by the encapsulating consciousness, it retreats into the trap of an automatism of which the invariant mechanical repetitions of Lessness are the most extreme example to date.’ The danger of the ‘stylisation of autodestruction’, which he now also claims to find in the lulling ‘rhythm of doubt’ on display in the pages of Watt, is that it too becomes another false foundation, and another fake aesthetic release. It may be a different kind of falsification to that made by the realist novel—now an automated closing-down of illusion into ‘the prison of empty style’—but the ‘stylisation of the impasse of reflexive consciousness’ is nonetheless an encounter with reality that is just as inauthentic as its simple opposite. stylistic retreat—a prose that remains anxious, open, and unpredictable. Coetzee is clearly interested in The Unnamable because of its anti-foundational potential, but can we say more about what this text is doing, rather than what it is not? To answer this question we will
have to turn, for a while, to Beckett himself in a more direct way. What I am going to suggest is that the Beckettian novel is designed to do ‘nothing’. Not ‘nothing at all’, but nothing itself. Beckett’s claim to a central position in the history of the novel rests on his development of an aesthetic model, whose risks are well described by Coetzee, based on the failure of expression, through which failure ‘the nothing’ is expressed. Interest in the girl would seem quite a persuasive one, for as soon as he works himself into a drowsy state he loses interest in the girl herself (‘I am aware of the girl struggling to stand up; but now, I think, she must take care of herself ’), and surrenders entirely to the ‘blissful giddiness’. There are therefore at least three ways of reading the Magistrate’s sleep: one that takes him seriously on his own terms, and two others that make an increasingly severe judgment of what he is doing. The text oscillates between these alternatives, keeping them in play.

**The Kafka Connection**

The transfiguration of the elements of fiction to the field of writing is a developmental feature of Coetzee’s novels, reinforced by the fictionalization of certain features of deconstruction, but it is in Kafka that this movement is clinched. There are obvious links between the state of civil anomie through which South Africa is passing in Michael K and the nightmarish world of The Trial and The Castle. Doubtless, "K" is a nod to these works; The Castle seems particularly relevant with its concern with the authority of the document, in the form of the letter, and the way texts and stories circulate. However, the pertinence of Kafka is more specific: we find it focused in the stories, particularly *The Burrow. Life & Times of Michael K* is Coetzee’s homage to Kafka. South Africa—Michael K’s people—is made evident, yes, heroically, every grinding day. It is not present in the novel. The reason Coetzee is telling such lies about black heroic identity is because of his own ‘stately
fastidiousness’: the ‘revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions’ that Life & Times expresses is emphatically Coetzee’s ‘own revulsion’ towards a revolutionary identity politics. His own definition of freedom, Gordimer claims, refuses any role for a properly political form of heroism rooted in ‘the energy of the will’, for Coetzeean freedom is merely ‘to be “out of all the camps at the same time”’. Unlike most novels, which merely ‘explore questions’, ‘this book,’ Gordimer believes, ‘is unusual in positing its answer’, and the ‘answer’ Coetzee gives is this: ‘Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her’ (6). Coetzee’s text asserts its own truth about heroism, commentators have instead found ways of revaluing her values: they portray Michael K as a true, rather than a false, portrayal of the heroic

In 1981, two years before the publication of Michael K, Coetzee published an essay in Modern Language Notes entitled "Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka’s The Burrow." It examines how Kafka attempts to do away with the distance separating the time of the events narrated (utterance) from the time of narration (enunciation); such a project, Coetzee argues, is syntactically and logically impossible, but its impetus comes from Kafka’s concern with the notion of a breakdown in the experience of time, where things continually collapse or threaten to collapse into a timeless, iterative present. All Coetzee’s novels share to some extent Kafka’s concern with the relation between narrative and the experience of time. The essay ends, however, by contrasting “historical” and “eschatological” conceptions of temporality. The eschatological is an "everlasting present" in which narration itself, the voice of enunciation, resides:
Now that the narrator has failed time and again to domesticate time using strategies of narrative (i.e., strategies belonging to historical time), his structures of sequence, of cause and effect, collapsing each time at the "decisive moment" of rupture when the past fails to run smoothly into the present, that is, now that the construct of narrative time has collapsed, there is only the time of narration left, the shifting now within which his narrative takes place, leaving behind it a wake (a text) of failure, fantasy, sterile speculation: the ramifications of a burrow whose fatal precariousness is signaled by the whistling that comes from its point(s) of rupture. (579)

Kafka seems to offer to Coetzee a powerful image of a narrating subject confronting its own limits of possibility, indeed, its own death. It is fitting that Foucault, in his essay "Language to Infinity," should refer to The Burrow when addressing the question of speaking to avoid death: it is "quite likely," Foucault argues, "that the approach of death—its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory—hollows out in the present and in existence the void toward which and from which we speak" (53). The reflexive moment in narrative, Foucault goes on to say, is a kind of "wound," for the process of doubling back is really an attempt on the part of writing to postpone death, to "conceal, that is, betray the relationship that language establishes with death—with this limit to which language addresses itself and against which it is poised" (57). Coetzee's muted affirmation of textual freedom, his attempt to produce the narratological equivalent of deconstruction's gesture of erasure, gains force from this description because we are able to see it in its socio-cultural light. Kafka's creature in "The Burrow" is sustained by a similar urgency: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of Kafka as producing a "minor"
literature, which involves writing in German, in Prague, and as a Jew, clarifies the connection: Kafka's narrative drive, in which "expression precedes content" (41), is a form of defense and resistance to entrapment. The closing lines of Michael K neatly illustrate these observations. Seeing himself returning to the farm, and finding the water pump blown up by the army, K imagines obtaining water: He, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (250) Michael K presents us, finally, with an image of resistance in the open-endedness of writing, and it chooses as its field of operation not the transcendental framework of the making or unmaking of history but the social exchange of literature within a particular cultural context. The marginal freedom—what Foucault calls the "virtual space" ("Language to Infinity" 55)—of textuality, a freedom that can be celebrated only in proportion as it is seen to be historically constrained, is held up and circulated by the novel within a heavily politicized culture as a quality deserving more than casual acknowledge.

**Use of present tense**

Narratives are informed by a point of view that assigns meaning to their contents in conformity with a governing ideology, normally that of the narrator. In fictional narrative, the relation of the narrator's governing ideology to that of the author is always a part of the narrative's meaning. Narratives refer to specific experiences that occurred in some past world (real or imagined) and are accordingly reported in a tense of the Past. In Wiring Degree Zero, Barthes thoroughly approves that past tense is the tense of narrative, a claim which according to Harvey possibly
follows Jean-Paul Sartre's observation, since the "narratives in the past tense tend to place events in a neat order of a cause and effect, at too great a remove from the chaos of the present moment" (74). As many critics have noted, retrospective narration is the standard case: "live now, tell later" is the norm, as Dorrit Cohn notes. Comprised of a narrator who tells of events sometime after those events have occurred, retrospective narration distinguishes story from discourse; it also foregrounds the cognitive and experiential differences between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I. Retrospective narration is what we typically encounter in fiction and what has informed nearly all narrative theory. However some novelist like Hemmingway, Coetzee, Bobbie Ann Mason, Margaret Atwood, Scott Turow have used the present tense narrative in some of their works. Suzanne Fleischman concludes her recent illuminating study Tense and Narrativity by building on Gerard Genette's discussion of the inherent instability of present tense narration. Fleischman argues that narrative, by nature, uses the past as the dominant tense. The presence of the present, then, moves a discourse toward the genres in which present tense is dominant—either the lyric or the drama. Fleischman concludes her discussion with her strongest claim: the "metalinguistic function" of the present tense is "to announce a language that cannot be narrative according to the rules of narrative's own game" (310).

