

# Chapter 9

## Framing the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

*Gabriel Serbu*

University of Rijeka, Croatia.

floring.serbu@uniri.hr

ORCID: 0000-0003-3481-8639

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c412>

### Abstract

One central theme running through the “western” tradition is the tension between *self* and *other*, or between *sameness* and *difference*. This tension seems to have intensified today under the pressure of a growing resistance to the homogenizing logic of globalization in its various manifestations. The urgency to enter in a different rapport with the other — whether human or non-human — has indeed become not only a political requirement but an ethical imperative. There is a dominant tendency in the language of contemporary literary criticism to respond to such challenge by praising literature’s vocation to radically disrupt and undermine the established forms of discourse. On this view, the literary is given a privileged role in representing alterity. While mainly drawing on the “post-critical turn” in literary studies, my aim in this essay is to draw attention to the limitations of such a view by reflecting on the literary fortune of one of J. M. Coetzee’s early novels, *Life and Times of Michael K*. By mimicking the very language of criticism that tends to frame the other according to a grandiose rhetoric of subversion, the novel seems to cast suspicion on the transformative potential of literature.

### Keywords

postcritique; literary theory; representation; interpretation; otherness/alterity; novelistic discourse.

Our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. [...] Only part of the truth, such a reading asserts, resides in what writing says of the hitherto unsaid; for the rest, its truth lies in what it dare not say for the sake of its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself: in its silences. It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn.

J. M. Coetzee (1988b: 81)

## Introduction

Leading left-leaning intellectuals tend to agree that the underlying cause for today's crises is the rampant expansion of transnational capitalism. And there is little to do about it as long as we remain trapped within an "end-of-history" vision of the world supported by the supposedly objective laws of the global market and ideologically reinforced by "universal" liberal values<sup>1</sup>. What seems to be at stake is not merely a question of better policy-making or sustainable development within the same paradigm, but rather a need to redefine the terms of the debate, which is fundamentally a philosophical problem and a matter of interpretation<sup>2</sup>. Amid the unprecedented migration crisis and impending environmental collapse, one major issue in this debate is how "we" are supposed to define ourselves in relation to the human/non-human other. This points once again to a notorious impasse haunting the western tradition: that of *representing alterity*. The conventional take on the matter, at least in the academia, is that the task of thinking today is to find ways to break free from the interpretative paradigms underpinning a Eurocentric, hegemonic worldview.

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1 McKenzie Wark (2016) draws a fitting description of the "current conjuncture": «The capitalist west no longer confronts *two* socialist camps, one sprung from the colonized world. Rather, I take the defining feature of the conjuncture to be a now-globally victorious regime of commodified production to be confronting the limits imposed by its own destabilizing of the metabolic processes of the planet itself». The urge to adapt at any cost to such a vision of the world is effectively illustrated by Barbara Stiegler in her *Il faut s'adapter* (2018). On the metaphysical paradigm legitimizing western democracies see also Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala (2011).

2 «Perhaps the time has come, after the deconstruction of metaphysics, to rephrase Marx's statement in order to emphasize how 'the philosophers have only described the world in various ways; the moment now has arrived to interpret it'» (Vattimo and Zabala 2011: 5).

## Literature as Literature or the “Theological” Vein of Literature

In this context, literature occupies a privileged position, as it operates within the realm of language, where the “other” is encountered and where the possibilities and limits of interpretation are being tested<sup>3</sup>. But is literature powerful enough to interfere with the dominant discourse so as to have an impact on the dynamics of representation? And if so, does its strength reside in its commitment to a political program or, by contrast, in its radical disruption of any programmatic intent? Or is literature, perhaps, merely a reflection of the current ideology devoid of any emancipatory function?

These are important questions that exceed the scope and ambition of this chapter. However, it is worth stressing the sense of urgency these issues have acquired. Gisèle Sapiro, a sociologist of literature, has recently raised the problem of the function of literature in relation to the “old” impasse of representation, particularly in the context of the MeToo and Black Lives Matters movements. She observes that while literature is indeed linked to «different modes of social existence», it must be understood beyond the opposition between mere sociological reductionism and singular creative acts<sup>4</sup>. In a similar though more nuanced vein, Rita Felski, the proponent of the “post-critical turn” in literary theory, distinguishes between two styles of reading literature: the “ideological” and the “theological”. By “ideological”, Felski means that either is literature inescapably the product of the dominant ideology and thus forever blind to its own *raison d'être* or plays an important but merely auxiliary role in promoting some emancipatory ideology. Hence literature can either obscure or accentuate social antagonisms.

