

Disconsolate Subjects: Figures of Radical Alterity in the Twentieth Century Novel, From
Modernism to Postcolonialism.

by

Timothy Wright

Department of English
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Michael Valdez Moses, Supervisor

Ian Baucom

Srinivas Aravamudan

Ranjana Khanna

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on a group of 20th and 21st century novelists writing in English – Samuel Beckett, J.M. Coetzee, and Kazuo Ishiguro – whose fiction is populated by figures of disconsolation: characters who resist, evade, or – in the case of Ishiguro’s protagonists – assiduously attempt to conform to the constitutive social formations and disciplinary technologies of late modernity, among them, notably, the novel itself. These characters thus question the possibilities and limits of political critique and ethical life within a global modernity. I delineate a history of the disconsolate subject that cuts across the categories of modernist, postmodernist, and postcolonial literatures in order to reveal a different literary genealogy, in which an exilic postcoloniality becomes the paradigmatic sensibility for a global late modernist novel.

Georg Lukács argued that the transcendental homelessness of modernity is registered most emphatically in the novel, a form he imagined functioning as a surrogate home for rootless modern subjects. The tradition I describe, whose characters trouble the representational technologies of the novel, disrupts an easy identification with the textual realm as home. I borrow from the critic Neil Lazarus the notion of a vital modernist literary practice that persists after the death of modernism, “a writing...that resists the accommodation of what has been canonised as modernism and that does what at least some modernist work has done from the outset: namely, says

'no,; refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticises." This is a writing whose project, he suggests, following Adorno, is "disconsolation." With this in mind, I depart from the conception of an emergent cosmopolitan literature and examine instead a global literature of disconsolation, a literature that allegorizes a radically reconfigured global space whose subjects are no longer at home in the familiar world of nation-states.

A discontentment with the parameters of late modernity was already apparent in the high modernists, many of whom responded by embracing political positions on the radical right or left. However, the catastrophic political experiments of the century led to a sense that attempts to either refine or resist modernity had been exhausted. The works I examine mount critiques of such large-scale nationalist projects as the Irish Free State, the Japanese Empire, or apartheid South Africa – projects that emerged in opposition to a regnant world-system and saw themselves in utopian or liberatory terms. Yet these fictions are unable to affirm more than provisional or imaginary alternatives. A doubly exilic position consequently emerges in these novels, in which a rupture with the nation-state finds no compensation in another form of community such as a global cosmopolitan order. Through their attention to the gaps and fissures opened by the alterity of these disconsolate subjects, these texts function as waiting rooms or holding spaces for a utopianism that is unrealizable in a world of political disillusionment.

Acknowledgements

I have had the good fortune while at Duke to work with a superb dissertation committee. Michael Moses has guided this dissertation from the start, and his broad knowledge, perceptiveness, and continual support have sustained this project through many crises. He has set an example of intellectual seriousness that has never let me lose sight of the crucial questions at stake. Srinivas Aravamudan's insight, creative suggestions, and theoretical agility have nudged this project in new and surprising directions. Ranjana Khanna has been extremely generous with her time and attention, and has been a model of profound and rigorous questioning. I am indebted to Ian Baucom's prescient ability to discern the larger scope of my ideas well before I have. I am also deeply grateful to Nancy Armstrong for stepping in at the end and helping to clarify and focus the argument presented here.

I would also like to thank the many colleagues and friends who have provided intellectual community over the years. In particular, the members of my writing group, Gerry Canavan, Calvin Hui, and Lisa Klarr: their consistently generous suggestions, comments, and questions have added immeasurably to the quality of this work. Azeen Khan, Kris Weberg, Nathan Hensley, Ioanna Zlateva, Joel Schlosser, Matthew Eatough, Adetunji Osinubi, and Rae Chao have all found their way into this project in one form or another. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support – it is to my deep regret that my father Sydney did not live to read this.

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Introduction

...anyone over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost both his sense of being at peace with the world and the possibility of being satisfied with the judgment that the course of the world is bad: the moment of confirmation inherent in a resigned acknowledgement of the superior power of evil has been eaten away.

-Theodor Adorno

The Art of Non-Belonging

In a 1919 short story Kafka imagines a country doctor – living what seems to be a comfortable bourgeois life in an amply furnished house, with a servant, a personal carriage, and, until its untimely death during the night, a horse – called out in the dead of a snowy winter night to make a house visit in a nearby village (“A Country Doctor”). He arrives to find his patient, a young man, “gaunt” but “without any fever, not cold, not warm” and concludes that “the boy was quite sound, something a little wrong with his circulation...but sound and best turned out of bed with one shove” (221-2). As he is about to leave, however, he impulsively decides to take another glance at the boy:

and this time I discovered that the boy was indeed ill. In his right side, near the hip, was an open wound as big as the palm of my hand. Rose-red, in many variations of shade, dark in the hollows, lighter at the edges, softly granulated, with irregular clots of blood, open as a surface mine to the daylight. That was how it looked from a distance. But there was another complication. I could not help a low whistle of surprise. Worms, as thick and long as my little finger, themselves rose-red and blood-spotted as well, were wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the wound toward the light, with small white heads and many little legs. Poor boy, you were past helping (223).

Kafka's story gives imaginative form to the sense of some concealed horror growing in the very center of modern Europe's sense of its place in the world. This sense of a

wound festering at the very nerve center of human belonging is complicated by the doctor's perceptible fascination, his slightly too-evocative descriptions, as if entering into the wound were to enter a parallel world more vivid and real than this one. The "low whistle of surprise," whose dread-filled wonder at the strange disease that grips it functions to distance the subject from the affliction, could stand for what came to constitute a more general response to the political catastrophes of the twentieth century.

But there is a second part to this story. Returning home, the doctor finds that his own house has been usurped in his absence, his practice is lost, that he is now "Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages," condemned to "wonder astray" (235). He is thus a forerunner to the itinerant wanderers of Beckett, as well, I will argue, as a whole host of literary types that come to pervade the twentieth century novel. The situations of sudden, dramatic, and irrevocable non-belonging explored by Kafka constitute a response to what is fundamentally a historical event: the emergence (or revelation) of a world that has grown inhospitable and unhomely. Adorno makes this point in a fragment from *Minima Moralia* entitled "Refuge for the Homeless":

Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests... (MM, 38)

Alluding no doubt to the importance placed by Heidegger on the notion of dwelling, Adorno here suggested two fatal mistakes – a loss of clarity, and a blind or willing

complicity in tyranny – that arose so unsuspected from the heart of the modern world in the early twentieth century. That these mistakes might arise from the deepest desires of the modern subject – to make a home for himself in the world – is the crux of Adorno’s challenge. “[I]t is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,” Adorno adds, concluding in an often quoted aphorism, that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (39). If, in Adorno, one finds the philosophical critique of the home, in Kafka, one finds a whole host of new exilic dispositions and lifestyles – unhappy, restless creatures that find no issue for their desires in the world, who can offer no counsel, and model no political response – that begin to emerge in twentieth century fiction.

This study focuses on a group of 20th and 21st century novelists writing in English – Samuel Beckett, J.M. Coetzee, and Kazuo Ishiguro – whose fiction is populated by figures of disconsolation: characters who resist, evade, or – in the case of Ishiguro’s protagonists – assiduously conform to the constitutive social formations of late modernity, among them, notably, the novel itself. Beyond the epistemic reach of the texts in which they are figured, such figures as Beckett’s Murphy, Coetzee’s Michael K, and Ishiguro’s Kathy H., question the possibilities and limits of political critique and ethical life within a global modernity. By delineating a history of the disconsolate subject that cuts across the categories of modernist, postmodernist, and postcolonial literature,

this study reveals a different literary genealogy, in which an exilic postcoloniality becomes the paradigmatic sensibility for a global late modernist novel.

I borrow the notion of disconsolation from Neil Lazarus, who has suggested the notion of a vital modernist literary practice that persists after the death of modernism, “a writing...that resists the accommodation of what has been canonized as modernism and that does what at least some modernist work has done from the outset: namely, says ‘no,’; refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticizes.” This is a writing whose project, he suggests, following Adorno, is “disconsolation” (431-2).

Lazarus’ notion of a literature of disconsolation is a corrective to an increasingly accepted view that so-called “late modernism” is a safe, declawed, politically neutralized art-form. Most pointedly, Fredric Jameson has argued that Samuel Beckett in particular inaugurates the entire line of late modernism – a modernism that already knows the rules, that is institutionalized and practically canonical from the moment it is written, and the poses no danger to established political orders, indeed, that it “enables and authorizes the production of a far more accessible literature of what can be called a middlebrow type”¹ (*A Singular Modernity*, 209-10). While Jameson is right to mark high

¹ He continues: “This can no longer be said to be a popular literature, in the older strict sense of the term...It does not seem unduly restrictive, in an age of mass education, to suggest that the public of such a middlebrow late modernist literature and culture can be identified as the class fraction of college students (and their academic trainers), whose bookshelves, after graduation into ‘real life,’ preserve the souvenirs of this historically distinctive consumption” (210)

and late modernism as fundamentally distinct literary phases with distinctive political attunements, his diagnosis of late modernism's lack of political force seems to me to stem from an overinvestment in the political utopianism of high modernism. Jameson suggests that the power of high-modernist literature lay in its political utopianism. He quotes a line from Mallarmé that suggests a parallel between literary creation and political life: "*Il n'existe d'ouverte à la recherche mentale que deux voies, en tout, où bifurque notre besoin, à savoir l'esthétique d'une part et aussi l'économie politique*" ("Only two paths, where our needs bifurcate, lie open to mental investigation: namely, aesthetics, and also, political economy") ("Mallarmé Materialist", *Modernist Papers*, 313). For Mallarmé, and for the high modernists in general, a radically new aesthetic world could stand for and anticipate a new political order. Yet, for the writers I discuss here, the relationship of literature to politics has undergone a profound change. While the high modernists could conceive of their aesthetic creations as running in tandem with a radical political experimentalism, for the late modernists, these textual experiments always existed against the backdrop of a world that was already evacuated of utopian potential. Another way of stating this would be to say the high modernists still believed in solutions; that by shattering an old form they could replace it with a new one. For the late modernists, which I consider all three of these writers to be, the solutions had all already been tried, and had failed.

This refusal to endorse a political position has been the most troubling aspect for critics of these authors. Indeed, it is hard to argue that the work of Beckett, Coetzee, or Ishiguro is *not* purely negative at the level of critique and quietistic at the level of politics. Beckett's heroes famously stumble on into ever greater depths of unknowing. Coetzee's Michael K bears witness to the brutality of an oppressive state, yet declines to join an insurgent group, preferring to live in solitude on a secluded garden he cultivates in the Karoo desert. Ishiguro's characters range from reactionaries who resent the smallness of a democratic modern world and are nostalgic for a more glorious and innocent past, to those who meekly accept impossible conditions. They thus expose the underbelly of the existing political order without offering any possible alternative to it.

In a famous essay on "engaged" literature, Adorno argued that the attachment to a political bloc – even if it was a resistant bloc – was in itself an act of accommodation to the world and thus an affirmation of its essential structures ("Commitment"). The only form resistance could take within a world that was structurally wrong – the post-Auschwitz Europe whose very constitution was revealed by the Holocaust to be irrevocably bound up with disaster – would be to abstain from any form of acquiescence to the fundamentally degraded processes that structured it. The paradigmatic form of this resistance was the autonomous art of the modernists: an art that, in its purest form, refused "meaning" and refused the conceptualization of suffering under an ideal order.

For Adorno, “Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about” (“Commitment,” 191). The autonomy of autonomous art should therefore not be misunderstood to mean that this art has no truck with the world (although, of course, the danger of slipping into such a position is a continual threat): rather, autonomous art, by virtue of its difference from the world, is potentially a privileged site to contest or resist its course.

Adorno’s notion of committed literature as a literature committed to its resistance to the course of the world – which “permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads” (180) – allows us to understand this most discomfiting of features in these writers’ works. My argument will essentially be, following Adorno, that this refusal itself constitutes a politics, indeed, the only ethical form of politics available within late modernity. The comfort offered by a political position is replaced, in these novels, with an unsettling of the readers’ very notion of politics. That is to say, these authors are not Hegelian beautiful souls, aestheticizing their own misery. Rather, they are engaged in the invention of a set of literary techniques through which the forms of active discomfort, unease, and indifference to the political struggles that surround them – what I am calling disconsolation – can come to constitute a form of negative politics.

This study attempts to resuscitate and expand Adorno’s argument, arguing that a late modernist aesthetics, haunted by high modernism, persists through the late 20th

century and into the early 21st, and that, in particular, it comes into being to map the new and disorienting forms of post-national space that emerge in this time period. While I use Adorno as a lens through which to read the political, ethical, and aesthetic engagements of these authors, I also expand the geographical and historical parameters of Adorno's argument for the aesthetic as a space of refuge from and resistance to a degraded late modernity. I therefore attend to the ways in which writers who work in the tradition of what I am calling "disconsolate" writing were forced to devise new representational solutions to address a *global* or *postnational* space, and in the process formulated new variations on Adorno's rigorous anti-aesthetic aesthetics, while at the same time keeping faith with the fundamentally political project of disconsolation.