Present tense narration is 'inherently unstable' because it erases the distinction between the two temporal planes, (the present of the speaker and the past of the narrated events) causing the text to move in one of two directions. Either the narrator will disappear and the events will be presented as if without a filter, thus moving the text toward drama; or the narrator will become supremely important and the events will be merely an occasion for the discourse, thus moving the text toward
lyric. Genette argues that the novel can be read either as a wholly objective behaviorist account of events or as a completely subjective projection of the narrator’s jealous perspective. The present tense is such a problem because it violates the mimetic standard that says a speaker cannot tell her story and live it at the same time. Stipulating that texts which erase the distinction will be either unfiltered or completely subjective allows the mimetic imperative to be preserved. However, the present tense narration invites a reader to seek both comprehension and evaluation, sympathetic understanding and where necessary, strong resistance. Perhaps the most striking consequence of this narrative technique is that it makes reading endlessly recursive. The more we study the text, the more we are able to interrogate and complicate our understanding of the work. The present tense contributes to a terse, colloquial, antidotal style that increases verisimilitude. Critics have identified three types of present narrative techniques: retrospective, simultaneous and the historical present. Coetzee has used all the three narrative techniques in his novels in some measure. The present tense has been Coetzee’s choice in almost all of his books. The exceptions are ‘The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ and Michael K’s narrative in Life and Times of Michael K in Foe, the tense at first similarly depends on whether Susan Barton is relating past events in her narrative or writing letters to Mr. Foe about her activities in the present. However, part 3, narrated by Susan in the first person, is in the past tense with no narrative framing- without the quotation marks of the first two parts- and part 4, the indeterminate first-person epilogue, is in the present tense. Usually, then, Coetzee’s past tense belongs to a first-person narrator like Elizabeth Curren, Jacobus Coetzee or Susan Barton. The exceptions are Michael K.’s sections of Life and Times of Michael K and part 3 of Foe.
The present tense seems more fluid, less fixed. James Harrison sees the first-person present tense in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as following:

The reader to participate in the magistrate’s self-discovery… Coetzee enables the reader to remain abreast of a first-person narrator who is grappling with the events of the novel and however imperfectly, assessing and reassessing his own response to them in retrospect.

(81)

On the other hand, life and times of Michael k is, as Coetzee says, a novel about being rather than becoming (Morphet 455), so the past tense suits him better than Coetzee’s more usual present tense. In part 3 of *foe*, the use of the more conventional past tense might be linked with the questioning of such narrative conventions: Susan wonders why, “in the same room as yourself at last, where I need surely not relate to you my every action… I continue to describe and explain” (F 133). At the end of part 3, *foe* and Susan discuss the characters of this narrative, Foe asks Susan,

Has the time not come to tell me the truth about your own child, the daughter lost in Bahia? Did you truly give birth to her? Is she substantial or she a story too?

I will answer, but not before you have told me: the girl you send, the girl who calls herself by my name- is she substantial?

No, she is substantial, as my daughter is substantial and I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world.”
You have omitted Friday. (F 152)

The epilogue uses the present tense to mark it off from this fictional place of words where a possibly bogus substantiality has been achieved and captured in the past tense.

Unlike most narratives, which are rendered in the past tense, the magistrate’s story is not composed with the advantage of hindsight. At any given moment of his speaking, the magistrate is exactly, precisely as unaware as we are what will happen next, and so is unable to place the events he narrates into linear narrative context. He does not yet know what events are ‘important’ or ‘trivial’, and does not engage in the usually deliberative process of the storyteller, with its essential guiding dilemma: what to leave in, and what to leave out - where to draw the shaping lines of the story. As the critic Anne Waldron Newmann has pointed out, the present tense implies that the magistrate has “no conceivable occasion of narration’-why, we must ask, would he begin speaking just when he does, and not before, or after? Why does he fall silent, and cease to speak precisely when he does? Where is the conceived beginning, and where is the calculated end? And when, from what position, under what circumstances, is this utterance made? Like the a-historical, extra-geographical setting, the narrative tense of the novel seems to resist the idea of history-as-narrative, history as a linear account of “what happened” from the vantage point of victory, from a position of safety beyond the danger of the events themselves. What happens in this narrative happens NOW, and must be considered in the present.

**Disgrace**

Stylistically, Disgrace is matchless and unique among Coetzee’s novels because even though it is written by a third person narrator, David Lurie is the
focalizer of the novel: his consciousness is the centre of the attention. Disgrace can be said to be written in the mode of “free indirect discourse” (Herman 92-4). Coetzee’s decision to use this technique gives his audience access not only to Lurie’s spoken words but also to his unspoken thoughts. So the reader becomes intimately familiar with Lurie’s desires, passions, and discourse. Some critics define Disgrace’s narrative situation as a case of ‘simultaneous present tense narration’ (DelConte 428). The first line of the novel is really brilliant. “For the man of his age, forty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (Disgrace 1).

We could define this as a narrative in which the narrator tells the events as they occur. In this regard, DelConte explains that ‘the narrating-I is also the experiencing-I.’ (DelConte 428) Consequently, this gives a sense of immediacy to the story, because the narrator is describing the events while he/she is living them. Indeed, Disgrace is the history of Lurie’s “present reality” which tells the reader how he has raped Melanie Isaacs, his young student from Romantics course, which leads to his resignation from the university and how he is attacked by a gang who partially brunt him and raped his daughter, Lucy. Furthermore, the present tense narrative of the novel has a major contribution to the assumed themes of the novel including rape, scapegoat, racial segregation, passion, degradation, initiation and makes them ever-present throughout the entire history of man. Moreover, this mode brings the reader closer to the events and lets the audience in on minute details. An example illustrates the point:

He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, kisses her feet, astonished by the feeling she evokes. Something to do with
the apparition on the stage: .... She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes (*Disgrace* 25).

This example evinces the use of a simultaneous narration, as it exemplifies the appearance of a heterodiegetic narrator: an instance who stands outside of the story while assuming total control and having full knowledge. Coetzee's use of simultaneous present tense narration is not a conventional form of narrating. Because, as DelConte argues, 'it doesn't have a clear, real world analogue.' (DelConte 429) Moreover, this technique erases the difference between experiencing and narrating, which leaves no room for reflection for the reader or narrator. Therefore, the narrator is condemned to report, rather than to criticize or evaluate (DelConte 430), which is only possible in the mind of the readers. However Coetzee has used present tense to describe the events of the novel due to 'timelessness', one of the significant functions of the present tense. The contribution of this function to *Disgrace* is more thematic than stylistic. Tellingly, Coetzee’s preference of the present tense narration in *Disgrace* is in accord with dire circumstance in South Africa: the apartheid system is not just over. South Africa is in a transition period in which it is difficult to both break free from the past and, at the same time, find a sense of continuity. If the link with the past is broken, a chaotic condition perhaps would prevail there, since there is no stabilized frame to lead the nation and mould the consciousness of the transiting generation. Therefore, a perpetual present matrix with its timelessness criteria can remove the history of racial segregation from the past and simultaneously pave the way for future. This matrix can be the condition which Lurie’s daughter, Lucy, lives and farms, among various communities of native Africans in the country near Grahamstown, where she
does not agree to leave for living with her Dutch mother in Holland or her father in Cape Town even after being raped and robbed.

The appearance of a simultaneous narration in Disgrace implies that both the narrator and narratee can be present at the moment of narration. However, in most simultaneous present tense narrations this is impossible, because the narratee cannot always be present when the narrator speaks. Nonetheless, some novels do show evidence of a present or absent narratee, while others do not display any clue as to whether a narratee is present. For example, Disgrace is a typical simultaneous narrative and also evinces enough information to determine whether the narratee is present. These assumptions can be grouped under the header of what DelConte defines as the 'absentee narratee' (DelConte 433), which entails that the narratee belongs to the ontology of the narrator's world. However, the narrative structure cannot always guarantee the possibility of his/her appearance. In contrast to an ontological narratee, the audience or reader can function as a narratee as well. Delconte defines this as 'an extradiegetic audience' (DelConte 433). Furthermore, because of the absence of a narratee, the audience gains a closer position to the narrative. Therefore, the reader acquires more access to the story.