By “theological”, Felski refers to those critics who value “literature as literature”, focusing on literature’s enigmatic yet radical and transformative potential. On this view, the literary act is framed within a rhetoric of subversion, as a heroic incursion into the unknown, that may produce political effects but only at a deeper, more essential level (Felski 2008).

In this chapter, my aim is to examine what I consider to be an exemplary instance in “framing the other” in the language of contemporary literary criticism in connection with the two interdependent problematics outlined above: the ethical-political demand to rethink our relation with the other and the view of literature as a “privileged” medium of representing alterity in the realm of aesthetics. The author I have in mind is John Maxwell Coetzee, one of the most authoritative voices in contemporary world literature. His work is especially

3 On the historical limitations of linguistic creativity see Donatella Di Cesare’s introduction to Eugenio Coseriu (Di Cesare: 2010: 16).

4 See the preface and the introduction to *The Sociology of Literature* (Sapiro 2023).

relevant here, as it has long been regarded as a «strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity» (Attridge 2004: 12) that allows for «the discontinuities in the ethical and the epistemological and political fields [to be] tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction» (Spivak 2002: 18).

My purpose is to draw attention to a tendency towards a “theological style of reading” that seems to characterize, in various guises, much of Coetzee scholarship. To this purpose, I take *Life and Times of Michael K* ([1983] 2004; hereafter cited in text as *MK*) to be of particular interest, as it is the only novel where, through a play of focalization, Coetzee dramatizes the role of the critic/interpreter in his/her encounter with otherness (Chesney 2007: 317-318). I will suggest that this encounter can be read in terms of an operation of “framing”, in the Heideggerian sense of “im-position” or *Ge-Stell*<sup>5</sup> — meaning that both Michael K (the main character in the book representing the figure of alterity) and *MK* (the novel itself representing the “literary” as the *other* of normal/dominant discourse) are obsessively mined for meaning. As I will try to show, the *de rigueur* reaction to this operation in the language of criticism has, paradoxically, been to frame the other as unframeable, or, as one influential critic put it, to contend that in *MK* «‘meaninglessness’ [...] itself bears meaning» (Poyner 2009: 72)<sup>6</sup>.

Before getting to the novel itself, let me briefly provide some context. While each of Coetzee’s novels displays a unique blend of innovative narrative style and profound theoretical awareness, there is one fundamental conflict being staged throughout his works: the (mis)encounter between the liberal conscience<sup>7</sup> and a figure of otherness that radically disrupts the protagonist’s (and, supposedly, the reader/critic’s) interpretive framework. A straightforward reading would place this (mis)encounter within the tradition of a critique of the liberal humanist subject (i.e., typically the focalizing consciousness) and, by implication, of the liberal humanist discourse (i.e., the language of representation). If, however, one is to understand such critique in the double sense of the genitive

5 Heidegger refers to the “framed” existence of man within the era of technology and science, where everything is calculated and measured, controlled. What interests me here is the hermeneutic violence of the framing process, which Heidegger identified as the “essence” of western thinking (Heidegger 2003).

6 To be clear, my only purpose here is to identify a pattern in the readings of the novel that follow, and not to invalidate them.

7 A very accurate description of the “liberal humanist” that tends to be the focalizing consciousness in all Coetzee’s novels is provided by Teresa Dovey: «The sentiments and attitudes the Magistrate is made to express represent a traditional liberal humanist position, and may be summarised as: belief in the power and efficacy of the judiciary system; belief in ‘civilisation’ and the continual progress of humankind; an abhorrence of violence, accompanied by an attitude of tolerance and rationality; a capacity for fairly ruthless self-scrutiny and a sense of guilt that can be incapacitating; and, more significant than all of these, a belief in individual autonomy and freedom of choice. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, all of these attitudes are shown to be ineffectual in relation to the kind of power vested in the figure of Colonel Joll» (Dovey 1996: 142).

(where the discourse of critique also necessarily belongs to the “western” subject), it becomes apparent that such modes of critique, including the “literary”, are securely inscribed within the scope of the liberal humanist subjectivity and, by implication, its language of representation.