The twentieth century subject has of course already been diagnosed with a host of psychological ailments: alienation, malaise, estrangement, anomie, disenchantment, melancholia. Although disconsolation is clearly related to these more famous disorders of the modern mood, it describes less a passively experienced condition than a state of active engagement. Disconsolation has a double sense: as a noun, it describes an affective sensibility (the state of being restless, unhappy, critical); as a nominalized action, it describes a project (the work wants to reveal the world as unhomey, to undo the sense of the world as home). The politics of disconsolate writing reside not in the political position it does or does not outline, but in its affective register: in the deep and

implacable unease in which it leaves its readers. *Disconsolation is therefore both a mood and a political logic.*

My approach to these authors therefore rests on a set of larger *historical* claims about late modernity to which this disconsolation responds. My primary historical argument is that the political imagination of the latter half of the 20th century is haunted by the catastrophic failures of the large-scale political experiments – often utopian in character – of its first half.² These failures ultimately served to delegitimize political utopianism and shut the blinds over the political possibilities that had still lain open at the dawn of the century, in what Hannah Arendt, in the preface to her 1950 *Origins of Totalitarianism*, described as the “calm that settles after all hopes have died” (vi). Raymond Aron claimed that Europe had reached the end of the “ideological age”; Tony Judt, elaborating on this, describes how in postwar Europe, politics gave way to government, and government was confined to administration.³ If the haunting of the

² I am referring, of course, to the usual culprits – fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism (particularly its Stalinist phase) – and the broad trajectory they cut through the century. However, for the purposes of this study, I will discuss in depth only the three particular national projects relevant to my readings: apartheid South Africa, imperial Japan, and, a far less egregious example, the Irish Free State.

³ See Judt, 384. Judt gives a lengthier description of this post-political atmosphere elsewhere: “The very scale of the collective misery that Europeans had brought upon themselves in the first half of the century had a profoundly de-politicizing effect: far from turning to extreme solutions, in the manner of the years following World War One, the European publics of the gloomy post-World War Two years turned *away* from politics. The implications of this could be discerned only vaguely at the time – in the failure of Fascist or Communist parties to cash in upon the difficulties of daily existence; in the way in which economics displaced politics as the goal and language of collective action; in the emergence of domestic recreations and domestic consumption in place of participation in public affairs. (*Postwar*, 236). Judt charts a broad shift in the post-

present by political catastrophe had its most concrete analogue in the threat of nuclear annihilation, its most far reaching political effect was an exhaustion with political action as such. Hannah Arendt gives some sense of this confinement to an intolerable present, “We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition...This is why all efforts to escape the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are in vain” (Arendt, *ix*).

Secondly, I argue that this late modernity is further marked by the increasing systematization of social and imaginative life. The Frankfurt School thinkers described a wholesale reconfiguration of human activity, coining the term “administered life” to describe an underlying social formation that ran through both the catastrophic upheavals of the century and the post-war nation-state. For Marcuse, the advent of the Cold War meant the “closing of the political universe”: the internal contradictions of both of these societies were suspended before, on the one hand, the “threat from

war decades in Europe away from “ideological politics” and towards a bureaucratic and managerial form of politics whose focus was economic rather than political.

without" (21), and on the other, the internal drive to productivity. "There arises," he argues, "a universe of administration in which depressions are controlled and conflicts stabilized by the beneficial effects of growing productivity and threatening nuclear war" (21). Here we begin to see that Aron's end of ideological politics does not portend the end of violence or oppression, but rather their displacement out of the field of visibility.

Finally, I want to emphasize the global spread of this historical configuration. Whether welcoming or lamenting the fact, most commentators have agreed that the course of the 20th century has seen the consolidation of a particular form of social organization across the globe and the progressive elimination of alternatives to it. Marcuse saw little prospect for a "third force" emerging from former colonial areas, arguing that the forms of social organization they were adopting as they industrialized were at bottom no different from those of advanced Western societies (45). But his argument was anticipated, and made even more strongly, by theorists of the end of History. As early as the 1930s, Kojève had seriously revived the possibility that the world was witnessing the end of History – that is, the emergence of the ultimate form of human social organization – in the form of an American style capitalist society, an idea that Francis Fukuyama was able to restate with some conviction in 1989, after the fall of the USSR. However, this putative end of History is increasingly seen, in my readings, to be taking the form, not of the global panacea Fukuyama imagined, but of a kind of

global state. As Hardt and Negri have argued, the new global space is not by any means a “free” space – free, that is, of power and regulation, and of antagonistic conflict between states – but, to the contrary, a deeply striated space: “both system and hierarchy, centralized production of norms and far-reaching production of legitimacy, spread out over world space” (*Empire*, 13). Globalization, far from eroding forms of sovereignty vested in the nation state, has made possible a form of diffuse sovereignty within a properly global system: “The end of the dialectic of modernity has not resulted in the end of the dialectic of exploitation,” they argue. “Today nearly all of humanity is to some degree absorbed within or subordinated to the networks of capitalist exploitation” (43). Fredric Jameson has extended this analysis to the new forms of subjectivity that arise in late modernity, writing of the closing of the last loopholes of a total global logic and the suppression of an “outside,” which has restricted not merely the possibility of other futures, but even the ability to imagine these other futures.

In analyzing this historical predicament, the case of Adorno is exemplary. Adorno grew up in the eve of World War One, in his early maturity witnessed the rise of fascism and Nazism, the Stalinist show trials and the failure of Soviet communism, experienced exile in England and America, where his disappointment with the alternative on offer is palpable. In the words of Richard Leppert, “His experience in the American ‘paradise’ suggested what was to come after the defeat of fascism: a world

dominated by technologically accomplished forms of mass culture whose purpose was to sell" (514). Thus, for Adorno, it was not just the failure of Europe that dispirited, but also of the Communist alternative, which had not lived up to the dreams of philosophy: the luster of the Soviet Union was fatally tarnished by the time *Negative Dialectics* was published in 1966. Adorno's famous judgment that "philosophy...lives on because the moment to realize it was missed," surely refers to this loss in particular.⁴ It is because Adorno diagnosed this condition more ruthlessly and unforgivingly than anyone else that we find in his thinking the most fully worked out philosophical response to it. The philosophy of Adorno could be said to emerge out of a problem of history, emblemized and made visible by Auschwitz, but applicable more broadly to a late stage of global modernity. This stakes of this problem are crystallized in Kojève's famous lectures of the 1930s (published in 1947) on Hegel.

For Alexandre Kojève, the entire series of global upheavals that constituted 20th century history were merely the working out of a greater historical logic in which the final course of human history, first glimpsed in the ideals of the French Revolution and in Napoleon's defeat of the aristocratic Prussian and Austro-Hungarian forces at Jena in

⁴ Indeed, his elaboration of this idea alludes to Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried" (3). Now, said Adorno, "[h]aving broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself" (3).

1806, was finally, painfully, being realized. From an “authentically historical point of view,” writes Kojève,

the two world wars with their retinue of large and small revolutions had only the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces into line with the most advanced (real or virtual) European historical positions. If the sovietisation of Russia and the communization of China are anything more than or different from the democratization of imperial Germany (by way of Hitlerism) or the accession of Togoland to independence, nay, the self-determination of the Papuans, it is only because the Sino-Soviet actualization of Robespierrian Bonapartism obliges post-Napoleonic Europe to speed up the elimination of the numerous more-or-less anachronistic sequels to its pre-revolutionary past... (160, footnote)

Kojève is thus able to read the most catastrophic of world events (Nazism) as unwitting yet necessary preludes to the end of history – that is, to the final and most perfect form of social organization possible. From Kojève’s perspective it was incorrect to see the USSR and the USA as they saw themselves: that is, as implacable ideological enemies. Instead, argued Kojève, the United States is the “final stage of Marxist ‘communism,’ seeing that, practically, all the members of a ‘classless society’ can from now on appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them, without thereby working any more than their heart dictates” (161). Kojève’s view of the USA was no doubt highly idealized – leaving out as it did the legally enforced creation of an African-American underclass (Kojève is writing in the late 50s) – but his argument is precisely that the “ideal” America is the realization of a certain “ideal” Communism. He can therefore move on to make the extraordinary comparative suggestion “that if the

Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese are only Americans who are still poor but are rapidly proceeding to get richer. (161). The "American way of life" thus prefigures the future of global humanity, and the defeat of Nazi Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not signal anything more than a momentary reconfiguration of a single historical trajectory.

Adorno's philosophy begins with the refusal of that reconciliation, transcendence, or sublation offered in Kojève's "authentically historical" Hegelian reading of twentieth century history. One consequence of Auschwitz would be the moral impossibility of "making sense" of the Holocaust by reading it as merely part of a larger historical dialectic. But Kojève's argument does something else as well: by subsuming Nazism into a larger historical dialectic of progress, it severs the present of its taint. Nazism is one horrific possibility of modernity, but it has been tried, it has failed, and it is now consigned to the dustbin of History. But for Adorno, insisting on the viewpoint of the negative, these two epochs were not separate but congruent: the world of administered pleasures and desires that he diagnosed during his exile in the United States reduced humans to functions, and thus secretly participated in the logic underlying the dehumanizing horrors of the concentration camps in the Nazi Reich. Indeed, Adorno saw post-war Europe as inextricably bound up with the horrors of the camp, a proximity to which it willfully blinded itself. The rational distancing of oneself

from these horrors partook in the logic that created them; the dehumanized form of existence that appeared in the camp was far from the retrograde antithesis of European modernity, but rather the completion of the instrumental rationality that had guided it since its inception. The totalizing reach of this rationality – equally culpable in laying the foundations for Auschwitz and its inability to respond to Auschwitz – forbade any ethical form of accommodation to the symbolic forms of late modernity. “For Adorno,” again in the words of Leppert, “modernity and catastrophe were one, the bitter irony of which resided in the fact that modernity at its beginning had posited something fundamentally different, which might have been realized but was not” (514). Adorno thus writes out of the sense that attempts to refine or resist modernity have been exhausted. Adorno instead counseled a radical and implacable unease with the fundamental forms of modern social life. The only ethical form of being after Auschwitz was to be a fugitive, unhappy one – an existence that refused to be consoled even when forms of consolation offer themselves. That is, in a sense, Adorno needed to “keep faith” with catastrophe, to raise contradiction and suffering to a certain pitch that couldn’t be ignored.

The critique is thus fundamentally of the *idealization* of History as it takes shape through the sufferings of individuals. For example, Kojève’s famous footnote on Japan, written in 1959, makes no mention of World War II, but states instead that he “was able

to view a society that...has for almost three centuries experiences life at the 'end of History' – that is, in the absence of all civil or external war" (fn, 161). I want to start with Kojève's elision of the catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and ask what it would mean to understand these events, not as the painful working out of a greater historical narrative, but as constitutive of what it means to live in history. In this respect, the thinking of Adorno is exemplary, for Adorno remains skeptical of the tendency of Hegel's concept of World Spirit to abstract itself from lived experience through which it is supposed to reveal and fulfill itself. "It is over men's heads and through their heads, and thus antagonistic from the outset. The reflexive concept 'world spirit' is disinterested in the living..." (ND, 304). This marks a fundamentally different way of thinking about history, a shift from thinking about historical events in terms of their role in the distant playing out of a great game of universal Spirit, to thinking about them as individual and irrecoverable events, some of them good, some bad, some necessary, others entirely useless. As Jameson puts it: "The question [Adorno] wishes to raise with Marx...is whether it would not be better...to think of history in terms of contingency rather than necessity; to attribute the fall into violence, state power, and capital to a catastrophe that need never have taken place...rather than to see even this first invention of antagonism as 'inevitable'." (LM, 92). Edward Said puts it even more strongly, writing that Adorno "inject[s] Marxism with a vaccine so powerful as to

dissolve its agitational force almost completely. Not only do the notions of advance and culmination in Marxism crumble under his rigorous negative scorn, but so too does anything that suggests movement at all" (*On Late Style*, 14). Therefore, while his thinking remains haunted by a fundamentally Marxist vision of a classless society free from domination, Adorno's philosophy seems unable to endorse or even envision the dialectical machinery of history that will get us there. The essential ethos of Adorno's philosophy is thus to keep faith with suffering, to refuse the sublation of the negative into the totality, to remain attentive to the reality that stands outside of thought.

Negativity and the Disconsolate Subject

The disconsolate subject of my title is deliberately multi-referential. It refers to a *figure of disconsolation*: the specifically *literary* characters that trouble the novels I analyze below. It also refers to the subject matter of these novels: the world of diminished political horizons, limited human possibilities, and lurking catastrophe that they describe. It refers, finally, to the producers of these novels: as subjects caught between national affiliations, and at the peripheries of the global system (although at the center of the "world republic of letters"), they deploy the figure of disconsolation in tactical ways. My dissertation is primarily concerned with charting the way in which the figure of

disconsolation arises as a crucial site within late modernity, articulating both the consolidation of its disciplinary technologies and their failure.