The 'instantaneous' function of the present tense in Disgrace enormously contributes to the element of suspense. In fact, owing to the 'presentness' of the narrative, the element of suspense devolves into the smaller building blocks of the narrative, at the level of the verb(s) of each sentence. Following the syntagmatic axis, the present-tense verbs of Disgrace permeate a kind of unpredictability at the semantic level of the sentences. As a result, the word chains of every sentence culminated in the present tense verb slide to the next sentence for a postponing of
this suspension and uncertainty. Consequently the narrative is interwoven with a kind structural suspension. For instance, uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of actions in the scene where the gang of three native Africans invades his daughter’s residence in the country, loot her house, kill her dogs and rape her, (because of the simultaneous narration of the events accompanied with instantaneous of the present tense) imposes that much immediate suspension on every word that the reader can perceive it as a dramatic work. The ‘presentness’ of *Disgrace* obviously influences on converting a passive reader to an active one through the process of constructing ‘story’. Moreover, this function of the present tense increases the cinematographic dimension of the text. For example, in the scene of Lurie’s encounter with his student-cum-mistress Melanie Isaacs, the description of Melanie’s posture and gesture as well as her custom is so instantaneous that a reader thinks that his/her eyes are substituted for the narrator’s:

> She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese, cheek bones, large, dark eyes. Her outfits are always striking. Today she wears a maroon mini skirt with a mustard-coloured sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings. (1)

Recontextualization of other literary characters (overtly or covertly) in a present tense narrative such as *Disgrace* ushers the narrative toward the personification of that literary character. For instance, Coetzee draws an analogy between the story of humiliation and “fall” of Lurie and the fallen angel Lucifer. The
presence of Lucifer is not allusive and Lurie talks about him as well as comments on his psyche while he teaches Romantic poetry:

The angel Lucifer hurled out of heaven. Of how angels live we know little, but we can assume they do not require oxygen. At home Lucifer, the dark angel, does not need to breathe. All of a sudden he finds himself cast out into this strange ‘breathing world’ of ours. ‘Erring’: a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself. (32)

Nevertheless, when he is forced to resign from his professorship due to disclosure of his illicit relationship with Melanie, except for himself, all those who knew him consider him as a fallen angel. As another example, the vertical axis of intertextuality points to another literary character: Lord Byron’s Don Juan. Indeed, Coetzee through his present tense narrative of Disgrace depict Lurie an avatar of Lord Byron because of numerous love affairs, and self-imposed exile. Interestingly, David is teaching Romantic Period Poetry and composing a book on Lord Byron. Moreover, making love with Melanie Isaacs on his daughter’s bed could be symbolically an incestuous affair which Lord Byron himself was once charged of due to his affair with half-sister, Augusta Leigh.

With the point of reference swinging from the future to the past, it is the elusive present that escapes attention. Coetzee’s protagonist, a literary humanist in a corporatized university whose particular failing is aestheticized lust, undergoes criminal torture at the hands of black assailants, who also gang-rape his daughter. Coetzee’s choice of narrative voice in Disgrace and in the memoirs seems to reflect his arguments as to the use of language in Rousseau’s Confessions.
Foe

In Foe Coetzee has employed the same technique of narration as in Disgrace. However, in contrast to Foe's retrospective narration: 'at last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned (...).' Coetzee's use of simultaneous present tense narration is not a conventional form of narrating. Because, as DelConte argues, 'it doesn't have a clear, real world analogue.' Moreover, this technique erases the difference between experiencing and narrating, which leaves no room for reflection for the reader or narrator. Therefore, the narrator is condemned to report, rather than to criticize or evaluate (129), which is only possible in the mind of the readers. If one takes a look at Foe's narrative – especially chapters one and three – this retrospective narration does have a 'real world analogue'. Because in real life, one tends to speak of events that happened in the past by using the past tense. Moreover, past tense retrospection does allow for reflection. For example, when Susan arrives on the island, she is totally dehydrated and she thinks that Friday wants to eat her: 'he reached out and with the back of his hand touched my arm. He is trying my flesh, I thought, and let my head sink: I have come to an island of cannibals.' (131)

Susan's words are thus rendered in the past tense, which allows her to reflect on the situation. This is much more difficult when speaking in the simultaneous present tense. Next to time restrictions, simultaneous present tense narration also needs to be approached from a spatial point of view. For example, an author can eliminate the spatial difference between acting and telling, which means that the narrator is also the 'I' who experiences the events at that particular moment. The narrative location also tends to shift as the novel progresses. Foe is a good example
of this assumption because the location of the narrative shifts dramatically in between the chapters, as the characters move from the island to England. In this regard, one cannot define *Foe* as a conventional narrative, because it has a slightly episodic structure. The first and third part exemplifies a dialogic structure, which is inherent to conventional narratives. Furthermore, both chapters are written in the past tense as well, which is also characteristic of conventional retrospective narration. However, in the epistolary account and the last chapter there is no apparent dialogue.

In the second chapter of *Foe* the ontological narratee does not appear on scene. In other words, Susan acts as the narrator and Foe is her narratee. However, because Foe resides in another place, he is not present on scene. DelConte calls it the ‘fourwall present tense narration’ (DelConte 434). He equates this type of narration with a ‘heterodiegetic present tense’ narration (DelConte 434). Delconte defines the fourwall present tense as a narrative that places the extradiegetic narratee (or reader) and the narrator on a different scale. Furthermore, he contrasts this narrative technique with the idea of an absentee narratee, by explaining that a fourwall present tense narrative draws the reader into the story, because it reduces the distance between the audience and the narrative world. In contrast, the fourwall present tense extends the difference between narrative world and ontological narratee. Similarly, DelConte states that ‘the narratee is reminded that he/she is unable to interact with those events.’ (DelConte 435)

The effect that follows from this technique is one of frustration. A sense of frustration is noticeable in chapter two of *Foe*. In this case, frustration arises out of the inability to communicate with *Foe*. For instance, Susan sends him letters but
does not receive any letter in return. Susan finds herself distanced from her 318arrate and because of Foe’s stubbornness; she is not able to interact with him. In contrast to Disgrace, chapters one, two and four are all devoid of a fourwall present tense narration. The narrator and 318arrate are therefore not cut off from the story and its characters. In the first chapter – which is an account of Susan’s arrival on the island – she can constantly interact with other characters. So there is no sense of separation whatsoever and Susan finds herself on the same ontological level as the other characters. Similarly, because this is an account produced for an external audience, the reader and the narrative are not separated and the spectator of this chapter is subject to the words and actions of the characters. On some occasions Susan informs the reader of some particular details: ‘this is the spade with which Cruso leveled his terraces (I shall have more to say of the terraces later…’(151) The purpose of this chapter consists of introducing the reader to Susan’s actions and her whereabouts.

The encounter between Susan and Foe in chapter three operates in a similar manner. The narrator or focalizer (Susan) is not separated from other characters. This leaves the reader implicated in the story, because there is no ‘fourth wall’ that bars the narrator or audience from the other characters, such as Friday and Foe. Therefore, chapter three does not evoke a feeling of frustration. Nevertheless, the final chapter foregrounds the use of a simultaneous present tense narration, which brings the reader closer to the events. However, this effect does not go hand in hand with a fourthwall technique, because there are no real characters in the final scene. As such, the narrator and audience cannot be seceded from the narrative world. Nevertheless, a sense of distance is created because Coetzee uses a narrator who stands outside of the story. In other words, the focalization through Susan Barton’s
eyes in the three preceding chapters, is replaced by a heterodiegetic narrator. The use of this narrator creates a sensation of confusion for the reader, because Coetzee provides no real indication of the narrator's identity.

**Present tense narration in WFB**

*Waiting for the Barbarians* narrates a painful and remarkable tale by the elderly magistrate. He narrates his own experience of being tortured; of his attempts to expiate the pain of one tortured woman, attempts that actually perpetuate her pain and oppression; of his humiliation by the forces of his Empire and his continued complicity with the Empire. The magistrate could occasionally judge his former self from his perspective at the time of narration, and part of the narrative tension for the reader would be the question of how the experiencing-I evolves into the narrating-I. Of course, Coetzee could still indicate that the narrator-I's understanding of himself and his situation is severely limited. Such a treatment of the narrative perspective would allow Coetzee, first, to use the magistrate's retrospection to highlight some of the thematic import of the narrative, especially concerning complicity, and, second, to involve the reader in seeing beyond the magistrate, building upon or even revising the narrator's conclusions. Coetzee, however, has the magistrate tell the story not retrospectively but 'simultaneously'. That is, the magistrate tells the story in the present tense—not the historical present after the fact, but the simultaneous present as events are happening. This narrative strategy, the homodiegetic simultaneous
present, places the reader in a very different relationship to the magistrate and to the events of his narrative than would any kind of retrospective account.