This impasse is further complicated by Coetzee’s peculiar role as a dissenting white intellectual living in South Africa during apartheid and its aftermath. As Teresa Dovey explains, Coetzee’s fiction is situated at the intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism — that is, between the necessity to undermine the colonial discourses that historically represented the other and the risk of creating yet another Western narrative that would appropriate marginalized voices<sup>8</sup>. It is this deep-rooted anxiety<sup>9</sup> that has proved to be the most enduring source of inspiration for much of Coetzee scholarship. Needless to say, Coetzee himself encouraged this prevalent critical orientation, once remarking polemically that the literary must be in a relation of *rivalry*, rather than *supplementarity*, to History, in an early interview (Coetzee 1988a) — by which he meant, in so many words, that the writer’s responsibility is to his/her writing rather than to the (merely) political (Attwell 1990). Thus, paradoxically, the revolutionary gesture *par excellence* is essentially apolitical.

## Framing the Unframeable: Reading *Michael K*/Michael K

In the context of *MK*’s reception at the time of its publication in 1983, this kind of somewhat disengaged “postmodern sensibility” did not sit well with the more politically engaged commentators<sup>10</sup>. The most famous of whom, Coetzee’s fellow South African novelist and Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, in reviewing the book, deplored the fact that «Coetzee’s heroes are those who ignore history, not make it» (Gordimer 1984: 6). Gordimer’s remark encapsulates the central tension dividing *MK*’s critical reception<sup>11</sup> and, more broadly, the reception of Coetzee’s oeuvre during apartheid South Africa, the bone of contention being the nature of the novelist’s commitment under the pressure of oppressive historical forces. Yet, as many commentators have since observed (Attwell 1990), “political” criticisms such as Gordimer’s are anticipated and defused in *MK* through the complex use of narrative voice, which resists

8 Dovey (1996) associates postmodernism with a crisis of representation and postcolonialism with the interpretation of history.

9 According to Michael Marais, Coetzee’s literature is symptomatic of what he calls the “ontogenetic anxiety” of an intellectual who finds it almost impossible to negotiate between the obligation to protest against an unbearable historical legacy and the autonomy of artistic expression (Marais 2006: 83-98).

10 See, for example, Benita Parry (1996).

11 In simplified terms, the novel was either criticized for not addressing in a more direct way pressing political issues or praised for safeguarding the autonomy of the creative act, as itself a radical form of political engagement. I will further develop this point as I go along.

straightforward allegorical readings. This is most explicitly realized in the second section of the book where the sudden irruption of a first-person voice is meant to mimic “our” voice — that of the reader/interpreter, who is at once self-consciously implicated in and suspicious of allegorizing discourse, whether alluding to concrete historical events or leading to more abstract reflections on the human condition<sup>12</sup>.

In the first and third sections of the book, we follow the journey of Michael K — the typically Coetzeean figure of otherness, this time in the guise of an unemployed gardener from Cape Town, a forty-year-old “colored male” with a speech impediment from a congenital cleft lip<sup>13</sup> — through a fictitious civil war-stricken South Africa set in an unspecified future. In the second section, the third-person narrator disappears and we find ourselves immersed in first-person mode, inhabiting the voice of an unnamed medical officer who is in charge of the hospital ward in the rehabilitation camp where Michael K is both a patient and a prisoner.

In this section, we witness a sort of spiritual journey initiated by the medical officer’s encounter with the other. In a first phase, the medical officer asserts his allegiance to liberal values by prioritizing his moral autonomy over the authority of the totalitarian state, represented by major Noël: «His [Noël’s] responsibility is to his programme [...], mine to my patients» (*MK*, 131). During the interrogation scene, where Michael K is questioned about his suspected involvement with the insurgents (137-142), the medical officer insists that Michael K tell his own story so that he can be recognized as an autonomous *subject*, and not as an individual *subjected* to the coercive narrative of the state: «What is your stake in the future?», «Tell your story!», «Give yourself some substance, man!» (140).

However, the medical officer’s desperate attempts to make Michael K «yield» his truth (152) and «co-operate» (145) are invariably met with «a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears» (140). Moreover, Michael K’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue is accompanied by graphic descriptions of Michael K’s congenitally distorted mouth: «He moistened his lips with his lizard tongue»; «he licked at the lip cleft» and finally «he closed his mouth obstinately, the mouth that would never wholly shut» (139). Michael K’s distorted mouth is

12 See Attridge’s “Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*” (published as chap. 2 in Attridge 2004: 32-64).