In answer to the question, "What work does the figure of disconsolation do?" the best answer might be, "It does not work." It can be read as emerging from the notion of negativity. Adorno's notion of negative dialectics emerges as an attempt to preserve the utopian promise of Hegelian dialectics while insisting on the irreducible nature of human suffering. Returning to Kojève's *Lectures on Hegel*, we can identify the precise form of resistance the disconsolate subject offers. Human being, for Kojève/Hegel, is not an identity, but an absence, a negating-negativity within a given existence. Human essence is therefore revealed when Man opposes himself to what is, when he sets himself as a negativity against a positive existence. As Kojève describes him, he is "a Thought that does not coincide with Being (155); he can be defined, therefore, as Error – yet an error that can, through the transformation of the objective world, become Truth. Human negativity exists in time and is dynamic: it is through *work* that the human transforms the objective world so as not to be at variance with subjective reality. Without work, Kojève notes, there would be madmen and criminals (28). History can then be thought of as the *realization* of human negativity. In History, Man opposes himself to nature and negates the history of negating action (158). History ends when man no longer acts (fights, or works), when the Real gives him full satisfaction: "History

is but the process of progressive satisfaction of this Desire, which is fully satisfied in and by the universal and homogenous state" (192).

I bring up Kojève's speculations on human negativity in order to elucidate a crucial feature of the figure of disconsolation. These are individuals – men and women – who have been thrown into the midst of History: the primordial action has already occurred, events have been set in progress, the catastrophe cannot be averted. Yet, while caught up in History, they are somehow dysfunctional within it. They do not necessarily understand their desires, lack the ability or will to communicate these desires, or are incapable of realizing these desires. At bottom, they are figures who do not or cannot *work*, in Kojève's sense of transforming the objective world through their subjective desire. Beckett's protagonists desire extinction: Murphy's life project is the avoidance of any form of work (both in the quotidian sense and in Kojève's sense), while Watt finds the world he stumbles into utterly impervious to his investigations and actions. Ishiguro's protagonists – bit players in world-historical events – desire a form of belonging from which history has irrevocably excluded them: their desire to "work" in history has been stigmatized or delegitimized. Coetzee's characters are idle, passive, non-responsive, retreating into themselves. Many of Coetzee's subjects do not understand their own desires, and in extreme cases, such as Friday in *Foe*, their desires are completely opaque to others. Even after the ostensible "end of History," they remain

unreconciled with Nature. They therefore exist as pure negativity, as error that cannot resolve itself into truth. Their negativity thus does not point towards a future positivity. Yet at the same time the presence of this negativity indicates a lack within the dialectic of history. It engenders a reversal of perspective: rather than the individual being worked through and then discarded by History, History itself becomes, from this perspective, the estranged and dysfunctional myth.

The figure of pure negativity that cannot resolve into positivity is not unique to late modernity. Indeed, these figures can trace as literary forbears the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, created by a modernity unable to satisfy his desires, or even further back and more compellingly to Swift's Lemuel Gulliver, returning from his fantastical journeys, disillusioned with all the diverse forms of society he has encountered, utterly alienated from his country, his species, and himself. In posing irresolvable political and moral problems for their readers, these figures can be understood as forebears of the disconsolate subject. By not being resolvable, by resisting absorption into a larger historical dialectic – either through the formation of a contrarian political formation or through successful inclusion into the existent one – these figures intimate the fissures symptomatic of modernity in general, as the gap opened between subject and object promises to resolve in either enlightenment or catastrophe. But this fissure is intensified in the 20th century as the project of modernity increasingly comes to

seem exhausted. For this reason, such figures are isolated in pre-20th century literature. Moreover, while they tend to be fluent articulators of their own predicaments (the monster of *Frankenstein* even goes so far as to propose a new settlement of monsters in South America), the figures of disconsolation I examine tend towards silence or deception – that is, more radical and intractable forms of alterity. Although congruent, broadly speaking, with the concerns of leftist politics in the late 20th century – for a world without inequality, hierarchy, exploitation – the political valence of the disconsolate subjects swerves away from particular causes and towards a radical critique of modernity as such. The fundamental contestations of political modernity, as the integral propulsive mechanism of modernity as such, are therefore abandoned.

These writers therefore may accept the end of history, but they accept it in a spirit of mourning or of protest – not because of its ostensible blandness, but because this very blandness masks continued forms of violence and domination endemic to late modernity. The figure of disconsolation – uncomfortable within the nation, the political order, and the novel itself – marks this impasse. As Adorno noted, the embrace of a political bloc is merely one form of reconciliation with the world.⁵ By abjuring a political programme, the figure of disconsolation retains the ability to unsettle and disturb. The

⁵ “For the committed, such works are a distraction from the battle of real interests, in which no one is any longer exempt from the conflict between the two great blocs...For autonomous works of art, however, such considerations, and the conception of art which underlies them, are themselves the spiritual catastrophe of which the committed keep warning” (“Commitment,” 177)

substance of my readings is to show that this disconsolation is not a fruitless or idle evasion of politics, to show that these novelists – despite being so readily anointed within the institutions of literature – are rather engaged in shifting the ground of politics, in critiquing and estranging the political as such. The disconsolate subject articulates both the consolidation and the breakdown of the political structures of late modernity: she or he is the site at which the workings of the system, otherwise opaque, suddenly reveal themselves.⁶

Through its three chapters, my dissertation effectively describes a typology of disconsolation. The disconsolate subjects in the work of Beckett and Coetzee tend to inhabit a form of radical alterity. Beckett's protagonists strive to attain this state through revolt, while Coetzee's protagonists tend to find themselves on the margins and remain there through obdurate passivity. Ishiguro's protagonists, on the other hand, have generally attempted to partake in the grand narrative of history but have failed and been cast aside. In the process of desiring entry into history, they have *become* or been made into figures of radical alterity, their assiduous attempts to conform only revealing

⁶ The project of disconsolation is therefore related to the "hauntology" proposed by Derrida. Derrida proposes that all human institutions are haunted by what they have replaced or banished, that every hegemony is haunted by ghosts. The prime figure for this haunting is Marxism, and in particular the figure of Marx himself, banished from late twentieth century Europe. Derrida's desire is less to resuscitate Marxism than to resuscitate the ghost of Marx himself, and the ghosts that haunted Marx – that is, to reveal the spectral other within the institutions of modernity. One could say that the figures of disconsolation that I examine, in the vocabulary Derrida has introduced, *haunt*: that is, their spectral presence unhinges our sense of the fullness and presence of the modern world.

their outsider status more clearly. By failing to integrate within their social totalities – by failing at times to integrate even into the novel – all of these figures foreground its hidden contradictions. This figure is therefore fundamentally reflexive, not offering knowledge about itself, but fundamentally effecting a kind of interpretive reversal that turns the reader, rather than the figure of disconsolation, into the problematic subject. The attempt to know this figure always turns around, in the course of these texts, to reveal a reflexive knowledge about the world in which they emerge, a knowledge about *us*. Furthermore, the emphasis in these reversals is not so much on *what* knowledge is reflected, but on *how* it is reflected, or on what *kind* of knowledge it is. In this sense, the affective dimension of these texts is crucial. These novels imply that at least some aspects of our understanding of the world are set in place via mechanisms outside reason, and that it is at the level of affect that they can be unearthed or reoriented. Indeed, the substance of my readings demonstrates follows the strategies by which the texts perform this, the active form of disconsolation, and in doing so reveal the buried psychological structures by which we unconsciously navigate our late modernity. As a motto for the epistemological projects of these novels, one might do worse than to borrow Adorno's words: "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass" (MM, 50).

False Homes

Throughout my readings, three institutions repeatedly come into focus as underlying, giving rise to, or propelling these characters into their disconsolation. First, as I described above, the structures of political modernity and their relation to what Marcuse calls the closing of the political universe. Political action, in the traditional form of the struggle of political blocs for hegemony within the nation state, is ignored, dismissed, evaded, or regretted by these characters. For theorists from Hegel to Kojève, the human act par excellence is the realization of subjective negativity (or desire) through the transformation of existence. Yet the indelible negativity of these disconsolate subjects does not allow for completion as positivity. This evasion of politics on the part of the protagonists becomes, at another level, what I will call a *negative politics* pursued by the novelists, a politics that refuses accommodation to existing political blocs and programs.

Second of these is the nation state, which, after the collapse of the European empires over the course of the century, can lay claim to being the dominant form of human belonging,⁷ while at the same implying the creation of a people who do not

⁷ "Since 1945," writes the anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott, "and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies – railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology – [...] changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states... the sovereign nation state is busy

belong in the state, or who are unhappily interpolated within it. This position of unhappy or marginal belonging within a nation-state is occupied by both the writers I discuss and their characters, the latter – unable to reinvent themselves through a substitute community of literature – inhabiting this marginality more finally and radically.

Third, the novel itself, which comes to stand for everything that is coercive and restrictive about the social systems of late modernity. The novel stands in both a synecdochic and metonymic relationship to late modernity, both part of the apparatus of late modernity, and a vehicle through which it can be allegorized. As my readings demonstrate, political frustrations that cannot be worked out within the traditional arenas of national politics are channeled into the novel form, which, as a result of this burden, is forced into strategies of silence, disguise, ventriloquism, etc.. Adorno writes of an art that “seeks refuge through its own negation” (AT, 338); we can therefore speak of, as a parallel to a negative politics, a sort of *negative novel*, a novel which places itself and its conditions of possibility under a question mark.

projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty.”
(*Art of Not Being Governed*, xii)

Georg Lukács, in his *Theory of the Novel*, famously diagnosed the condition of modernity as one of transcendental homelessness, and went on to claim that the novel, functioning as a surrogate home for rootless modern subjects, was the prime symptom of this condition. While there may at first appear to be a contradiction between Lukács' sense of a transcendental homelessness and the overweening dominance of the nation state in the 20th century, these two phenomena are in fact deeply intertwined. "All nationalisms," writes Said, "in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement" ("Reflections on Exile," 176). In a very suggestive elaboration of Lukács, Said goes on to suggest that the nation-state *also* be considered an attempt to effectively annex a national home from this transcendental homelessness of modernity. Quoting Simone Weil, Said writes, "To be rooted...is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (183). He goes on to observe that of all the "remedies for uprootedness in the era of world wars, deportations, and mass exterminations," it is "the state – or more accurately, statism – that is the most insidious" (183). Said is here registering a crisis of human belonging particular to the 20th century. For it is in the 20th century that the nation state begins to be thought of less as a liberating alternative to empire, a political form in which a people could realise themselves, than as a technology of dispossession and tyranny in its own right.⁸

⁸ Hannah Arendt traces this "turn" in the character of the state to the emergence *en masse* of the refugee – the

What I want to suggest here is that the nationalist projects – apartheid South Africa, the Irish Free State, and modern Japan – that form the backdrops to these disconsolate subjects can be viewed as attempts to effectively annex a national home from the “transcendental homelessness” of modernity. They therefore constitute, not anomalies, but paradigmatic instances of modern state-making as a “solution” to the problem of modernity – as atomizing, disenchanting, rationalizing – following the German Romantic account of the nation: “a holistic people with a common language, history, culture, and race” (Young, 61-2). The Irish Free State, the Republic of South Africa, and modern Japan were all culturally conservative projects that claimed to free the nation from a dark imperial intrusion. The Irish Free State (1922-37) emerged from a decolonization movement that at times proclaimed the vision of an Ireland that was able to endlessly absorb or evade the homogenizing currents of European modernity. Yet, after

large masses of people, displaced as a result of the convulsions of World War I, who did not belong to any state. For Arendt, it was the Minority Treaties signed by the League of Nations in 1933 that signified “the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation had been completed; the nation had conquered the state, national interest had priority over law” (*Origins*, 275). While I do not deal with the figure of the refugee as such, this turn in the nature of the state – from an instrument of law to an instrument of self-validating power that proclaims the sanctity of the nation – runs throughout the diverse state projects I examine. It is also important to stress the perspective of the displaced that Arendt occupies here. “What the experience of geographic displacement teaches us is that all the supposedly stable equations of place, ethnos, and national political institution are imaginary constructs which displace displacement by substituting for the history of permanent migratory dislocation an ontologizing image of home or of a homeland, a proper place where a spuriously pure ethnos can authenticate itself” (Rivkin and Ryan, “English Without Shadows,” 854).

coming to power, this vision of Ireland effectively consolidated into its antithesis, and it implemented a conservative Catholic/Gaelic cultural program whose aim was to create a strong national identity that was rural and Catholic. This it did, as with all identitarian programs, by opposing itself to the Other that had oppressed it: Englishness. In the case of apartheid South Africa (1948-94), Afrikaner nationalism cast itself against over a century of economic and political domination by the English, particularly in the form of economic and political liberalism, as it had been imported by the British since their annexation of the Cape and later of the Boer republics. Both the Irish Free State and apartheid South Africa erected states based on a religious-ethnic identity, a naturalized relationship to the land, and the resurrection of a national history in semi-mythical form: these were states that essentially mythologized themselves as homes.

Postwar Japan is an altogether more complicated case, as it was not the antagonistic counterpart to its predecessor, imperial Japan (1868-1945), but rather its shamed offspring. Neither imperial nor postwar Japan can be considered in any sense anti- or pre-modern: modern Japan could be said to have begun with the arrival in 1853 of Commodore Perry's "black ships," portending the incursions of a West that Japan felt it had to both catch up to and resist. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought to power a regime determined to make Japan strong: dismantling feudalism, they created an emperor-centered bureaucratic state with a modern army and Western style legal codes

and education, and set out to build an empire. Japanese imperialism therefore differed from the European forms of imperialism in that its origins did not fundamentally emerge from the development of capitalism. Rather, this empire was seen as a way of proving Japan's vigor as a modern polity, while at the same time resisting "white" imperialism.⁹ The sense that the country had to both catch up with the West through modernization, and at the same time retain its unique cultural identity, led to the coming to power, in the 1930s, of an imperialist movement that wanted to "overcome the insidious infection of modernity and Westernization" through the aggressive expansion of the Japanese empire into the rest of Asia, or what its ideologues called, in a utopian turn of phrase, a "co-prosperity sphere."