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. "They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun," he says. "You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look." He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. "No wrinkles." He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. 'At home everyone wears them." (1)

As the narrative progresses, Coetzee combines this effect of present tense narration with one of the magistrate's traits as a character-narrator to create a very powerful representation of the magistrate's dilemma—and to complicate the audience's positioning in relation to the magistrate. Coetzee creates the magistrate to be a reflective individual, but he puts the magistrate in a narrative situation that deprives him of the distance from his experience necessary for his reflection to make coherent sense of it. As a result, the magistrate's understanding comes in pieces and is always subject to revision. At the same time, the absence of any retrospective perspective places the authorial audience's prospective experience of the narrative very close to the magistrate's ongoing experience. This positioning has two very significant effects. First, just as the Magistrate's understanding comes provisionally and in pieces, so too does ours. Second, although our awareness of Coetzee behind
the Magistrate means that our understanding can exceed the Magistrate's, we frequently must struggle to attain the necessary distance from the Magistrate's views and actions. Our struggle to see beyond the magistrate becomes progressively greater because Coetzee makes the magistrate much more sympathetic than Colonel Joll, Mandel, and the other officials from the Third Bureau, and because Coetzee shows the magistrate being led by his powers of reflection to oppose these representatives of the Empire and to make some progress understanding the situation in which he lives and acts. Indeed, near the end of the narrative the magistrate reaches conclusions that have the appearance of a final truth, a place of understanding where he and the audience can rest.

Through the positioning provided by the present tense narration, Coetzee uses the authorial audience's reading experience up to and after this moment as a way to exemplify one of his major thematic points about complicity. This moment in the magistrate's understanding is so important because it is part of the development of the central instability of the narrative, his relation to his own complicity in the Empire's oppression of the barbarians, especially as that complicity is reflected in his treatment of the woman whom he takes into his apartment. When the magistrate first invites the woman into his rooms he does not understand his motives and frequently describes his puzzlement at what he is doing.

For the time being, perhaps forever, I am simply bewildered. It seems all one whether I lie down beside her and fall asleep or fold her in a sheet and bury her in the snow. (43)

But Coetzee asks us to see beyond that puzzlement and recognize that the magistrate's ritual washing of her body has a double significance. Especially in the
early stages when the washing is restricted to the woman’s broken feet, the ritual is the magistrate’s attempt to atone for the woman’s torture, and a tacit admission of the way his complicity with the Empire makes him responsible for what happened to her. Like Christ’s washing of the feet of his disciples, it is an act of humility and respect, something that arises out of his feeling for her pain and something that acknowledges her equality with him. At the same time, however, the magistrate’s actions continue her oppression, an oppression that becomes greater as he washes more of her body: the woman is with him by his command—he is the official of the Empire; she has no choice but to submit—she is the ‘barbarian’. Coetzee gives several signs that the magistrate is too close to his complicity with the Empire to recognize how his confused effort at expiation actually perpetuates her oppression. These signs include the magistrate’s shifting without comment from calling her “woman” to calling her “girl” as well as his protesting too much when he briefly thinks that he is trying to “move her” more than Joll did. “I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. No! No! No! I cry to myself. . . . I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!” (44).

Moreover, the very manner in which he carries out the expiation derives from the habits he has developed in his easy life as magistrate during times of peace. That easy life is filled with sensual pleasure; his drive toward that pleasure leads him to move beyond the washing of the woman’s feet toward the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure in his washing the rest of her body. She becomes an object for both his attempted expiation and attempted pleasure. The effort at atonement is corrupted by the magistrate’s complicity—and that very complicity prevents him from recognizing what he is doing.
Significantly, however, after the magistrate has himself been tortured by the forces of the Empire, he is forced to move further away from it, and as a result of this movement, he acquires a new understanding of his actions toward the woman, an understanding that Coetzee highlights by the length and occasional eloquence of its articulation:

From the first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart. If only she had found the words to tell me! "That is not how you do it," she should have said, stopping me in the act. "If you want to learn how to do it, ask your friend with the black eyes." Then she should have continued so as not to leave me without hope: "But if you want to love me you will have to turn your back on him and learn your lesson elsewhere." If she told me then, if I understood her, if I had been in a position to understand her, if I believed her, if I had been in a position to believe her, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation. For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. But I temporized, I looked around this obscure frontier, this little backwater with its dusty summers and its cartloads of apricots and its long siestas and its shiftless garrison and the waterbirds flying in and flying out year after year to and from the dazzling waveless sheet of the lake, and said to myself, "Be patient, one of these days he will go away, one of these days quiet will return: then our siestas will
grow longer and ours words rustier, the watchman will sneak down from his tower to spend the night with his wife, the mortar will crumble till lizards nest between the bricks and owls fly out of the belfry, and the line that marks the frontier on the maps of Empire will grow hazy and obscure till we are blessedly forgotten" Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth. (WFB 135-36)

This moment of insight is so powerful because in it the magistrate so clearly articulates the view of himself that Coetzee has asked his audience to adopt. Furthermore, in that articulation, the magistrate is fulfilling one aspect of our desire, a desire that develops out of several converging aspects of the reading experience.

As noted above, because our prospective reading experience is so close to the magistrate's moment-by-moment lived experience, we frequently must struggle to see beyond his limited vision. At the same time, our fundamental sympathy for the magistrate moves us to want his vision to be as clear and honest as possible. Once the magistrate's struggle to see clearly leads him to a place where his vision matches ours, we take a certain satisfaction in his achievement, even as we recognize that the truth he voices is a chilling one. Indeed, because we are always positioned so closely to the magistrate's developing consciousness, because we struggle to see beyond his vision, his articulation here is likely to advance our understanding of his situation: he expresses better than we could what we have been feeling.

Strikingly, however, Coetzee does not leave his audience with the satisfaction of fulfilled desire very long. And here we can see the consequences of the way the
tense positions us to make our understanding, like the magistrate's, provisional and partial. The magistrate's apparent breakthrough in understanding is not followed by significant changes in his behavior. Once he is freed from his exile, once the forces of the Empire flee the town after their unsuccessful campaign against the so-called barbarians, the magistrate steps back into the role he had before the arrival of Colonel Joll. "In all measures for our preservation I have taken the lead. No one has challenged me. My beard is trimmed, I wear clean clothes, I have in effect resumed the legal administration that was interrupted a year ago with the arrival of the Civil Guard" (145).

The precise nature of the magistrate's position relative to the Empire is not entirely clear, because the Empire's relation to the outpost is no longer clear. Mandel says that the forces will return in the spring, but there is also evidence that the Empire may be on its last legs (no merchant will take the coin of the Empire), that, indeed, we have been reading about the desperate actions of an Empire about to fall. The effect of this uncertainty is to shift our attention from the details of the political situation to the interior consciousness of the magistrate. And the manner in which he takes up his former role shows that he has maintained his complicitous consciousness. Once the magistrate reassumes his role, he returns to thinking of the woman as object. Once his sexual desire returns, he tries to "invoke images of the girl who night after night slept here with me. I see her standing barelegged in her shift, one foot in the basin, waiting for me to wash her, her hand pressing down on my shoulder . . . From the depths of that memory I reach out to touch myself" (149). That he is unable to arouse himself to orgasm does not alter the fact that he is once again objectifying the woman. His turning to Mai for sex is also a resumption of old
habits, his reassumption of his attitude of entitlement to sensual pleasure according to his desires.

Coetzee also uses the magistrate's interaction with Mai to underline his failure to follow through on his understanding about the woman. Mai tells him, "Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?"