13 These details are important because they set Coetzee’s character apart from Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, of whom we know almost nothing, neither his circumstances nor his physical appearance. It is precisely this featureless appearance, coupled with his unsettling “I prefer not to” formula, that truly makes *Bartleby* a “man without qualities”. A figure of alterity that lends itself so easily to grand allegorical readings. Think, for instance, of Gilles Deleuze’s *homo tantum* (1998), Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer* (1998), Slavoj Žižek’s *Bartleby* as a radical political figure (2006), or, finally, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s view of *Bartleby* as not political enough (2000). On the difference between Michael K and *Bartleby*, see Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens (2007: 167).

therefore not only the marker of his otherness but also the symbol of his resistance. His silence is disruptive without being explicitly oppositional.

In the context of a critique of the liberal conscience, this aspect is revealing (if only speculatively) given that, as is well known, the word Immanuel Kant uses to epitomize the peak of human emancipation he both incites and predicts is *Mündigkeit*, or maturity — note that, in German, *Mund* means “mouth”<sup>14</sup>. Now, if we follow the etymological trail of the German word, we will find an intimate connection between linguistic competence and the literal age of maturity, marking the time when a person is considered to be a responsible human being capable indeed to speak for herself — something Michael K fails to do. This reading gains further plausibility if we think that the *other* of the “citizen subject”<sup>15</sup> is the *barbarian*, who by definition is either unable to speak or speaks unintelligibly<sup>16</sup>. And the same goes for another figure of immaturity, the *infant* — literally someone who is «not able to speak»<sup>17</sup>.

The point is straightforward: the encounter with the other is tacitly guided by a logic of agreement that is always goal-oriented and hence coercive — the goal being precisely to subdue the interlocutor into agreement. As the medical officer's “maieutic forceps”<sup>18</sup> fails to extract the “truth” from Michael K's deformed mouth (or, to put it in a familiar jargon, fails to assimilate difference into sameness), his complicity with the oppressive system becomes obvious, as also suggested by his last attempt to convince Michael K to speak: «Where else in the world are you going to find two polite civilized gentlemen ready to listen to your story all day and all night, if need be, and take notes too?» (*MK*, 140). The «two polite civilized gentlemen» are of course major Noël and the medical officer himself, representing state power and the liberal humanist, respectively — essentially two sides of the same coin<sup>19</sup>. And one might even in-

14 The etymological evolution of *Mündigkeit* (maturity) is more complex, but the connection to *Mund* (mouth) is certainly implied, as Helen O'Sullivan demonstrates in her *Language Learner Narrative: An Exploration of Mündigkeit in Intercultural Literature*. See especially the section entitled “*Mündigkeit*, *Mund*, and the Voice of Reason” (2014: 118).

15 I borrow the phrase from Kenneth Surin (2005) who explicitly links the emergence of modern subjectivity to Kant rather than René Descartes.

16 «From PIE root \**barbar-* echoic of unintelligible speech of foreigners (compare Sanskrit *barbara-* ‘stammering,’ also “non-Aryan,” Latin *balbus* “stammering,” Czech *blblati* ‘to stammer’)» (Harper, n.d.).

17 «From *in-* “not, opposite of” + *fans*, present participle of *fari* “to speak,” from PIE root \**bha-* “to speak, tell, say”» (*Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.).

18 The phrase appears in a similar context in Coetzee's previous novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* ([1980] 1999: 56).

19 An almost identical dynamic between the two figures of power is suggested in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: «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» (Coetzee 1999: 180).

clude the figure of the literary critic as fitting quite neatly the above description. Additionally, the never-ending state of war suggested by the epigraphic quotation from Heraclitus<sup>20</sup> and reflected in the pervasiveness of power relations, turns, quite predictably, into a dystopian reversal of the liberal society dreamed by the eighteenth-century *philosophes*.<sup>21</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that the thematization of dialogue as a coercive practice — a theme deriving from Nietzsche's "discovery" of the will to power, one of the core concepts of continental philosophy and literary theory after the events of May '68<sup>22</sup> — is key to understanding the crisis that the medical officer goes through. Shortly after Michael K's enigmatic escape from the camp, the medical officer's existential discomfort culminates in an imaginary encounter with Michael K in the form of a long monologue, filled with anguish and regret, which reveals a desperate, almost pathetic search for meaning. On a textual level, this mirrors the critic's/reader's self-defeating hermeneutic effort to decipher the text. As the "rhetoric of daring" fuelling the quest for freedom, autonomy, and justice so dear to the liberal imagination collapses into radical doubt<sup>23</sup>, the medical officer seems indeed to fall into the same disheartened state of spirit that pervades the "postmodern" theorist: what Terry Eagleton wryly describes as a cultish reverence for «some ominous Other» accompanied by «guilty self-laceration» (1996, chap. 1).