None of these projects can necessarily be considered anti-modern – to the contrary, all were deeply invested in the kinds of modernization programs that characterize modernity more generally. However, they could be said to have resisted certain aspects of modernity – its perceived inhospitableness – by defining themselves as homes *par excellence*. That is, they undertook to create forms of community that would overcome the disintegrative effects of modernization. This resistance took place primarily at the level of ideology – of a national self-imagining that was enforced

⁹ After the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-5, Japan entered into a more properly capitalist phase of imperialism, based on a community of interests. See Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism*.

through education and culture. The entire ideological apparatus of the Afrikaner state – in terms of its mechanics, a hypermodern state – was steeped in pastoralism: the mythologization of van Riebeeck’s garden, the Great Trek, and the creation of a national identity as *boerevolk* (farming-people) were part of an autochthonizing technology designed to forge a direct relationship between the Afrikaner people and the land (hence Coetzee’s interest in and recurrent engagement with the pastoral genre). Similarly, the ideal of the “pure Gael,” satirized so mercilessly by Beckett, aimed to recuperate some authentic version of Irishness. Japan, already for all intents and purposes a fully modern nation by the dawn of the century, was plagued by the recurrent anxiety of contamination by the West; the existence of a powerful form of national identity was certainly not mandated from above in the way the Gael and the Boer were, but rather emerged from within society.

The use of these national backdrops allows the authors I discuss to unearth a certain strand of “bad utopianism” that unites them. Imperial Japan’s dream of a post-capitalist society in Manchuria, the Apartheid State’s dream of a pastoral Boer republic: these were both utopias (right-wing utopias, to be sure) built around forms of ethnic and national identity – utopias for the chosen.¹⁰ In the end, then, none of these national

¹⁰ See Jameson, “On Moats and Trenches,” on the way in which Thomas More’s utopia is forced to externalize its exploitative elements.

projects were able to offer an alternative to what they claimed to resist: predicated on forms of occlusion, repression, and domination, they were all structurally implicated within a larger, dominating, logic of late modernity to start with. Yet, in a sense, these catastrophically failed projects allow the novelist to bring to the surface what lies latent or is hidden elsewhere, and thus offer a surface on which to read the constitution of a global late modernity. When Beckett's work starts drawing parallels between the Free State and the generalized no-place of his later work; when Coetzee draws parallels between apartheid South Africa and Australia; when Ishiguro suggests parallels between Imperial Japan, postwar democratic Japan, and Britain, one has an intimation of the way in which the global space of the nation is saturated by a singular and inescapable logic.

Many postcolonial theorists have postulated a second wave of colonialism, in which the nations of the globe begin to coalesce under a delocalized global neoliberal state. As I alluded to in my reference to the work of Hardt and Negri, it is not as if these national projects fail and are replaced by a neutral system. The new global system – especially in the more recent works I discuss (the years 1989-91 seem to mark a crucial transition) – is revealed to be structures around the same kinds of occlusions, hierarchies, and violence as that which it replaces. This can be seen earliest in the case of Japan: the new, democratic regime installed after the defeat of Japan is subtly revealed

by Ishiguro to be a major participant in a global struggle of Cold War empires. But a similar dynamic can be seen in the work of Coetzee: the passing of the apartheid regime has not diminished the force of Coetzee's early works, nor has it led to a lessening of critique in his later works.

These works thus depict a space in which both the national space and global space are unhomely. To a certain degree, the specific national sites that these authors choose are fundamentally interchangeable: they are exemplars, or specific cases, of a larger global condition, rather than departures from it. Ishiguro's Japan, one suspects, is to a large extent an imaginary Japan that nevertheless serves as a surface on which to explore themes that fundamentally address a global condition; similarly with the unnamed location of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or of Beckett's late story, "The Lost Ones," where local detail is stripped away in order to reveal essential structures. The point is rather to find, in these rather extreme national situations, evidence of an underlying a coercive logic of modernity itself.

It is therefore no surprise that the writers I discuss emerge at what world-systems theorists call the "semi-peripheries"—those spaces that are neither entirely colonizers nor colonized – and furthermore, at the semi-peripheries of the nation state itself, as privileged subjects who nonetheless attempt to disavow their position within the nation, both through exile and through writing. These are writers who do not *belong*

in a straightforward sense: Beckett and Coetzee emerged from privileged minority class fractions whose hold on power was always precarious and open to dispute, and towards which they took ambivalent stances. Ishiguro came from a middle-class Japanese family that moved to England when he was aged five, and was brought up with the expectation that the family would return to Japan. In this sense he is almost the paragon of a homeless writer, his “home” being, from the start, an entirely imaginative construct. His writing is thus engaged in a complex interplay that foregrounds the unexpected parallels between the Japan of his imagination and the England of his experience: two island nations with strong codes of behavior hiding embarrassing imperial pasts.

With their hybrid national identities and awkward identifications with the nation (Irish/French, South African/Australian, Japanese/English), these writers are not fully legible against the backdrop of either the nation state or of a purely global international space. Rather, they straddle the boundary between periphery and core, and emerge most fully when read in between these spaces, as operating within the uncharted and disorienting area of what John Comaroff has called the “post-Benedictine” world (post Benedict Anderson). Their subject positions bear witness to the fault-lines within a “great transformation” from a world structured around nation-states into a new and disorienting globalism. They are cosmopolitan in the sense of being fluent in and writing in multiple cultures. But this is tempered by the sense that the emergent global order in

which this cosmopolitanism can take root does not necessarily offer a preferable or freer location, that it is instead as unhomely or alienating as the order of nation-states from which he had fled. This sense of being in a doubly exilic position – in which it is not merely the nation-state that is unhomely, but the global order that replaces it – is what unites Beckett with such later figures as Coetzee and Ishiguro. “I am one of many people in this country,” writes Coetzee, an English-speaking South African of Afrikaner stock, “who have become detached from their ethnic roots...and have joined a pool of no recognizable *ethnos* whose language of exchange is English” (342). Beckett famously renounces the English language to write in French, a language in which he can write “without style,” and which he then translates back into a deracinated, bare-bones English. Ishiguro’s novels are written in a bland “global English” that has been purged of its specific national tics, its literary heritage, its sense of place (in an interview, Ishiguro has spoken of writing his novels in a deliberately plain and style-free English that can be easily translated, with foreign audiences in mind).

As the *lingua franca* of the global market order, this global English can be thought of as a fundamentally different language to the national varieties of English, its oblique relation to the nation offering quite different possibilities to the writer. This impulse to de-nationalize the language, to free it from its automatic and habitual relation to a culture, is not necessarily best thought of as a cosmopolitanism. Rather, for these writers,

it constitutes one of the fundamental gestures of a disconsolate poetics. Comparing his situation to that of Defoe and Hardy, Coetzee describes the formal experimentation of his writing as being unwillingly thrust upon him as an effect of precisely this exilic position: “[t]hey lived in a culture, or cultures, that allowed them to get on with the job, and we don’t. Hence the pathos – in a humdrum sense of the word – of our position: like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking out wistfully through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of realism but that we stubbornly can’t help thinking of as the real” (63). Coetzee’s comments mark a telling difference from the high modernist position, whose desire to “make it new” was accompanied by a belief in the transformative aspects of art. To the contrary, formal radicalism is here an exigency placed upon Coetzee, an imperative of the particular historical, social, and geographical position he occupies. Realism is here associated with rootedness, belonging, national culture; modernism with an *exile from the real*, associated with the emergence of a global space – and also with cultural exile, malaise, alienation.

The Negative Novel

To read the novel as a parallel form to the state is to also read, embedded within the novel form, those technologies of sovereignty, discipline, and authority that

characterize the state. At least, that is the conceit entertained by all these novelists. Rather, however, than attempting to *rival* the sovereignty of the state through the novel – a hopeless enough task – they use the novel to outwit, evade, and subvert that sovereignty. For the writers I discuss here, the status of literary space has undergone a profound change: it has come to stand not for possibility but for discipline.¹¹ The term negative novel describes this perverse and paradoxical project of outwitting or evading the apparatus of the novel itself. The figure of disconsolation is the prime device by which this is effected: this figure eludes the novelistic apparatus by disrupting an easy identification with the textual realm as a “home.”

Beckett’s *Murphy*, for example, functions to allegorize a doubly exilic space in which, on the one hand, Murphy is alienated from an excessively demanding or overweening Irishness, and on the other is unwelcome within a putatively cosmopolitan English space. The mental asylum in which Murphy finally lands up and where meets his demise (at the hands of his own author) is one of the many liminal and heterotopic spaces that Beckett will use to house his increasingly asocial and unsocializable characters. The spaces of escape envisioned in Beckett’s work are not spaces of political freedom (these do not exist in Beckett’s world) but of a radical freedom from the

¹¹ See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and The Police*, for a reading of the Victorian detective novel as disciplinary technology. The point I am making, though, is not that the 20th century novel is a disciplinary technology, but that it comes to *stand for* discipline in the imagination of 20th century writers.

fundamental structuring devices of all social life – from reason, language, empathy, and from physical or material being itself. Beckett’s sense of restriction, bondage and cultural alienation no doubt derives from his position as a disaffected Anglo-Irish, equally alienated from both the Irish Free State and England, yet it is engaged with as a more properly literary problem: the attenuation and eventual disappearance, in the literary text, of an external and “human” position which can be inhabited by the subject. Beckett here imagines the authorial figure (himself) as a tyrant, parodically over-identifying with sovereignty over his literary realm by inflicting various forms of punishment and bondage on his characters, and finally killing off his own creation, Murphy. For Beckett, the novel has come to stand for everything restrictive, coercive, and inhospitable about the social world of early 20th century Europe. No longer a medium through which through which the real can be represented, it becomes a technology of the real that must be evaded.

Beckett’s *Murphy* reveals and then exploits the link between the affective, existential, and formal underpinnings of the nation state and the novel form itself: in *Murphy*, the novel has become both a home and a torture. Why this should be so is suggested by Said, who argues that the novel reemerges in the absence of national belonging as a substitute form of belonging: “Much of the exile’s life,” he says, “is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not

surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals" (181). Said's sense of the relationship between exile, the nation, and the novel, is visible in the forms of alienation or homelessness experienced by the three writers here. But my readings reveal that, rather than fabricating an alternate home within the novel, these writers enact in their work a resistance to the consolations offered by the novel as home: the temptation to make the novel into a home is marked, in all their works, by an acute sense of those dangers of the home expressed by Adorno: the "betrayal of knowledge" and the "musty pact of family interests" (MM, 38).

One implication of this can be seen in Beckett's subsequent novel, *Watt*, where Beckett renounces the position of the sovereign author, and both character and text become mired in a terminally inoperative reality. The novel uses the backdrop of the moribund and isolated Anglo-Irish Big House to formulate a late-modernist aesthetics adapted for purposes of representing the disorientation and homelessness of a post-national space. More so than *Murphy*, this text might be said to inaugurate the novel of disconsolation in the Anglophone tradition.

Beckett's work, although it chronologically precedes the Cold-War periodization I have been using, already begins to register its historical predicament: the radical diminishment of political horizons and the emergence of an overwhelming systematicity in the organization of the social world – the sense that the world no longer constitutes a

home for the human subject, but, to the contrary, has made the human into a function or product. In Beckett, who had already witnessed the rise of Hitlerism in his visits to Germany in the early 1930s, and in the peculiar situation of the Anglo-Irish, this sensibility emerged earlier than in other places, certainly in the English-speaking world. By anticipating a global phenomenon, Beckett's work stands as a crucial model for later writers emerging from very different national situations. But this argument is essentially restricted to the early Beckett: after *Watt*, he effectively solves the problem of national place, at least insofar as his writing is concerned. *Watt* and *Murphy*, however, are still asking the same questions about nation and home that Coetzee and Ishiguro will ask later.

Coetzee's novels explore and subvert notions of home precisely through their inversion of the idea of the novel as substitute home. A trio of early novels are set in paradigmatic scenes in the life of a "home," either political or novelistic – *Waiting for the Barbarians* (the death of Empire), *Life & Times of Michael K* (the collapse of the South African state), *Foe* (the emergence of the novel). Yet they are populated by characters marginal to or disinterested in these historical struggles for permanence, characters whose forms of silence and withholding trouble the discursive environment in which they find themselves. The chapter on Coetzee thus attends to the manifold ways in which Coetzee places the conventions and technology of the novel in question, creating

characters and situations that specifically frustrate attempts at mastery. Drawing on John and Jean Comaroff's suggestion that the postcolony is a state founded on difference rather than homogeneity, this chapter reads a cluster of J.M. Coetzee's early novels as responses to the pastoral self-fashionings of the apartheid South African state. In particular, I read Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which parodically retraces the grand narratives of official South African history from the perspective of an illiterate and uneducated gardener, as intervening in the genre of the South African *plaasroman* or farm-novel. Yet the genre's inherent tendency to a pastoral plenitude is continually frustrated, in Coetzee's text, by its own protagonist's elusiveness, thus setting up an irresolvable tension between a textual ethics of alterity and a social desire for presence and community – the very tension of the utopian impulse. Coetzee's peculiar form of reluctant modernism emerges as an attempt to find a form capable of both critiquing the symbolic economy of the state and of gesturing toward an unrepresentable utopia beyond it. I close the chapter with a consideration of Coetzee's late style and its distinctive melding of fiction and non-fiction. Concentrating on the Nobel address (2003) and the recent *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), written from Australia well after the collapse of the apartheid regime, I examine the ways in which Coetzee's fabulations of the writer as intellectual attempt to refuse his canonicity and hence his own authority within the "home" of the novel.