Before defending himself to her, the magistrate tells us, "She is opening a door through which a wind of utter desolation blows upon me" (152). This glimpse of the woman's pain at his hands gives the magistrate pain—sorrow, emptiness, desolation—but he soon puts it aside and moves on. The force of our negative judgment becomes greater. But this account of the magistrate's falling back into his complicity is incomplete. It leaves out a significant countervailing force in the reading experience, something that works against our recognition of the meaning of the magistrate's movement. That force is our own sympathy with the magistrate, and our responses to his situation as the prisoner who is tortured and made an outcast among his own people. While he is being tortured, we share his pain; while he is an outcast, we cringe at his humiliation. And the present tense heightens the effect because it contains no promise of any change; as we read, we recognize that the magistrate's subjection to torture could become a permanent condition. When this sympathetic, reflective magistrate conveys his pleasure and satisfaction in resuming his place of consequence ("In all measures ... I have taken the lead"), we are inclined to share his satisfaction and, therefore, overlook or not fully register the perpetuation of his complicitous consciousness. In other words, we are inclined to be complicit with his complicity. Eventually, however, the evidence of that complicity becomes too great to ignore.
Nevertheless, even as the evidence of complicity mounts, another realization builds within us: in the magistrate's present situation, he cannot act otherwise. He can momentarily feel the woman's pain and his sorrow but he can no longer relate these feelings to his complicity with the Empire and its representative, Joll. To do that would mean that he could not return to his post without some misgivings about his possible relations to the Empire or its successor, and that he could not so automatically resume his pursuit of the easy, sensual life he had before Joll's arrival. He does not experience such misgivings or give up the pursuit of sensual pleasure because his complicity cannot be so easily escaped. Nevertheless, he does register a vague sense of self-division—he feels some things that he cannot fully articulate. The penultimate section of the narrative ends with him telling his audience: "I think: There has been something staring at me, and still I do not see it" (155). And the whole narrative ends with the sentence, "Like much else now a daysI leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses along on a road that may lead nowhere" (156).

These remarks actually serve a double function for the magistrate. While they show some awareness of his failing, some evidence that he cannot completely eradicate the experiences of the last year, they also allow him to maintain his complicity. Like a white professor who admits to his black students that he is racist in ways that he might not always recognize and then does nothing else about his racism, the magistrate admits that a problem exists, but that admission substitutes for any effort to face it or to solve it. Again, however, because the magistrate has been complicit with the Empire for so long, we must recognize that he is in too deep to do otherwise. The relation of Coetzee's audience to these developments is extremely complicated. As I have indicated, Coetzee asks us to have a two-fold
response to the magistrate’s behavior: to recognize that the magistrate’s inability to escape from his complicitous consciousness is a grim lesson about the power of complicity, something in the magistrate to be resisted rather than forgiven; and simultaneously to recognize that the magistrate, given who he is and how he has lived his life, cannot do anything else. Even more important, however, is that Coetzee asks us to turn the experience of our progressive relationship with the magistrate back upon ourselves. And here the present tense plays a crucial role. When the magistrate achieves his insight that he and Joll are two sides of Imperial rule, it is natural for us to believe that the intellectual knowledge of his complicity will translate into action to change that complicity. But the later experience of the narrative asks us to go back and recognize that, however natural, the expectation was also unfounded. Similarly, when the magistrate resumes his position of importance in the town, it is natural for us to share his satisfaction. But the accumulation of evidence of his complicity leads us to recognize our own complicity.

In the first case, the satisfaction of our desire to have the magistrate recognize his similarity to Joll seduces us into believing that once the magistrate articulates his complicity he will be able to escape it. Our seduction depends upon our underestimating the nature and power of complicity and the depth of the magistrate’s. The subsequent experience of the narrative emphasizes that complicity works without the conscious awareness of the complicit individual and that the magistrate’s whole adult life has been based on his complicity. If his moment of insight offers us the satisfaction of fulfilled desire, the subsequent events present us with the frustration of thwarted desire. But upon reflection, we can recognize that the frustration we feel is partly at our own blindness, the underestimating or perhaps even forgetting that made our seduction possible. In the second case, when we feel
some satisfaction in the magistrate's return to prominence, we have a very powerful experience of the insidious working of complicity: in feeling that satisfaction we unwittingly participate in the magistrate's complicity—but we do so from the best of motives, namely our sympathy and fellow feeling. Our double experience of complicity—in the events and in our activity of processing them—is, I believe, the most important effect that Coetzee's use of the present tense makes possible. It is above all the magistrate's own lack of perspective on his behavior and our immersion in that behavior as it happens that leads to our complicity. A retrospective narration with even a partially more enlightened magistrate would interfere with our experiencing that complicity.

Furthermore, given the magistrate's habits of reflection, he would have to become either more enlightened or more clearly deluded: in either case, we would move further away from the experiencing-I and all his halting, faltering steps. Our own halting and faltering would not occur as effectively as it does here. By the end of the narrative, we reach a complex judgment of the magistrate that combines resistance to his resumed complicity with an understanding of its inescapability. However, because this judgment is only part of our double experience of complicity, we move away from the effort to achieve a final, definitive evaluation of the magistrate's actions and toward the unsettling recognition of the power of complicity. Because complicity is so insidious, and because we see it and experience it in our reading of this narrative, we must be very wary of adopting any stance based on our moral superiority to others whom we might consider complicit in the perpetuation of racism, sexism, or other dehumanizing ideologies.
This wariness does not mean that we ought not make distinctions between, say, the Ku Klux Klan and the average white liberal academic; but it does mean that the average white liberal academic, rather than comforting himself with his moral superiority to members of the Klan, ought to examine his life for evidence of his complicity in the perpetuation of oppression and then do something about it. Coetzee's narrative insists—and our experience of it leads us to agree—that we all are complicit in some way or other. The narrative also insists that, despite the inescapability of complicity, we must seek to eradicate it and the oppression it perpetuates. To do anything else is, in effect, to be complicit with complicity.

Life and Times of Michael K

Life and Times of Michael K is not straightforward first-person interior monologue, nor is it an external third-person perspective, nor is it a dominating authorial voice speaking on behalf of the characters. Instead, we have a voice that seems to vibrate between a narrating and narrated consciousness: He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, he thought: the day after that they will wilt, and the day after that they will die, while I am out here in the mountains ... There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again. (LTMK 90)

The narrative switch between the first and third persons draws attention to the precariously balanced tension between the literary consciousnesses at work in the novel, where each seems to place the other on hold, in the instant that its own existence is supervenient upon the other.’ We frequently encounter sentences that
begin as statements about K’s mental world’, writes Attridge, ‘but which carry on in
language that hardly seems his’ (Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*,
50). Attridge cites the following passage from the novel: he wondered whether by
now, with his filthy clothes and his air of gaunt exhaustion, he would not be passed
over as a mere footloose vagrant from the depths of the country, too benighted to
know that one needed papers to be on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm.
(*LTMK*, 54 and then goes on to comment, ‘Rewriting this in the first person –“I
wonder whether by now, with my filthy clothes and my air of gaunt exhaustion . . . .” –
makes it instantly clear that this is not word for word representation of K’s thought’
(Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 50) – and this is despite the
insistence on the part of the narrative voice that it is K’s thought. I would argue that a
characteristic feature of the narration in *Life & Times of Michael K* is this relentless
switch in circuitry from the third to the first person, which gives a sense of flickering
states of consciousness: There was a flutter of bats under the eaves. He lay on his
bed listening to the noises on the night air, air denser than the air of day. Now I am
here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere. He went to sleep. (*LTMK* 71)

Passages like these, with their nervous oscillations between first and third
persons, narrated and narrating consciousnesses, provoke further difficult questions
about the nature of mental processes, and about the modes of representing them in
a work of fiction. No longer can syntactic patterns be assumed to be the carefully
plotted graph of rational and autonomous thought; I am reminded of a series of
recurrent metaphors throughout Coetzee’s reflections about this, perhaps most
especially when he is writing about Beckett. In some of these metaphors, the line of
controlled and ordered syntax reels in, as much as it is pulled off balance by, the
turbulent depths of consciousness:


**Textual Forms in the narration**

Coetzee repeatedly uses various text forms and consciously includes details that underline the indexical quality of the writing. He has used textual forms like journal entries, diaries, letters, travel writing. Travel writing, diaries and letters are recurring narrative modes in Coetzee’s writing and are supported by the perspective typical for quasi-authentic accounts: the first person singular. J. M. Coetzee has been preoccupied with questions of authenticity, truth and its inexistence in the singular form. As part of this preoccupation, his fiction also explores what might be called master plots and ideologies which themselves examine the existence of so-called truths as no more than artificial constructions. Authenticity is the apparent objective of a range of different textual genres (including autobiographies, diaries, chronicles and letters), the aim of which initially appears to be to communicate truthfulness. These narrative modes all demonstrate a clear inclination towards the sense of the factual to which they each allude, Diaries, Chronicles and Records as Index-Simulations much more overt than apparent official historical data in his writing, autobiographical accounts combine the verifiable side of historical experience with a seemingly truthful subjective perspective. They are all, to borrow H. Porter Abbott’s phrase, ‘purporting to give the truth of a real, not an invented, consciousness’ (Abbott 1984: 18). There is, for instance, the intricate travel writing in the second part of Dusklands which relates Jacobus Coetzee’s expeditions to the Hottentots and the Namaquas through the various contradictory voices of fictitious-disguised-as-real author, translator and editor. Through this, Coetzee lays bare ‘what
is chronicled, alleged or transmitted through the annals of South African history and the reality concealed behind the façade of that hectoring discourse’ (Collingwood-Whittick 1996: 76), suggesting that this is basically fabricated and unreliable histomythography. The second chapter is structured as an epistolary account, which implies that the narrative consists of a correspondence via letters, between two or more characters. This idea is already evident, when in the opening lines of this chapter Susan states: ‘in my letter yesterday I may have seemed to mock the art of writing.’ (Foe 52) In Romantic Correspondences, Mary Favret emphasizes the promiscuity of letters, the ‘looseness’ that ‘locks’ the writer and reader in ‘an intimacy’ (24). The very form of the letter, in its ability to reveal the most private and intimate thoughts and feelings of the writer and to let us in on the secrets of the writer as they develop, prompts identification. The power of the letter to elicit reader sympathy depends on an appearance of authenticity made up of the first person perspective without the intrusion of an external narrator. It depends, as well, on the voyeurism that makes the reader a unique confidant.

Incidentally, Eugene Dawn professionally pursues mythography as a legitimate and normal part of propaganda in the first part of Dusklands, remarking that ‘the myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers’ (24). Dawn’s understanding of this represents another version of the fictive history which is related by Jacobus Coetzee in his ‘narrative’ (63) about the journeys and the quasi-ethnographic statements about the indigenous tribes that he encounters. For him, it is scientific truth; but for the reader, these utterances dissolve in a jumble of unfounded voices. Additionally, Coetzee employs the diary style of writing perhaps most prominently in In the Heart of the Country where Magda tells her story, again written as a first-person account. Her entries are short paragraphs that are
chronologically enumerated, which serves to remind the reader of the chronological
dates that normally introduce each journal entry. Letters also feature throughout
Coetzee’s writing, including one in *Life and Times of Michael K* which is addressed
to Michael from his doctor to express his inability to understand the inner drive of his
former patient (149–52). Since the preceding and bigger part of the novel stays with
Michael K, this letter offers the reader another perspective on the same situation
and, as such, unveils the ultimately subjective basis of historical data.

History, more than any other scientific discipline, appears to constantly and
overtly occupy the border between fact and fiction, representing the differing and at
times opposing reference systems that play the role of indexical signs (*J. M. Coetzee
in Context and Theory* 178). However, the way that these signs are read is not
unilateral and there is not one single, unchallengeable master-plot. Historical ‘facts’,
one could say, are like manufactured wooden slips engraved with indecipherable
signs. Indeed, these slips appear in *Waiting for the Barbarians* where the Magistrate
understands them to be historical data from a lost society. The obscure pieces of
wood were found on one of several excavations that the Magistrate had supervised
in the previous year. The digging produced traces of a lost civilization with ‘faded
carvings of dolphins and waves’ (100) on these ‘relics of the ancient barbarians’
(112). The meaning of the signs carved into the slips is presented as fundamentally
 unintelligible. Demonstrating this, the Magistrate is forced to perform something of a
live deconstruction when ordered by Colonel Joll to unveil their meaning:

Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a
plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last
years of the Empire – the old Empire, I mean. (112) However, the Magistrate is not
interested in the signs’ meaning. Rather, his declared focus is on the engravings as indexical traces which refer to their absent-yet-existent producer(s). ‘I look at the lines of the characters written by a stranger long since dead’, says the Magistrate (110). His references to the literal unearthing of the physical traces have a bearing on this insight. Both the pale animal carvings and the inscriptions in the wood function as verification of an absent physical presence. Dig at random, he recommends, to prove his assumption that the whole terrain consists of nothing but ‘barbarian burial sites’: ‘perhaps at the very spot where you stand you will come upon scraps, shards, reminders of the dead’ (112). Dramaturgically, these slips must be seen in relation to the Magistrate’s desire to write his autobiography. However, he keeps delaying his beginning, suggesting that his life story will in fact never be written. The connection between the slips and the Magistrate’s unformed autobiography suggest that history is largely a cultural product. ‘Empire has created the time of history’ (133). The Magistrate puts himself in the context of the wooden slips and thus of the absent eye witnesses of the barbarian civilization.

He imagines himself dying there, drying up, being shriveled by the sun, ‘and not being found until in some distant era of peace the children of the oasis come back to their playground and find the skeleton, uncovered by the wind, of an archaic desert-dweller clad in unidentifiable rags’ (100). Justas the inscriptions on the walls and on the wooden slips verify a producer ‘long since dead’, the bony leftovers of the Magistrate would not signify except as proof of his existence. He concludes that any attempt at ‘putting down a record’ (154) in writing would only contribute to the limited ideology of imperialism.
The Magistrate does not want to write ‘a memorial’ (155): I think: ‘I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for Diaries, Chronicles, Records as Index-Simulations, the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them.’ (154) Instead, the Magistrate turns to oiling the slips in order that they might be buried where he found them so that others could discover them for themselves some day. The example of the Magistrate illustrates the thin line that exists between writing history and writing (auto) biography, and between historiography and mythography. These two variants are introduced as early as Dusklands, where both sections that form Coetzee’s first fictional text represent one of the two.

**Dusklands**

In *Dusklands*, the first and most important complexity in ‘The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ is the narrative technique. J M Coetzee’s immediate aim is to establish a historic provenance for his attempt to chart Afrikaner identity, and to do this he links the narrative through his choice of narrative method with the classic early attempt to analyse European identity through Europe’s imperial relationship with Africa - Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The notoriously complex narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* includes two formal narrators, one of whom does little more than to mediate the main narrative to one of the book’s two formal audiences, while the central narrator himself is in danger of splitting in two; this account does not include the authorial presence.

‘The Vietnam Project’ is divided into five sections, four of which appear to be diary entries recounting events in the life of Eugene Dawn. In the opening section,
Dawn recounts all of his paranoia: his supervisor—Coetzee does not like his writing style, he suspects his wife, Marilyn is having an affair; he loathes and feels trapped in his body. The second section, written in bureaucratic jargon with sub-headings and references, contains Dawn’s report for the ‘New Life Project’, a propaganda plan that he is preparing for the Department of Defense. An expert in mythography, Dawn argues that the United States should concentrate on forming a counter-myth to the current Vietnamese myth of the sons. In the traditional Vietnamese myth, the sons rebel, mutilate the father, and fertilize the earth with the “father’s rain” (25). In Dawn’s application of the myth to Vietnam, the sons are the brotherhood of earth-tillers who want to take the land for themselves by overthrowing the sky-god (U.S. bombers); the earth-mother conceals the sons from the thunderbolts of the father; at night while he sleeps, the sons unman him. Dawn must revise the traditional myth because it makes the father vulnerable. His point of attack is against the idea that the earth-mother and sky-father live in symbiosis, and that neither can exist alone. His solution is to dispose the earth-mother by means of what he terms “meta-historical consciousness” (26). After turning this report in, Dawn is convinced that J.M.Coetzee is avoiding him, and he is troubled with bad dreams. Attempting to grasp reality, he runs away with his son, Martin, to a motel in the mountains. When Marilyn and the police come to reclaim the child, Dawn, in his sense of dissociation, stabs Martin. In the final section of the novella, Dawn writes from a psychiatric hospital in which the doctors are analyzing his childhood and attempting to discover what made him perform such an atrocious act.

‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ has five sections, four of personal recollection and one official document. Dawn’s story has numerical divisions; Jacobus gives his sections different narrative titles. In addition, the second half of
Dusklands is accompanied by a framing device, a preface by a presumed translator, J.M. Coetzee, and an afterword by a South African academic historian, S.J. Coetzee. This framing device directs our attention to the ongoing propagation of the Afrikaner master myth of history. An eighteenth-century Dutch explorer and hunter, Jacobus Coetzee, opens his narrative with a discourse on the Bushmen and then describes his “Journey Beyond the Great River,” accompanied by his six Hottentot servants. His “Sojourn in the land of the Great Namaqua” occurs when he becomes ill and delirious with a fever and finds himself being taken to a Nama village and nursed in a menstruation hut. While recovering, he is bathing in the river when a group of small boys steal his clothes and begin to mock him. Furious, he falls upon them and in the ensuing fray bites the ear off a boy. The Nama physically punish him and then expel him from the village for this savage act of mutilating a child. Accompanied by his faithful servant Klawer, who dies during the journey, Jacobus makes his way back to civilization, only to return with a small armed force to avenge himself on the people who had humiliated him. The final section of his personal narrative, “Second journey to the land of the Great Namaqua,” unrelentingly details his cruel punishment. A final account of the first journey appears in the Appendix, which contains the deposition of Jacobus Coetzee, taken down in 1760 at the Castle of Good Hope to serve as the official governmental report. This deposition tells an entirely different personal account, detailing the days of travel, the various natural resources found in the country, and several peaceful encounters with the Nama.

There are no fewer than five narrators, spanning the continuum from full to empty. In order of appearance, they are: first, the writer of the Translator's Preface which opens the book and stands immediately before the main action (he is called J M Coetzee and he is the son of Dr S J Coetzee); second, the narrator of the main
action, Jacobus Coetzee, Janszoon; third, the "late Dr S J Coetzee", an academic historian responsible for the Afterword (the Introduction in previous editions, until his son’s editorial intervention); fourth, "the burgher Jacobus Coetse, Janszoon" who gives an account to an official of the Dutch East India Company at the Castle in Cape Town of a journey he has undertaken in the land of the Great Namaquas (the same person as the other Jacobus Coetzee, and the same journey - but irreconcilably different); and, fifth, the pervasive but absent director of the scenario, with whom we never come face to face but inside whose skin we, the audience, may be said to live—someone also called J M Coetzee. (One could also argue narratorial status for the Company official who transcribes Jacobus Coetse's Deposition, and perhaps should). The usual purpose of the fractured narrative technique employed by Coetzee is to intensify the validity of narrative content by appearing to subvert it. In Coetzee’s The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee the aim is full reliability, to be achieved through the subversion of accepted standards of reliability, which is achieved by splitting the narrative into five.

He suggests the unreliability of any one part of the text unless it is read together with all available narrative viewpoints. For example, the reader may choose to "believe" or not to "believe" Jacobus Coetzee’s version of events as he relates it in The Narrative. But his (the reader's) attitude is invariably modified by his encounter with the Afterword (Dr S J Coetzee), and again dramatically affected by reading the "official" narrative (the Deposition) of Jacobus Coetse. And he must know that his reception of the central tale would have been different had the Afterword stood first (as he is told it originally did) in the form of an Introduction. In other words, Jacobus Coetzee's story alone is radically unreliable, though it may strike the reader as being entirely credible. When the reader includes all the other available narrative evidence,
a new text emerges, and is entirely reliable because of its inclusiveness. The problem then lies in the extreme complexity of this 'reliable text'.

The narrative point of view is that of the frontiersman; the tone of the rhetoric—its straightforwardness, matter-of-factness, lack of elevation or particular emphasis—all combine to produce the impression that narrator-Jacobus is very close both to the matter he is explaining and to his audience. There is no gap between teller and tale, no irony, no sense of hidden perspective, no uncertainty over meaning, no ambiguity. The narrator is “full” both in relation to the content of his story and in terms of his audience, with whom he appears to be perfectly at ease - in a word, continuous. Of course, Jacobus Coetzee elaborates on the above simple statement, and the effect is one of surplus fullness - the material from which myths are made. “She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her, she has seen them shot down like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away”. (61)

The two most notable narrative acts in the book, apart from Jacobus Coetzee's Narrative, are those performed by the Translator (J M Coetzee, son of Dr S J Coetzee) and S J Coetzee "himself". In the Afterword, Dr S J Coetzee writes: “To understand the life of this obscure farmer requires a positive act of the imagination”. (P 109)

The sentence, in its structure (inverse, indirect), its vocabulary (demanding, abstract) and its tone (appealing, anxious) conveys imprecision and uncertainty. Its relationship with its audience is based on the likelihood of misunderstanding, loss of interest, breakdown. It raises doubts without offering rewards. It acknowledges lack of continuity between narrator and audience in its exhortation to the audience to
“act”. Thus the narrative of Dr S J Coetzee, the scientific historian whose apparent task is to provide a reliable reading to the text of the past, turns out to be empty, relative to the segment of the text it is intended to explain, in a slightly different sense, to “fill”.

In the Translator's Preface, the narrator, the translator “J M Coetzee”, is virtually absent. The tone is utterly self-effacing, though the one positive assertion, qualified as it is by a vocabulary of politeness, actually has a major influence on the ultimate status of the text in terms of reliability: "... which I have taken the liberty of placing after the text in the form an Afterword", (55)

"The mixture of diffidence and power marks the relationship between the translator, J M Coetzee, and his audience with suspicion and resentment. He does not even invite a spurious effort towards continuity, as S J Coetzee does through in invocation of Afrikaner myth and sarcastic attacks on British counter-myth. So we see that lack of "fullness" cannot be confused with lack of power. By presenting his series of Coetzee-narrators, each with his particular degree of "fullness" and influence on the reliability of the text, the author creates an identity possessing considerable duration and variation in time. Behind the varied Coetzee identities - ruffian adventurer, tormented explorer, chauvinistic historian, and passionless, pedantic translator-editor - lies a unified but very complex statement of Afrikaner identity.

**Life & Times of Michael K.**

*Life & Times of Michael K.* (1983) consists of three parts. In the parts 1 and 3 the story is told by an omniscient narrator in style indirect libre. The metafictional element is introduced in part 2, which presents the medical Officer’s first person
reflection on the meaning of K’s story. The first part describes the journey undertaken by the protagonist Michael K. He is spurred on by his sick mother to take her to the house she grew up in in Prince Albert, somewhere in the countryside. Their country, South Africa, is in the middle of a civil war and they lack the necessary documents to leave Cape Town, their home. Early on during their trip, she dies and leaves him without a home or real purpose. He travels on, not knowing where to and, probably because of the suggestion he is coloured (or so it is suggested) and travelling without permission, he is put in several “working camps”. Michael seems to go wherever he is told to go without any struggle and at the same time wants to find a place where he can live alone with nature. He desires a life outside of society and does not feel he has a part in the war or any other activity brought on by his country’s history.

The second part is narrated in the first person by a doctor of one of the camps Michael has been taken to. He is fascinated by this particular patient, who spends most of his stay in his sickbed due to severe undernourishment, and he tries to understand why his patient refuses to eat and why he refrains from conversing with anybody. He constructs his own version of Michael and his narrative ends with a long letter imploring him to show him his way of life, as though Michael were some kind of messianic figure. The third part describes Michael’s return to Cape Town, finding it in ruins, rethinking his journey and planning a new one.