But make no mistake: the disenchanted liberal has not completely lost faith. Instead, he conveniently redirects his conceptual weaponry to serve a "rhetoric of triumphant subversion". In a grotesque twist of fate, the other is converted into a redeeming figure of salvation, his power rooted not in agency but in inscrutable passivity. As the medical officer notes, Michael K «only eats the bread of freedom» (MK, 146). In fact, in order to disrupt the inevitable spin of the «wheels of history», «beyond the reach of the laws of nations», Michael K must indeed turn into a «universal soul», «untouched by doctrine», «above and beneath classification» (151-152). Indeed, who would recognize him as such if not the freedom craving eye of the medical officer, who ironically even mistakes Michael K's name for "Michaels": «Listen to me, Michaels [...] I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you» (151). So overwhelmed by this irruption of alterity is the medical officer

20 «War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as gods, others as men. Some he makes slaves, and others free».

21 On the ideological affinities between liberalism and totalitarianism, see Anthony Arblaster's *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (1984). On the propensity to war inherent in the liberal conscience, see Michael Howard's *War and the Liberal Conscience* (2008: 5-21).

22 See Vincent Descombes (1980: 131-135).

23 Stanley Rosen has deftly illustrated the link between the motto of the Enlightenment, *andē sapere*, and the rhetoric of postmodernism, which is refractory to the idea of progress and haunted by doubt (1987: 9-22).



that he concedes, «people like Michaels are in touch with things you [Noël] and I don't understand» (155).

Surprisingly (or not), the medical officer's framing of Michael K according to a rhetoric of "triumphant subversion" has seeped, under various and sometimes even contrasting guises, into the language of literary criticism. As soon as the early, more "engaged" political readings of the novel were discarded (and with good reason for being over-simplistic for a writer of Coetzee's sophistication), the critical efforts of the academia were funneled into an attempt to "rescue" Michael K from any reductive readings (often linked to the South African political context) and see him for the "original soul" he is. However, although alterity can be said in many ways, Michael K has been persistently framed through familiar theoretical paradigms that seem to follow a pattern of radicalization — that is, the more un-representable is Michael K represented the better. To illustrate this, I will trace Michael K's journey through some representative readings within literary theory.

It is in this spirit of radicalization that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, read Michael K as a symbolic representation of radical passivity engaging in silent withdrawal rather than overt opposition, thereby converting him into a grand allegorical figure of resistance to the new post-national order they call "Empire"<sup>24</sup>. On this view, Michael K transcends the South African context in the 1980s, emerging as a broader "political representative" whose absolute refusal is understood as the necessary starting point for an emancipatory politics between Empire and Counter-Empire<sup>25</sup>. Michael K is therefore the marginalized "Everyman" whose silence, while understated and unheroic, serves as a deliberate act of disobedience against the coercive discursive strategies operating within the neo-colonial world order — one that has perverted the old liberal democratic ideal of the "conversation of mankind" (Bohm 2000).

Things turn metaphysical, however, as critics come to realize, as does the medical officer, that there is more (or rather less) to Michael K's silence than a rebellious posturing against the establishment: Michael K is not merely political, but radically political. His silence cannot be limited to the "category of refusal", which is functional within the confines of the hegemonic order, but rather hints at the "gap" pure and simple around which any positive discourse is necessarily structured<sup>26</sup>. It is precisely this elusive quality of Michael K that haunts the medical officer:

24 See the brief section in their classic, *Empire*, entitled "Refusal" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 203-204).

25 I am following here Armin Beverungen and Stephen Dunne's critique of Hardt and Negri's interpretation of Melville's *Bartleby* as a political figure (Beverungen and Dunne 2007). Note that the figures of Michael K and *Bartleby* are unjustifiably conflated by Hardt and Negri.

26 Compare Žižek's critique of Hardt and Negri's political interpretation of *Bartleby* in his *The Parallax View* (2006).

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory [...] of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? (*MK*, 166).

Well, critics have indeed noticed it, and it is this kind of metaphysical ruminations that have spurred a plethora of extravagant interpretations of Michael K, one more daring than the other, but which generally revolve around variations on the same theme: resistance to the will to power. Hence Michael K becomes the (anti)heroic figure of evasion, fulfilling a redemptive function in the liberal imaginary: the “uncategorizable” — either in the “negative” Derridean sense of deconstructing conceptual hierarchies<sup>27</sup> or the “positive” Deleuzian sense of creating disruptive concepts<sup>28</sup> — that holds the promise for the “new” to emerge. And literature, through the deployment of sophisticated narratological strategies, becomes the privileged medium for accomplishing such a task.