A similar suspicion towards the idea of home exists in the novels of Ishiguro, which switch settings between the author's two national affiliations, Japan and England (and occasionally Englishmen in central Europe or China). Their status as once proud countries that have lost their preeminent status in the world, yet refuse to admit to themselves their new ancillary positions in the global order make them ideal spaces from which to explore the forms of global exile and disorientation we have seen in both Beckett and Coetzee. Thus they all employ fundamentally the same type of narrator: idealistic but blind and unknowing, trying in vain to make good on some kind of failure that cannot be redeemed. The chapter on Ishiguro repeatedly turns to his interrogation of convention: Ishiguro's characters are always acting out a different story from the one they tell themselves; a point driven home formally in his use of generic templates. One of the clearest example is that of Christopher Banks, hero of *When We Were Orphans*, who lives his life according to the 19th century detective novel: his conviction that he is a renowned detective setting the world right is contradicted by the dawning realization that he is part of a late-20th century web of global intrigue that far exceeds the scope of the Victorian detective narrative that he thinks he is acting out.

While critics generally read Ishiguro's early "Japanese" novels as attempts to imaginatively reappropriate the country of his birth, I read "Japan" in these novels as a figure through which Ishiguro can explore one of the fault-lines of late modernity, the

consolidation of a post historical consciousness within a nation whose entry into the “end of history” was particularly abrupt and painful. Ishiguro’s characters are the inverse of those of Beckett and Coetzee: their efforts are directed purely at neutralizing their own otherness. *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) uses the perspective of an unreliable narrator, a disgraced Japanese “war painter,” to reveal the hidden historical fault lines within a consolidated post-historical consciousness. Ishiguro’s commentators tend to glide over the subversiveness of his novels’ relationship to history: by dramatizing the historical construction of moral right through his obsessively normalizing characters, these texts compel us finally to reflect back on ourselves and our own historical epoch, a globalizing neoliberal order, as harboring its own blindness and occluding its own violence. Ishiguro’s recent *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – which latches onto a well-worn sci-fi trope, the creation of a sub-class of human clones – marks a crucial development in this historical predicament. I argue that the novel’s concern with the mechanics of social reproduction and the closing of political horizons is explored less through plot than through *genre*, which is continually rerouted and short-circuited through the variety of worn narrative forms (boarding school novel, romance, fairy tale, sci-fi, teen lit) embraced by the clone narrator. These forms function less to describe a reality than to provide the narrator a means of normalizing her sense of otherness within a world that has banished both the past and the future from its historical imagination.

The generic saturation of the novel thus comes to stand for a fundamental incapacity to grasp the structural underpinnings of the present, and hence creates the sense of a world in which political action – action requiring a coherent and communally accepted narrative – is impossible.

The Fate of Utopia

A reading of Ishiguro's novels also raises most clearly the question of the utopian. Despite – or rather, precisely because of – the hopelessness of the situations they depict, the utopian is an indispensable presence. They obey Fredric Jameson's dictum – inverting Thatcher – that “there is no alternative to Utopia.” Yet the cardinal sin in Ishiguro is the pursuit of a utopia without a full grasp of the historical situation in which one is embedded – a position of historical clarity understood to be impossible except in retrospect. Similarly, whatever utopianism appears in Coetzee is tempered by his deep mistrust of political action. As one of Coetzee's own characters glosses his politics, “Nothing is worth fighting for because fighting only prolongs the cycle of aggression and retaliation” (*Summertime*, 230). Indeed, the loss of the utopian is the subtext of all the political thinkers I have referred to, from the laments of Arendt and Adorno, to the dark webs perceived by Foucault and even, at points, Kojève, whose sardonicism regarding the end of history is hard to miss.

The works of Coetzee and Ishiguro wrestle most overtly with the compromised status of the utopian impulse in late modernity. Both Coetzee and Ishiguro are interested in “good” characters – the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* – who nonetheless end up participating, willingly or not, in forms of oppression or even atrocity. Even so seemingly innocent and utopian a character as Coetzee’s Michael K belongs to this logic. *Life & Times of Michael K*, which narrates the protagonist’s attempt to construct a vegetable garden – a minimal utopian enclave – within a dystopian state that has descended into war, retraces the utopian and pastoral underpinnings of the South African state and attempts to resurrect them in a form uncontaminated by the disasters of that history. Thus both the apartheid state and the tiny vegetable garden started by Michael K are connected by a hidden Utopian link, a link made more explicit when we realize that the modern South African republic itself began as a kind of vegetable garden, a refueling station for Dutch East India Company ships rounding the Cape. The pastoral, understood as a realm of both social harmony and novelistic realism, remains a yearning so compromised by history that it cannot be realized.

Similarly, as I show in my chapter on Ishiguro, a careful reading of *Artist of the Floating World* reveals that behind the utopianism of imperial Japan and the fresh faced optimism of the new democratic Japan lie similarly shameful imperial projects. Therefore, the utopianism of the young Ono, as he wholeheartedly joins into the

imperialist movement of 1930s Japan, and which we are invited to condemn, cannot simply be salvaged by inventing a new, better, utopia. For the lesson of Ishiguro's novel is that we cannot reach a position of historical clarity, and thus can never act with full foreknowledge. If Ishiguro's characters retreat from the world of politics, it is not because they lack idealism, but rather because they possess too much of it.

Yet it would be incorrect to call these works anti-utopias. Rather, they have structurally internalized an antinomy of what we might call post-Auschwitz utopianism. Adorno's brief discussion of utopianism in *Aesthetic Theory* captures the active contradiction within these artworks. "What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it. At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation" (32). These works might be called, in Jameson's phrase, anti-anti-Utopian. They are committed, on the one hand, to excavating and unveiling malign forms of the utopian as they have been embodied in national projects gone wrong. On the other hand, they have forbidden themselves from realizing their own latent utopianism.

If the artwork cannot represent utopia, this is not to say it is anti-utopian. "Perspectives must be fashioned," Adorno concludes in the final entry of *Minima*

Moralia, “that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought.” (247). This kind of utopia, that whose possibility is suggested by the representation of what it is not (thus in a sense literalizing the etymological derivation of the word), could be thought of as a negative utopia. My chapter examines this antimony most extensively, reading Coetzee’s refusal of a pastoral realism as a husbanding of the utopian impulse without a correlative utopian program. However, negative utopias repeatedly emerge in my readings of Beckett – witness, for example, Watt’s fellowship with a community of rats – and the nostalgia of Ishiguro’s characters – a nostalgia that seems to bespeak a desire for an impossible past, yet whose critical impulse towards the present secretly redirects one towards the future and the utopian. This, then, is the ultimate horizon of these novels: the intimation of a different world that dare not speak its name.

Chapter One

Style and Sovereignty in the Early Novels of Samuel Beckett

Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals. Each of these occupations requires a minimal investment in objects and places a great premium on mobility and skill.

Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile"

In his biography of Samuel Beckett, James Knowles relates one of Beckett's childhood games: Beckett would climb to the top of a sixty-foot fir tree and then jump off, arms outstretched, relying on the branches to break his fall before he hit the ground. Relating this to the adult Beckett's passion for diving, he describes how the experience entered Beckett's imaginative world in the form of dreams, or more accurately nightmares, in which "he saw himself diving into too narrow a pool between the jagged walls of a rock face" (39). In its resistance to being deployed within traditional notions of *Bildung* or development, and its closeting of its meaning within the act itself – a heightening of existence – this episode can stand as a figure for Beckett's writing project. Like Benjamin's gamblers, while seeming to strive for a suspension of progressive bourgeois temporality, they are in fact merely a heightened version of it: making the leap, the jumper delivers himself to a radical form of non-freedom or constraint, a heightened experience of human bondage to the material world. Beckett's work can be

thought of as the attempt to dive into progressively narrower pools, continually setting for himself stricter boundaries, less room for error, continually increasing his chances of extinction. "A writer who all his life put himself in impossible literary situations" writes Pascale Casanova: "no one has occupied so many reputedly untenable positions; no one has been attached to so many impossible aesthetics" (106).

A recurrent trope in what can be called the grammar of Beckett's literary imagination is that of escape from constraint, either from a real-world constraint, or, if this is not immediately available, a self-imposed one. There is something of the game in this type of structure. Clearly the task of outwitting or solving a formal problem is a creatively generative one: the well-executed sonnet usually owes its most striking insights to the exigencies of its tight formal restrictions. In this respect, Beckett no doubt drew some of his inspiration from his master James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the application of diverse formal models to individual episodes constitutes one of the primary generative devices of the novel, although Beckett's play seems less exuberant and more desperate, at times verging on madness, at other times on sadism. The issue is not so much the playing of the game, but the survival of it; not so much the negotiation of constrictions as the ultimate evasion of them or mastery over them. The game of course appears as one of the recurrent motifs of *Murphy* (with its infamous chess game centerpiece), but can also be thought of as the informing spirit of Beckett's work as a

whole. This is what Hugh Kenner has perceived: "Each Beckett project starts afresh, a new work, a new kind of work, a new kind of experience. There is always attrition, as there is in chess. There is always a mate, or the nearing threat of a mate. But no two games are the same." (Kenner 1973, 128).

Beckett himself often took recourse to the game as a metaphor through which to describe his work, as in these comments from his direction of *Waiting for Godot*:

It is a game, everything is a game. When all four of them are lying on the ground, that cannot be handled naturalistically. That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes an imitation, an imitation of reality.... It should be clear and transparent, not dry. It is a game in order to survive." (qtd. in Knowles, 536)

Clearness and transparency are not generally associated with modernist cultural production, and the invocation of these two aesthetic criteria by Beckett can therefore be taken to point to one of the key innovations of his work. Once the artwork has been freed of the obligation to represent a muddled and complex reality, it can concentrate on the exploration of its internal possibilities in precise terms. The difficulty of reading Beckett's work tends to occur in identifying and then following the precise protocols of the game at hand.

What is the relationship between the purified laws of the game and the chaotic reality against which it asserts itself? If one reads, following Freud, the impetus behind Beckett's games as a desire for a certain kind of mastery, or sovereignty, the immediate

question to be raised is: What provokes this desire? This is the fundamental question this chapter will try to answer in its reading of Beckett's early novels, whose fundamental trauma stems from Ireland and the politics of Ireland, from which Beckett increasingly detached himself. My hypothesis, for the purposes of this chapter, is that it comes, at least at first, from Ireland, and in particular the nascent Irish Free State, freely exercising its own sovereignty for the first time in centuries. The chapter therefore charts a rivalry (though the battle is more one-sided than the word rivalry suggests) between Beckett and the Irish Free State. The political sovereignty of the Irish state over its body-politic is countered, evaded, or mastered through the institution of forms of counter-sovereignty within the literary realm. This is not to read the antagonism with the Free State as the primary structuring element of all the texts I examine here, but rather to view this initial antagonism as structuring a series of subsequent antagonisms and escapes.

Pascale Casanova's 2006 monograph on Beckett is a recent addition to a growing line of critical works that attend to Beckett's relationship with Ireland. Its major predecessor in this respect is John Harrington's *The Irish Beckett* (1991); at the near end of the line one can now add Patrick Bixby's *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (1999). Without examining the distinctive critical methodologies in these quite different works, one can safely generalize that they tend to read Beckett's complex relationship with Ireland on

the level of subject matter: it is a question of what Beckett chooses to write about, where he chooses to write it, and to what extent he chooses to attack or parody it. The restless formal experimentation of Beckett's early writing – which will finally congeal into something like a mature "style" (although he rejects the term; maybe "modus operandi" is better) after he switches to French in 1946 – is almost viewed as a parallel project. For Harrington (and for Terry Eagleton in his introduction to Casanova's book) the particular kinds of formal experimentation Beckett engaged in are Irish in spirit, and the texts' relentless efforts to expel all concrete elements from themselves are precisely what constitutes them as Irish. This may well be the case, but it tells us very little about the specific historical torsions and alliances that gave rise to a Beckettian style, as opposed to an Irish style. To insist on the ultimate Irishness of Beckett's very attempt to escape from Irishness ultimately yields little more than the abstract satisfaction of classification. For Casanova, following the model of her "World Republic of Letters," it is really the Irish literary figures that consume Beckett, whose bone of contention is not so much Ireland as the rejection of one school of Irish writing, "bardolatry," epitomized by Yeats, and election of another, epitomized by Joyce. The significance of Beckett's writing is its enactment, following the subtitle of her book, of a "literary revolution." The actual history of Ireland and its politics therefore have no substantial parts to play in this reading. For Bixby, finally, the task is to read Beckett's work not as critics generally have

done, as an effete modernism, supposedly existing only in the disembodied sphere of pure aesthetics, but as politically and socially rooted. Bixby thus minimizes the formally experimental qualities of Beckett's work to concentrate on its forms of social satire. One gets the impression from Bixby that Beckett's works are solid and hearty realistic social comedies, perhaps in the style of Fielding. The aspect of Beckett's writing that most immediately strikes the reader – its formal strangeness – is explicitly dismissed from consideration.