**Foe**

Postmodern novels resist a so called ‘master narrative’ (Hutcheon, 5). *Foe* is a good example of this concept, because it tends to resist an all-encompassing narrative. It celebrates the potential of first-person narrative to provoke fellow feeling.
In this respect, it consists of four parts which all have different properties, whether it be the narrator, the narratee or the characters. Lidan Lin indicates this in the following quote: this insistence is evident in the manner in which Coetzee structures *Foe*. First, unlike Coetzee's other novels, which invariably contain a single narrative, the novelistic space of *Foe* is occupied not only by a narrative (Parts I and II) but by a metanarrative (Part III) which serves as a commentary on the production of the former. *Foe* is a rather fragmented novel, because it is structured as a narrative with four different parts. The first Part is structured as a 'travelogue', in which Susan acts as a homodiegetic narrator. The story is continually focalized through her viewpoint, as she tells the story of her arrival on the island, and her relationship with Friday and Cruso. Furthermore, this chapter has an oral quality to it and it is written in the first person. As a result, it seems to be written directly for the audience, who acts as the receiver of the story. (VanZanten Gallagher, *A story of South Africa*, 186-187)

The whole second Part is written in the epistolary mode. The narrative subsequently takes the form of a dated correspondence in which the first part of the novel has been enclosed. Again the narrative is focalized through Susan's eyes. We could define it as a stream of consciousness of Susan's thoughts. She wants Foe to know her every little thought, by sending him a letter. In this correspondence, it becomes clear that Susan has enlisted Foe, the author, to help her reconcile her own desire with that of her readers and write the ‘true’ and lively—in other words saleable—story of her time on the island. Therefore, the primary addressee of this chapter is Foe, while the reader is only the secondary addressee. However, Foe does not return her letters, so in this chapter there is no real form of dialogue. Only on some occasions does Susan drop out of this epistolary form, for example, when she is talking to the captain at the harbor or to the little girl who calls herself Susan.
Barton. There is little dialogue because of the form in which Susan writes her story and because she spends most of her time with Friday, who is of course mute and therefore cannot speak with her. This part of the novel utilizes epistolary technique to elicit identification and sympathy from her addressee, Foe, and move him to the completion of her story. As she relates her own efforts to write this story, she laments that her first attempt ‘is a sorry, limping affair,’ ‘the next day,’ its refrain goes, ‘the next day … the next day’ (Coetzee 1986: 47).

This is different in part three, because Susan is able to establish a dialogue with Foe. It dispenses with the epistles but in straightforward first person past tense narrative happens in Foe’s refuge, which Barton has finally succeeded in finding. Here Susan engages in continual dialogue with Foe. This part is elevated by philosophical dialogue much of it is centered on Friday and ends with Foe and Barton sleeping together and Friday begins to learn how to write at Foe’s insistence. She does this in order to negotiate with Foe the subject of her story. Moreover, just as in the beginning of the novel, she does not direct her story to a particular character, as only the reader serves as the audience in this part.

In the final part, the narrator (who speaks in the first person) stands outside of the story. In other words, Coetzee uses a heterodiegetic narrator to tell his story. In this respect, there is some confusion in the ultimate chapter, because the reader does not know if the story is narrated by Susan Barton or another narrator. Only the last page of the novel reveals that it is not Susan Barton who is speaking but a neutral, omniscient narrator:

Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands,
puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float like stars against the low roof. I crawl beneath them (Foe 157).

As a result, this part has a more realistic feel to it, because as Waugh states:

realism, ... paradoxically functions by suppressing this dialogue. The conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant voice of the omniscient, godlike author. (Waugh, Metafiction 6)

Coetzee introduces a new anonymous narrator who enters Foe’s house and finds the beginnings of Susan’s story, the novel’s opening lines. In two brief episodes that partially mirror one another, an anonymous narrator undertakes the challenge of discovering the truth of the silent Friday, a truth unrevealed in the rest of the novel. The first takes place solely in Foe’s chambers, while the second moves on from there to a submarine landscape in which the narrator explores the dark mass of a wreck containing Friday’s body: both episode end with the opening of Friday’s mouth, from which “issue the sounds of the island” (154) which are the aspects of askance for the inquiring narrator. Readily, the narrator slips into Susan’s story, diving into the wreck that is both the hull of the sunken ship and an emblem of the narrative itself. There, swimming amidst the bloated bodies of Susan and Foe, the consummate images of discarded authority, the narrator finds the still living Friday in his worldless home, and he attempts to open his mouth. His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption.....soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face (157).

In these final moments of the narrative, Coetzee positions a new narrative voice and, in displacing that of Susan, as well as those of Cruso and Friday, he
dissolves all previously established authorities. In its place, he offers a substance and a silence. Though wordless, Friday’s presence is a potent force. Within this resounding silence, Friday figures both representation and resistance. Foe involves itself in the figuration of the mechanism of subjection as they get manifested in racial, sexual, and textual power relations inscribed with not only representation and resistance but also history and heresy. Silence too readily reckons a property of Friday’s characterization.

The ending of the novel leaves a quandary combining the themes of narrative art and colonialism. At one point Barton asks herself, if Friday “was not a slave, as he nevertheless not the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told?” (150) Foe answers “It is not possible that some of us are not written…..or else (just like Friday) are written by another and darker author” (143).

As a result, the appearance of a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator differentiates this part from all other parts: there is no real dialogue in realistic fiction and no voices are in conflict. There is only one narrator, and no other character to whom he/she speaks. The story is therefore not mediated through another instance, narrator or character. By integrating such a narrator, Coetzee adds an ‘elusive’ aspect to this novel, which contributes to the ambiguous ending of the final chapter.

Furthermore, (Foe’s fragmentary nature which is apparent in the way Coetzee structures his narrators, spatial and temporal structure reflects the primary concern of Coetzee's writing in the 1980’s, namely its preoccupation with the authority of the storyteller. (VanZanten Gallagher 192) Especially the third and final chapter exemplify this position, because Susan wants to establish her authorship over Foe. And she wants her story to be told according to her ‘truth’ and her values. In the end, the use
of a heterodiegetic narrator highlights the novel's elusive conclusion and leaves doubts about who has the authority over the novel's conclusion.

Foe features three different types of writing which all belong to the wider field of historiography. Susan, returning from an adventurous episode, feels compelled to set down what happened to her, and ventures into the genre of travel writing. In her attempts to fulfill this desire, Susan also approaches the writing of a diary: her travel writing appears as retrospective journal entries which combine descriptions of her present situation with island memories. Each diary passage is clearly announced by a specific date which acts as an index and a marker of seeming truthfulness. However, these apparent diary entries are actually letters to Mr. Foe, thereby employed to translate this information into a book. However, as the distinguished author has disappeared, the diary-letters are in fact written ‘into’ his absence. Normally, as Lejeune remarks, ‘the signature designates the enunciator, as the address does the addressee’ (Lejeune 11). However, if one’s address serves as an index that refers back to oneself, Foe’s absence is made all the more evident since Susan has taken over his lodgings in his absence, thus filling an other’s indexical sign with new content.

After returning from the island, Susan Barton sets out to have an account written about her time as a shipwreck survivor. However, she soon discovers that there is an insurmountable gap between her own memory of this time and the version that is envisioned by Mr. Foe, the author she has elected to put her experiences down in words. More than that, Susan has to acknowledge that she has no proof of having lived on the island and has no indexical sign of her time there, except Friday who, bereft of his tongue, can tell neither her nor his own story:
I brought back not a feather, not a thimbleful of sand, from Crusoe’s island. All I have is my sandals. When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. (Coetzee 1987: 51)

Words alone, Susan realizes, are not sufficient: she might be the sum total of her past experiences; but she has no way to verify the events and non-events of her time on the island without Cruso. While still marooned, Susan begged Cruso to fashion some kind of ink and paper to ‘set down what traces remain of these memories, so that they will outlive you; or, failing paper and ink, to burn the story upon wood, or engrave it upon rock’ (17), but is, however, rebuffed. Indeed, back in London and lacking any indexical sign, Susan desires the proof which can authenticate her memories and turn her into something substantial:

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 the truth . . ..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 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. (51–2)

Susan’s conviction that a sense of authenticity is gained and verified through touchable objects, objects of substance, or ‘excarnations’ (Assmann 1993: 133–55) is clearly communicated through this passage.
J.M. Coetzee has balanced between conventional and non-conventional styles of narration. He mostly puts a character in front of the reader to tell the story and thus creates a cordial connection with the reader. He picks up the mode of narration where he can remain behind the curtain—just like the operator of puppetry—letting his character speak his words and not interfering them much with 'I'.