This radically disruptive quality of both Michael K (the character) and *MK* (the novel as an instance of the “literary” itself) leads Derek Attridge, one of Coetzee’s most insightful critics, to reject all allegory in the name of a sort of mystical participation in the “event of reading”. He argues that the reader who *truly* partakes in the literary event is put in touch with alterity through the defamiliarizing effects of the reading experience. The point, for Attridge, is to exceed the sphere of the “already known” and reach the “entirely other” (Attridge 2004: 63–64). To be provocative — without diminishing the depth of Attridge’s readings of Coetzee’s work — one might argue that any “defamiliarizing shock” we experience here is not so much a radical escape into the “entirely other”, but rather a “shock of recognition”, more akin to an altering of the already known<sup>29</sup>.

## Too Much Otherness?

Indeed, some critics have grown impatient with so much ethical rigor. In a review of Attridge’s *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), Brian May observes that by charging against any allegorical or even “naïve” readings of literary texts in general and Coetzee in particular, Attridge comes close to a «mode of critical anxiety that prevents much from being said» (May 2007: 638). In much the same vein, Lucy Graham stresses the role of allegorical readings in keeping the work in touch with its historical background and away from aestheticism (Graham 2006: 240), while Gerald Gaylard deplores the fact that

27 For a reading of *MK* in this sense, see Michael Marais (1989).

28 For a Deleuzian reading of Coetzee, see Grant Hamilton (2011).

29 I am alluding here to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s insistence on the importance of our “enabling prejudices” in the event of understanding (Gadamer 2004: 278–306).

«the Levinasian version of alterity that Attridge offers is in danger of becoming a hermeneutic orthodoxy» (Gaylard 2006: 156) killing any trace of *jouissance* we might derive from Coetzee's oeuvre. In a brilliant tongue-in-cheek essay from 2012, Hedley Twidle (2012) complains that J. M. Coetzee's «work lends itself easily, perhaps too easily, to academic explication». His novels seem to engage with theory in such a refined and self-conscious way that critics cannot help but let themselves lured along the carefully deployed hints and clues throughout the narrative. As one commentator aptly put it, at the end of the day «Coetzee is a specialist who writes for specialists» (Sévry 1991: 209). The problem, it seems, is that whoever writes from within the current critical practice is hardly allowed to stray from the dominant reading patterns, so that, ironically, there appears to be little room left for any irruption of otherness.

This metalinguistic skepticism — where literature is seen as a portal to “other-worldly” dimensions — lies at the heart of what Rita Felski (2008) terms “theological readings”. What I have been trying to suggest in this essay is that this tendency seems to have lost its radical edge and is rather securely inscribed within the institutionalized practice of literary criticism. As Amanda Anderson (2016) suggests, our readings seem to never really be able to move beyond the framework of a “bleak liberalism” that risks converting fiction such as Coetzee's into a harmless operation of a “literary humanitarianism”<sup>30</sup>. I am relying here on Anderson's insightful description of the «double vision structure» inherent in the liberal imagination: an optimistic vision oriented towards a commitment to the «ideal of reflective enlightenment» that suggests a «mere investment in neutrality, principle, or critical distance» and pessimistic vision focused more on «the intractability of liberal vices, the limits of rational argument, the exacting demands of freedom amid value pluralism, the tragedy of history, and the corruptibility of procedure»<sup>31</sup>.

Threatened by this latent Manichean tension still upsetting the Western dreams of emancipation — the tension between an ideal of a harmonious cosmopolitanism and the inevitability of an Orwellian decline —, the liberal imagination abandons any programmatic intent and turns into a “politics of desire” motivated by a hope in a sort of mystical struggle for liberation (Duesterberg 2019). The shift from an “oppositional politics” to a “cultural struggle” against the constraining “cultural apparatus” is sealed: the creative act becomes the new dogma and literature is therefore institutionalized as the site of resistance *par excellence* (McCann and Szalay 2005), the safe space for the emergence of radical alterity. What I have tried to show is that much of the overwhelming body of scholarship built around Coetzee's purposively ambivalent oeuvre is no exception to this critical orientation, rather the rule.

30 See Lindsey Stonebridge (2020).

31 See Amanda Anderson's introduction to her *Bleak Liberalism* (2016).

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