This chapter then attempts to address a lacuna in the scholarship on Beckett and Ireland: namely, the nature of the relation between Beckett's stylistic experimentation and the politics of the Irish state. I specifically avoid the answer given by Joyce critics: that is, that faced with the choice between the language of the colonizer (English) and a native language tarnished by its alliance with nationalism and its irremediable provinciality (Gaelic, which Beckett did not speak), Joyce chose to disrupt and reinvent English. As Jameson has noted, "Joyce was still evidently in Ireland throughout his 'exile'" (203). The same cannot be said for Beckett, whose attachment to Ireland was more vexed and ambivalent from the start. Beckett, unlike Joyce, was Protestant Anglo-Irish, and at no point in his life did he express any sympathy for the Catholic Nationalist cause. Moreover, Beckett's linguistic experimentation continued unabated after his switch to the French language, indicating, at the very least, that his hostility cannot be

confined to the English language, and instead indicated that his critiques, when they are directed to the Irish Free State, are fundamentally thinking of the Irish Free State as a *figure* for a larger condition of late modernity.

An immediate problem in addressing the question of style in Beckett's work is that Beckett made it his life's project to rid his work of style. One should think rather of his anti-style: "to write without style," goes his famous explanation for switching to French. In any case, it seems more than coincidence that Beckett's early, Anglophone work is wrestling with the presence of Literature at the same time as it is wrestling with Ireland; that the formal project of outwitting, evading, violating the fabric of literature itself has something to do with Ireland as both imaginative and political entity. (Once the battle with "Literature" has been effectively won – beginning with the Trilogy – Ireland also begins to disappear). What is really at stake in this battle?

Flaubert: The birth of aestheticism from the spirit of critique

Beckett's work is often read against the late 19th century European realists (Balzac) whom he detested, and with the 18th century British satirists (Swift especially, but also Fielding). However, to accurately take measure of the stakes of Beckett's work, both what it reacts against and what it takes up, a brief excursion into a seldom-considered precursor of Beckett is necessary. This is the high-realism/proto-modernism of Gustave

Flaubert. To read Beckett with Flaubert is to get a sense of how a particularly formal and historical problem within *realism* underpins and haunts the late modernism of Beckett. The roots of a distinctively *modern* high literary style, practically invented by Flaubert, can give us the key to understanding Beckett's desire to reject style itself.

Flaubert's work, like Beckett's, is deeply suspicious of the notion of *Bildung* – formation, development. As the dominant paradigm of the 19th century, in philosophy, literature, and, later, middle-class self-advancement¹, *Bildung* could be said to be the fundamental concept that Beckett's work attacks. Beckett's relationship to *Bildung*, as I see it, occurs in two registers.

- (1) The underlying logic of his prose has features reminiscent of those seen in developmentalist paradigms: self-generation, differentiation, complexity, etc. (think of the endless and increasingly layered and complex logical games Watt generates in his attempt to understand his surroundings). What is emphatically different, however, is that these processes culminate in nonsense, lead nowhere. One might say that the logic of developmentalism drives them, but stripped of any larger meaning; there is a concentration

¹ I take this narrative of the gradual degeneration of the notion of *Bildung* from Thomas Pfau. *Bildung* has its roots as a philosophical project in the early 19th century; one turning point in its decline is the annexation of the paradigm for the purposes of a middle-class ethic of self-advancement. I would argue that this is precisely the subject of Flaubert's novels.

purely on process to the exclusion of anything else. There is a sense of a paradigm run amuck, unmoored from meaningful production.

(2) On the level of content, there is a parody of the idea of personal development.

Beckett's characters, if they attain the level of full personhood at all, are indigent drifters or creatures existing in primal relations (master-servant, usually). They tend to embark on quests, like Molloy's quest to find his mother, Moran's quest to find Molloy, Watt's quest to understand Knott, that are inevitably fruitless and end instead in aimless wandering or lassitude. They embark on these quests for no particular reason that we can discern, and abandon them just as arbitrarily. Watt (like the endless series of servants that have preceded him) wanders in and out of employment, is promoted for no apparent reason, and just as arbitrarily kicked back out on the street.

In this sense, Beckett is working in the same vein as those 19th century writers – emblemized by Flaubert – who refuse to wholeheartedly embrace the *Bildungsroman* and its attendant ideologies, who instead adapt the form to critique the value systems underpinning an emergent bourgeoisie that has appropriated *Bildung* for its own ethic of professional advancement and self interest.

The *Bildungsroman* thus becomes a crucial point of reference. A fundamental aspect of the form is its investment in the reconciliation or integration of an individual and

society, of a pliant subject and an unbending object, through narrative. A “development of selfhood” takes place against a “projected resolution” of an “accommodation to existing society” which the protagonist may choose to accept or reject: “each novel ends with a precise stand on his part, with *his assessment of himself and his place in society*” (Hirsch, 298). The form (I lean heavily on Moretti here) then takes as its starting problem the rupture of subject and object identified by Baudelaire as the fundamental condition of modernity. It then enacts a reconciliation of this fissured subject and object on psychological terrain: through the protagonist’s testing of reality, his processing of experience, there is a gradual movement towards a final reconciliation, in which he sacrifices certain elements of his individuality for an organic existence in the whole. Marianne Hirsch calls it the “gradual process consisting of a number of encounters between subjective needs and an unbending social order” which “necessitates errors and the pursuit of false leads” (298). It presents, as Moretti says, a model of exchange: if x qualities are to be realized, then y must also be accepted.

Thus the question of subjective perception versus objective reality becomes the primordial problem of the *Bildungsroman* protagonist. Beckett’s and Flaubert’s protagonists approach experience with a dogged earnestness, only to find themselves lost in a maze of interpretation.

Flaubert, since he is dealing with the bourgeois world (a world that is only a thinly veiled stand-in for the marketplace) presents the eventual compromise in particularly harsh light, for acceptance of this world takes place through the most brutally dehumanizing stripping away of illusions. Two things define Flaubert's heroes: 1) a certain commitment to fiction and imagination (something his villains utterly lack), and 2) a kind of sordid ordinariness, such that they cannot be readily identified as heroes or heroines or as villains (they are only slightly less dislikeable than the villains). They throw themselves into the fictional, illusory realm against a tawdry background of solid middle-class pragmatism and common-sense, but emerge without any distinction: to the contrary, their romantic illusions are revealed as being as tawdry as the world from which they hoped to escape. Unlike the heroes of the 18th century, who approach reality with an innocent freshness, the heroes of Flaubert approach the world expecting it to match up to a preconceived notion of it gleaned from books. Are these illusions any better than the suffocating environment of banality that surrounds them? Flaubert does not make the answer obvious. The illusions held by Flaubert's protagonists are foolish, but necessary bulwarks against the suffocating middle class environment that ultimately destroys them. Habituation in Flaubert is always a defeat (the successful characters in Flaubert are inevitably the most vulgar and unimaginative manipulators of the system.) The defeats of Flaubert's "heroes" are set against the successes of his bourgeois

“villains”. Emma, and then Charles, both fall out of *Madame Bovary* when the bitterness of the actual world proves too harshly uncongenial to their fantasies. The endings (for example, Homais awarded the Legion of Honor) grimly suggests a world going on in utter indifference to the plights of its heroes. Success here has become the domain of a new breed of person: pragmatic and cynical, utterly devoid of curiosity, and thus free from the desperation that propels Flaubert’s heroes into fantasy.

It is thus the whole sordid system that Flaubert appears to be critiquing: both the foolish illusions, and the suffocating environment that makes them necessary. What is clear is that his protagonists can never actually transcend their environment through the mere ardor of their illusions. As Moretti acutely remarks, “In the world of Flaubert the hero desires only what the world itself wishes him to desire (166). The real heroic triumphs in Flaubert do not occur in life, but in a *meta* register: of the organic, perfectly formed novel, and the artist, transmuting tawdry reality into art. It is in the realm of art that this defeat in life can be rendered meaningful.

Flaubert’s heroes, the essence of whose heroism is their rejection of a middle-class notion of “success” for an ultimately fruitless (in the teleological sense) chasing of what turn out to be illusions, morph into Beckett’s heroes, whose fruitless searches for solid meaning progressively cause them to degenerate, until such respectable bourgeois citizens as Moran (in *Molloy*) end up as vagabonds. The idea of the anti-hero emerges

from the notion that worldly success has been fully appropriated by an imaginatively impoverished professional class, and thus, all that can be done is to avoid it, in failure and defeat.

It is because of the possibility it offers to reconcile subject and object that the category of experience – and hence, the emphasis placed on the Cartesian knowledge claim – becomes so central to the *Bildungsroman*. The knowledge claim, in Cartesian fashion, proceeds from a completely self-enclosed individual confronted with the phenomenon of an external world. The individual fashions a hypothesis, using the tools at his disposal – prior experience, logic – and then, for want of anything else, must live with this hypothesis until further experience proves it true or, as it almost inevitably does, faulty. The worlds of Beckett and Flaubert are constructed from this premise.

This can be seen in Flaubert's world primarily through its effects: the ease with which characters thrust their own illusions onto the world, and the webs of lies they create to sustain them. A world in which knowledge is placed in doubt is a world ripe for the transfigurations of illusion. Similarly, a world in which definitive information about what is really happening, what people are really thinking, is almost impossible to come by, is a world in which the lie can be used with impunity. Hence almost every relationship in Flaubert is sustained by some or other form of dishonesty. Charles never even doubts that Emma is being faithful despite the flimsiness of her lies to him. Emma

herself never suspects Rodolphe's self-interested manipulation of her. The "precipices and morasses" in relationships between even the most intimate of partners are demonstrated repeatedly in Frederic's progressively more dishonest liaisons with his friends and lovers. Thus we find, at the fringes of Flaubert's world, characters like Lheureux ("the happy one"), the naked and cynical face of capitalist reality wringing every last centime from those characters who prefer to live in the sweeter world of illusion. Reality, in Flaubert, is the merciless and unforgiving world of the marketplace. His heroes, however, will stumble through illusion after illusion, never drawing closer to this reality but, on the contrary, entangling themselves in every more elaborate constructions. When they are finally confronted by reality, they crumple, defeated and disillusioned.

Hence it is not merely a matter of dishonesty, but a problem of the limits of the human capacity for understanding, expression and communication. Flaubert hints that the ultimate blame lies with language (or at the very least, speech): "the fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in the utter vapidness of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars" (*MB*, 216). This interjection is found during Rodolphe's love-talk with Emma, and it refers not to language as such, but to the

degraded language of social interaction, the clichés of romance. Yet the written word is still in certain cases exempt, if only because Flaubert himself is, as an artist, capable of articulating this very inadequacy.

In this sense Flaubert's painstaking crafting of language, his search for *le mot juste*, is a form of combat against the slippage of language, in the social arena, into a series of conventions that merely approximate that which is to be expressed. Flaubert's stated ambition, at the time he began *Madame Bovary*, was to write "a book about nothing, a book without reference outside itself..., a book that would be almost without a subject, or in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible" (*Letters*, January 16, 1852). Since it proved impossible, Flaubert did the next best thing, and wrote a book about an unremarkable adulterous wife in the provinces, next to which the pure artistry of the work would stand in high relief. Flaubert's plots are almost incidental to the stylistic effects that are achieved with them. The reconciliation of subject and object occurs at the level of art, never within the world of the novel itself. (Beckett's entirely self-contained novelistic systems, on the other hand, dramatize the inevitable failure of synthesis.)

"The narrative point of view and voice, whether it be first person or third person, is characterized by *irony* toward the inexperienced protagonist, rather than nostalgia for youth. There is always a distance between the perspective of the narrator and that of the

protagonist" (Hirsch, 298). The true hero is of course the author in Flaubert, and to an extent in the early Beckett. Later on, however, Beckett will do away with this wise, mature narrator, although the spirit of relentless irony will persist.

One of the less obvious of Flaubert's methods of ironizing his characters is his dedication to pure style. The intricate web of pattern and symmetry that critics have unearthed from *Sentimental Education* is one way in which Flaubert asserts the "art" value of the novel over its subject matter. Flaubert will at times go beyond these subtle orchestrations and deliberately have his characters appear ridiculous – there is often a sense of a latent but ever-pressing hostility towards them. Rodolphe's conquest of Emma, for example, is finally achieved against the backdrop of an agricultural show. Flaubert weaves the prize-giving ceremony into Rodolphe's maneuvering towards his own prize:

"No, though! Tell me it isn't so! Tell me I'll have a place in your thoughts, in your life!"

"Hogs: a tie! To Messieurs Lehérissé and Cullembourg, sixty francs!"

Rodolphe squeezed her hand, and he felt it all warm and trembling in his, like a captive dove that longs to fly away; but then, whether in an effort to free it, or in response to his pressure, she moved her fingers. (168)

Rodolphe and Emma may well be aware that their effusions are taking place alongside the awarding of prizes for livestock, they may even, conceivably (at least, Rodolphe) be aware that there is something ridiculous about this. But what they cannot be aware of is that Flaubert is subtly setting up in the mind of the reader a comparison

between the courtship of Rodolphe and Emma, and the agricultural fair, such that one can say that Rodolphe is “maneuvering towards his own prize” .There are other, more sophisticated ways to interpret this juxtaposition. The point I am making, however, is that a parallel is set up for the reader by the author, unbeknownst to the characters. A scene such as this subtly demonstrates that the author is superior to the characters he depicts, that he is capable of holding himself above the fray and looking down with a clear eye.

Interventions are also made: Flaubert will drop down suddenly and implant a clear-eyed summation among the proceedings. One can still say with Flaubert that he is mining the events presented to the reader for a moral, an observation made from the vantage point of wise disillusionment. These interjections can serve as a transcendence of the squalidness of the events of the novel. The meaning of what transpires is not evident to the characters (even in Emma’s death, she is presented only with an image of blindness – perhaps a recognition of her own illusions, or of the illusion of all striving), but to the artist. Flaubert’s comments extract from the substance of his fictional world certain abstractions.

My fundamental point here is that Flaubert intimates what Beckett will take for granted: a world in which human beings are doomed to live lives of failure and disappointment. Flaubert’s heightened realism, his famous proto-cinematic effects,

signify as much an attempt to “capture” the real as they reveal a desire to turn away from it in disappointment or disgust, to hold it at arm’s length. Flaubert’s work thus inaugurates the aesthetic realm as a substitute reality that operates in rivalry with the real. In Flaubert, we find the familiar surfaces of the everyday middle class world. Flaubert transcends the inadequacy of life in art, from which vantage point he gazes down. This, it seems to me, is the starting point for Beckett, and one can read his trajectory as the progressive refusal of this privileged position.

From the *Bildungsroman* of Defeat to the Defeat of the *Bildungsroman*

Beckett writes of modernity that it is “the breakdown of the object, [or] the breakdown of the subject. It comes down to the same thing – rupture of the lines of communication” (*Disjecta*, 70). The problem of epistemology, then, becomes central: the modernity of his characters is marked by their basic attitude of doubt towards the external world. This is the case too with Flaubert’s characters, who are expected to adapt themselves to a banal and unimaginative middle-class order. While Beckett’s characters struggle with the sheer opacity of the external world, Flaubert’s heroes experience a dissatisfaction with the tawdry data of the given world, which must be supplemented and transfigured. Beckett’s characters bring with them reason, logic, and obstinacy – the

leftovers of a moribund scientific spirit. Flaubert's bring with them the dreams of literature.

The processing of experience – which is the fundamental way in which the subject relates to the object, is then, to my mind, the fundamental domain within which a developmentalist paradigm intervenes, for it is in the processing of experience that the prospect of mending this rift between subject and object is offered. The *Bildungsroman*, which takes as its primary theme the integration of the individual subject with an objective social world, thus leans heavily on narrative as a way of organizing and classifying information. One way of staging this habituation of the subject to the object takes place through a series of encounters between a central protagonist and a surrounding world, encounters that are retrospectively examined, such that they provide a series of steps leading to a final maturity in which the protagonist recognizes his place in the world. Another way is Flaubert's, in which the protagonist experiments with the pure pliability of individual subjectivity, with complete disregard for the objective facts of the external world, until the fissure between fantasy and reality grows too large, and his or her illusions collapse. In both methods, process is central. A third way is Beckett's, in which the protagonist's individuality never resolves itself against an objective external world, and they plod on and on into greater depths of solipsism and unreason.

This idea (by no means unique to Beckett) and its implications are expanded on in his early book *Proust*, which I will go into in some detail as it seems to me crucial in understanding the roots of Beckett's obsession with epistemological problems. What Beckett finds most noteworthy about Proust is that he writes of a world in which a coherent personality is recognized as impossible – the subject is always partly trapped in the past, partly in the present, and unable to form a connection with the real. Individuals are always in the grip of Time, and always altered by Time. The past always remains with them, deforming them: their perception of the world can never be stable, and their actions can never attain a stable personal meaning. They wish for something one day; when they attain it the next day they are someone else, having been changed by time. All intercourse with the external world becomes meaningless in a situation like this. "What is attainment?" asks Beckett, and answers: "The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died – and perhaps many times – on the way. For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one's dinner to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner" (581). The action of Time results in an "unceasing modification of [the] personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis" (581)

This state of things, in which the individual is perpetually at odds with his environment, can only be made livable by making a contract with reality, a contract that guarantees a certain inviolability in the subject's relation to the object such that he can function in the world. This contract is Habit, and hence, our perception of the world is always covered by Habit. "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit." (*Proust*, 582). Habit, however, has to be constantly formed and reformed to adapt to ever-changing conditions, to events that are unforeseen in its curriculum. It is in those moments in which Habit is in transition that one can momentarily grasp, behind the coating, life itself. Those moments of "the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being... The suffering of being: that is, the free play of every faculty." (582). The breakdown places us suddenly in stark relationship to Being.

The old ego dies hard. Such as it was, a minister of dullness, it was also an agent of security. When it ceases to perform that second function, when it is opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept, when, in a word, it betrays its trust as a screen to spare its victim the spectacle of reality, it disappears, and the victim, now an ex-victim, for a moment free, is exposed to that reality. (583)

Being, then, only emerges in those precarious moments when the human subject moves between one makeshift epistemological contract with the world and another; at other times, the Faculties are drugged into inattention by Habit. Beckett's discussion of

Habit clearly functions for him less as an essay at understanding Proust than as a pretext for the formulation of his own aesthetic philosophy. The critique of habit was of course a staple of early 20th century philosophy, found in thinkers as diverse as William James and Martin Heidegger. I want to pick up, however, on Beckett's recourse to the somewhat archaic philosophical vocabulary of the Faculties. It is no accident that Beckett's definition of suffering as "the free play of the faculties" invokes Kant's famous definition of the experience of the beautiful. For Kant (in *The Critique of Judgment*), this free play betokened the subject's recognition of its harmony, both with itself, and with the exterior world. Beckett seems to suggest here a diametrically opposed sense of the function of the aesthetic: that it should disrupt rather than confirm our sense of harmony with the world, that any sense of harmony we might feel is fraudulent. This is of course, in the Kantian schema, to move from the beautiful to the sublime. But it might be more useful to think of this as rather a *reworking* of Kantian aesthetics into Heideggerian existentialism. Indeed, Heidegger's description, of the breakdown or unusability of the tool, which suddenly reveals the user's stark relationship to the being of the world, (*Being and Time*, para 16, p. 68) can be read as the aesthetic rationale of Beckett's writing, where it is in particular the breakdown of *language* that reveals, behind what we had previously taken for granted, the terror of existence.

While Beckett goes on to classify Proust as a reconciler and synthesiser, it is not entirely clear that Beckett sees himself this way, or this role as possible. The condition which Beckett describes here is pure unfreedom: the individual is always the “victim,” and even in those moments when he is released from this bondage, it is not of his own free will: he has been betrayed, and is now exposed to the “spectacle” of reality. Although Beckett couches this as a trans-historical problem of existence, it is hard not to see in it a critique of a particular condition within late modernity in which an accretion and ossification of human symbolic systems has occurred at the same time as reality has become ever more horrifyingly impossible to cope with without the comfort of these systems. The individual finds himself either stifled or terrified.

Beet Country

Beckett’s philosophy might have striven for universality, but the milieu out of which it was formed was, however, distinctly Irish. Many of the essays Beckett wrote around the early and mid 30’s, the period during which he formulated his “anti-style,” concentrate on the national culture of the Irish Free State, recently born from years of intense and violent struggle for independence from Britain. These essays are remarkable for the hostility with which they attack the cultural policy of the young Free State and the cultural movement associated with it, the Gaelic revival.

The cultural politics of the new Free State tended on the whole to be unremarkable: after the violent upheavals of revolution and civil war, the direction of the government as a whole tended towards stability – both the institution of law and order and the cultivation of a stable economy. However, there were two fronts on which Irish policy could be said to have embarked on a radically nationalist path: firstly, the issue of language revival; secondly, censorship. The revival of the Gaelic tongue was attempted through the systematic institution of Gaelic language education nationwide. The ideology underpinning it was clearly articulated by the Education Minister Eoin McNeill: “I believe in the capacity of the Irish people, if they clear their minds, for building up an Irish civilization. I hold that the function of an Irish State...is to achieve that work” (qtd in Brown, 50). The notion here is that intense exposure to the Irish language will purify the Irish of foreign colonizing influences. The state, rather than merely enabling the Irish people, is the primary and ultimate agent of this purification.

The process by which this notion of cultural purity came to hold sway over the country is complex, and involves the transformation of a progressive “Irish Ireland” ideology of the late 19th century into what Terence Brown has called the “cultural exclusivism” of the Free State. The ideas originally articulated by proponents of the “Irish Ireland” movement are clearly powerful: for the Gaelic League, formed in 1893, authentic Gaelic life had managed to escape the universalizing influences that had

distorted local life throughout Europe. They therefore stressed the resilience and the assimilative powers of Gaelic Ireland, which had absorbed and survived centuries of foreign incursions (Brown, 60-68). It is not hard to see how this attachment to the local as a site of resistance in revolutionary Ireland shifts into a belief in cultural protectionism, already enunciated by Gaelic language enthusiasts such as D.P. Moran and Padraic Pearse well before Irish Independence, and ultimately leads, in post-revolutionary Ireland, to the censorship of those materials which might threaten the culture.

Beckett's essays on the literary culture of the Free State have been heavily commented on, and I will pass over them rapidly here. Their central argument essentially comes down to a condemnation of the Celtic Twilight movement – that is, those writers invested in the resuscitation and purveying of a heroic Irish mythology – and the cautious endorsement of those few Irish writers aware of what he calls the “rupture” and whose work in some form conveys it. If his essays on Irish poetry are content to divide the poets between those aware of the rupture, and those content to deliver the “Ossianic goods”, a much clearer vision of the role of the Irish State itself is articulated in a brief essay on censorship, commissioned in 1935 (although it was to remain unpublished in Beckett's lifetime). The Censorship of Publications Act, passed in 1929, led to the institution of a national Censorship Board, which could be thought of as the second prong of the Free State's implementation of a homogeneous Irish identity.

Here the impetus was less Gaelicising than Catholicising. Beckett's "Censorship in the Saorstad" (1935), which consists for the most part in a close and contemptuous reading of the act, is an attack not so much on censorship per se, but rather on the vision of Irishness that underpins it. Beckett was not the first to notice the act's preoccupation with reproduction:

Part 4 enshrines the essence of the Bill and its exciting cause, in the general heading tactfully enveloped among the 'other purposes incidental', the prohibition namely of publications advocating the use of contraceptives, blushing away beyond the endurance of the most dogged reader among the Miscellaneous and General. France may commit race suicide, Erin never will. And should she be found at any time deficient in Cuchulains, at least it shall never be said that they were contraceived. Thus to waive the off chance of a reasonable creature is no longer a mere mortal sin, but a slapup social malfeasance, with corollary in the civic obligation to throttle reason itself whenever it happens to be 'flung' into a form obnoxious to the cephalopods of state. The pure Gael, drawing his breath from his heels, will never be permitted to defile his mind with even such fairly clean dirt as the *Black Girl in her Search for God* so long as he can glorify his body to the tune of a half dozen byblows, white as pthisis, in search for a living. This yoke will not irk him. (86-7)

In the tradition of Swift's famous proposal that the Irish sell their excess children as food, Beckett draws on the image of the Gael as a prolifically fertile and relentlessly small-minded agricultural people. As in Swift, the attack seems to slip from satirizing the view of the Irish held by those in power – the cultural ministers with their notions of the "pure Gael" – to savaging the Irish themselves. The censorship law – whose direct impingement on Beckett seems to him less of a concern than a point of pride – here becomes the occasion for an outright attack on the notion of Irishness held by the Free

State, and also on the Irish (Catholic) people, portrayed not only as anti-intellectual but as socially backward anti-moderns. The Censorship Board serves not so much to proscribe certain cultural practices, as to endow a preexisting cultural backwardness with state sanction: "this yoke will not irk them".

The concern is of course with the effect of censorship on national life. Given the role the Censorship Board was envisioned to play in the production of a national culture, it is of particular interest that the act should concern itself with the actual reproductive life of the Irish family (the act banned all birth control literature without requiring a decision from the censorship board²). In this sense, Beckett is correct to isolate the prohibition of birth control as the "essence" and "exciting cause" of the bill. As in the Monty Python sketch, in which the Catholic mother absentmindedly drops out offspring while washing the dishes, while the father is driven to sell them off en masse to keep the family finances afloat, the nationally sanctioned sexual practices of the "pure Gael" (in the language of the Free State) produce "a half dozen byblows" in the course of his adherence to the Catholic faith. The dangers are threefold: illegitimacy (a "bye-blow" is an "incident", but also slang for an illegitimate child), illness (phthisis: consumption), and indigence (the child will at some point need to make his own way in a social order that is clearly ill-equipped to handle him). The threat here, for Beckett, is to a rational

² For more on the history of the act, see Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands*, 81-102

and modern social order (Beckett elsewhere seems to align himself, surprisingly, with Marie Stopes, the famous sexual reformer and pioneer of family planning), an order in which the immoderate animal drives besieging the human are held in check and controlled. Beckett's ideal society, by implication, is one of healthy and "reasonable creatures", born in wedlock, and assured of gainful employment. Beckett's Protestantism never seems more apparent than here, in its revulsion against the disorder of the physical world.³

Beckett then proposes a structuralist reading of the Act:

Finally to amateurs of morbid sociology this measure may appeal as a curiosity of panic legislation, the painful tension between life and thought finding issue in a constitutional belch, the much reading that is a weariness exorcised in 21 sections. Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter suit well together. Paradise peopled with virgins and the earth with descorticated multiparas. (87)

The notion of a symbolic resolution to a social contradiction is more familiar to us now, although it is striking to see Beckett engaged in what appears to be a form of ideology critique. Beckett's diagnosis of an underlying panic concealed behind the prescriptions of the censorship act also returns us to the model he proposed in *Proust*, in which the perception of an unmanageable reality solicits the response of a protective

³ The shift in Beckett's target towards the Catholicism of the Free State reflects the power relations that obtained at the time: the Free State had from its beginnings allied itself to the Catholic Church, to whom it deferred in matters of education and social policy. While the Gaelicization of the country remained patchy, its Catholicization was almost complete. It was this Catholicism that the social reformers of the Free State harnessed (not, however, without friction).

framework. Beckett reads the act as the expression of a contradiction within the life of the nation, already distorted by the disparity between its large and growing, predominantly illiterate, Catholic class, and a small and largely Protestant class of intelligentsia. The contradiction here, though, is that between the actual lives of the Irish and the “pure Gael” of the national imagination. Beckett makes this clear elsewhere, most explicitly in “Recent Irish Poetry,” in which he castigates the Irish “twilighters,” or antiquarians, for exacerbating precisely this contradiction through what Beckett calls their complacent delivery of the “Ossianic goods”: “The issue between the conventional and the actual never lapses, not even when the conventional and actual are most congruent. But it is especially acute in Ireland, thanks to the technique of our leading twilighters” (*Disjecta*, 71). The attack in “Censorship,” however, is far more vicious: Beckett’s own Protestant distaste for the reproductive and disorderly finds outlet in a scorn for a presumably Catholic willingness to mediate sacred and profane, virgins and “multiparas”. Beckett implies that the Act’s symbolic resolution masks the actual material conditions, that the “sterilization of the mind” functions to allow the “litter” to thrive as “apotheosis”. The two then operate in a cycle of mutual reinforcement, while the contradiction between them is occluded.

A sense of the mechanics of nationhood – of how a nation is imagined and formed, literally, through reproduction and reading (the two aspects of national life over

which the Censorship Board is instituted to exercise control) – runs through the essay, which concludes with a particularly caustic formulation: “We now feed our pigs on sugarbeet pulp. It is all the same to them” (88). The nation as farmyard is an image borrowed and adapted from Stephen Dedalus’ (and by extension Joyce’s) dismissal of Ireland as “the old sow that eats her farrow,” a formulation that figures the Irish people as subject to a cannibalistic nation – from whose depredations they may yet, though the agency of the poet, be liberated. Beckett’s version seems to foreclose the possibility that the Irish subject can be imaginatively redeemed, that the poet, in Stephen’s/Joyce’s words, might yet “forge the uncreated conscience of the race.” For Beckett, the new Irish subject is rather a blind, indiscriminate creature, indifferent to struggles to reform it.

The “sugarbeet” upon which the Irish pigs feed is a specific reference to the Free State’s development of the sugar beet industry, part of its investment in a vision of Ireland as a powerful modern agricultural nation. Beckett’s essay might be read as an attempt to come to terms with the marginality of the artist within this new state: if the problem is that the diet of conservative Catholic Nationalism on which the Irish are fed seems to content them, then there is no space for the writer in the new state. As Peter Martin has argued, the policy of censorship “allowed the Irish Free State to define itself culturally in a way that took control of the cultural revival out of the hands of artists and writers whom the reformers regarded with suspicion” (*Censorship*, 97). For Martin, the

numerous campaigns against censorship mounted by Yeats, AE and others (long predating Beckett's essay) failed because they failed to mobilize popular support, a fact not unconnected to the contempt for conservative Catholicism that runs through them, as well as what must have seemed to the vast majority of Irish to be the elitist position they took, defending the rights of "literature".

One of the most striking elements of this short essay is its style: Beckett's vitriol engenders a tightly wound and somewhat artificial idiom laden with *recherché* terminology – the kind of language unlikely to be understood by the "pure Gael", and in fact probably calculated to offend him. If the audience is not the popular opinion of the pure Gael, neither is it the government minister – in fact, the piece seems to have no ambitions within the political realm, as pamphlet or otherwise. (It was, in fact, never published⁴). With its retraction from the public realm and the redirection of its anger into the world of language, it is clearly of the same caste as his first published novel, *Murphy*, written during the same time period and concerned with the same problem: how to come to terms with Ireland. This leads one to draw some provisional conclusions regarding the provenance and function of Beckett's early style as manifested in both the essay on censorship and *Murphy*.

⁴ Originally commissioned by *The Bookman*, which folded shortly thereafter. Beckett sent it to *transition*, which continually deferred its publication of the piece.

- 1) The Ireland against which both texts set up their attacks is a space ruled over by an overweening figure of Irish national identity – Cuchulain in *Murphy*, the “pure Gael” in “Censorship” – that claims to exercise control over the possibilities of individual lives within the state.
- 2) The intention driving the text is to sever its author from this Irishness, not through the logic of its argumentation (in which it seems hopelessly matched against an opponent invulnerable to the type of attack being leveled at it), but by the sheer astringency of the language itself.
- 3) The psychological dynamics of both texts follow the model proposed by Freud in his *fort-da* game. The author narrates a reality in which he has no control – namely, his complete marginalization from Irish cultural life – and restages it from a position of mastery. This mastery takes the form of a linguistic mastery, a sovereignty within the realm of text.

***Murphy* and Abstraction**

In his famous observation of his grandson's *fort-da* game, Freud hypothesizes that the game is the boy's way of coping with the unpredictable absence and reappearance of his mother, over which he has no control. He takes a passive situation and, by repeating it as a game, now plays an active part, satisfying his desire for mastery. Freud goes on to

suggest a possible element of aggression here: the boy's revenge on his mother for leaving him is channeled into this game: "You're leaving me? OK, then, go, I don't need you!" "Under the dominance of the pleasure principle," writes Freud, "there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind" (Freud, 601). The pleasure people take in watching a tragedy is not unrelated to this, Freud adds. The game, for Freud, plays a critical role in the individual's ability to survive in a world over whose elements he or she has limited control.

With its stylistic aggression and its game-playing, *Murphy* lends itself to explication via Freud's model. What is the passive situation the mastery over which finds its expression in *Murphy*? One could call this, generally, Irishness, and a sense of the politics of the Irish Free State (1922 to 1937, stretching neatly over the years – '34-'36 – during which Beckett was working on *Murphy*), with its general attempt to resuscitate traditional Gaelic culture through forms of institutional Gaelicizing, is crucial to understanding the origins and ends of Beckett's satire. However, Ireland is best thought of as the cauldron out of which Beckett's poetics were born, not the ultimate horizon against which they are to be understood. First one must address the novel in its own terms.

The novel is a vaguely autobiographical “voyage in” that uses the *Bildungsroman* as a template upon which to exposit a cluster of philosophical ideas entertained by Beckett at the time. The narrative is loosely structured around the central trope of escape from constraint. It centers on the character of Murphy, a Dubliner and one-time student of theology, who has left Ireland for London, where he lives with his girlfriend Celia, who works as a prostitute to support her aging father. Murphy is being pursued by his Irish past, in the person of an ex-girlfriend left in Ireland, who has hired an investigator to track him down. Meanwhile, Murphy himself is absorbed in an attempt, not to make a name for himself in his new environs, but to attain a complete and utter torpor, descending into the depths of his mind where “he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute unfreedom” (112) (a chapter is devoted to the cartography of his mind). Harassed by Celia into employment, he ends up as a warder in an insane asylum (a recurrent locale in Beckett’s work), a paradise of “vicarious autology” (189), where he immediately feels at home. After a makeshift heating contraption goes awry, he is gassed in his room and incinerated. His ashes, which his will states are to be flushed down a toilet at the National Theater in Dublin, end up scattered on a bar floor. Meanwhile, his experiment in completely self-sufficient torpor is shown to be inherently flawed and a necessary failure. Dublin, London, and finally the Magdalena Mercyseat: these constitute the three social spaces through which Murphy journeys before his final

decommissioning from the text: a line of flight that leads to oblivion. We never actually see Murphy in Dublin, where he lived before his arrival in London, and the novel therefore *starts* with a situation of exile. *Murphy* has thus already broken from the world of Joyce in its geography.

The central problem of the novel is freedom, or rather the lack of it. *Murphy* opens thus: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on nothing new" (1). The line obviously mimics Ecclesiastes' "There is nothing new under the sun." The novel therefore opens from a vantage point of supreme knowledge: the sun, here the sovereign point from which all human events are to be judged, surveys the futility of an ultimately closed world. But what makes the line peculiarly Beckettian is the dependent clause - "...having no alternative..." - inserted into the statement, "The sun shone...on nothing new." To whom does the possibility of an alternative belong? Does the sun possess some kind of will? Might it decide not to shine? Or does the option weigh rather on the "nothing new", in which case the alternative might rest on the beings that populate the world? In this case, though, it is implied that the sun is somehow put out by having to shine on the same thing again. The line secretly anthropomorphizes the sun by implicitly endowing it with a form of consciousness, while withholding from it any form of agentive will. The sun seems to suffer, but is neither the author of nor the culprit for this suffering; it therefore cannot redeem itself. This is the figure that Beckett will also

use to describe the characters of *Murphy*: the suffering consciousness trapped within the unyielding flesh.

What kind of consciousness is bred by this situation? Philosophically, Beckett's essay on Proust provides several clues as to how to go about understanding the basic problematic of *Murphy*, in particular its fascination with the abstract. The characters in *Murphy*, like Proust's "creatures," cover over their realities with abstractions and laws, some of which contravene the physical laws of the universe. Neary, with his recourse to the Pythagorean *ipse dixit* and reputed ability to stop his heart at will, is the most obviously committed to the world of the abstract. But all of them are committed: indeed, all of the various epistemological models summoned up in *Murphy* – those of William James, Descartes, Geulincx, Pythagoras – serve their various adherents as contracts they have made between themselves and reality. Their obsession with closed systems is nothing more than a desire for an epistemological model that guarantees the subject complete immunity from any intrusion from reality. The choice of system can therefore to some extent be an arbitrary one: Neary may adhere to Pythagoras, Murphy to the zodiac, Wylie to his doctrine of closed systems. (Murphy himself is to some extent exempt from this painful farce, as he attempts to withdraw from the object world – that is, to withdraw entirely from the contractual mode of living in the external world tacitly acceded to by the other characters. His case is discussed later.) The recurrent theme is of

Irishmen trying to escape their Irishness through the universalist metaphysics of a canon of world philosophy.

While Proust's characters move through a relatively organic succession of epistemological contracts with reality, old ones being discarded as they cease to function, new ones adopted to cater for new situations, the characters in *Murphy* cleave to doctrines that are as remote and arbitrary as they are arcane. In doing so, however, they also open themselves to the possibility of crisis, moments in which their systems fail to account for their realities (Neary's rejection by Miss Counihan, Murphy's final epiphany that his quest is hopeless). Neary could be seen as the archetype of this rule of abstraction over the contingent world of becoming. Capable of suspending his heartbeat at will, Neary is an unrepentant Pythagorean. His formidably developed mental faculties have created a being that operates entirely through abstraction such that his expressions of greatest despair are articulated in mathematical form: "Remember there is no triangle, however obtuse, but the circumference of some circle passes through its wretched vertices" (213).

The dominion of abstraction must ultimately be thwarted, of course, and it is the comic drama of this novel to demonstrate those moments in which the subject's fantasy mental realm is finally and triumphantly breached by the external world. One zone of hostility is the body. As Linda Ben-Zvi has argued, Beckett's fiction demonstrates the

body's resistance to being subdued as a mere object of knowledge: "The central given in Beckett's works can be said to be the very recalcitrance of the body against dismissal and its gross insubordination in refusing to assume its place in the Cartesian hierarchy where mind ultimately holds sway" (137). Hence the grotesque and infirm bodies in *Murphy*, endowed by their creator with various afflictions: Miss Carridge's odour, which persists through all attempts at disguise; the hideous deformity inflicted upon Rosie Dew, in which "the thighs are suppressed and the buttocks spring from directly behind the knees" (97) – a condition which Beckett takes great pleasure in explicating – and Cooper's acathisia, his inability to sit. "Wylie and Cooper appeared on the pavement, two tiny heads in the pillories of their shoulders," the narrator says at one point (131): the vast and capacious metaphysical systems summoned up throughout the novel are revealed here, from the outside, to be the frailest and most ridiculous of protections against a circumscribing mass of resistant, irrational flesh.

We should pause at two of these afflictions: Mrs. Dew's "Panpygoptosis" and Cooper's "acathisia": here the narrator seems to have actually fabricated conditions that do not exist in the real world. The suffering in these cases, therefore, should be seen as originating not in the world of the novel, but from the hand of the author. It appears that the "little world" of the novel is subject to the various tyrannies of its narrator – that the

narrator has overstepped the bounds of his authorial sovereignty, traditionally conceived, to the end of inflicting real damage upon his characters.

This becomes clearer when one examines the operations of this narrator. As numerous commentators have pointed out, the world of *Murphy* operates according to mechanisms of pattern, logic, geometry, and system under which the traditional illusions of living and breathing character are suffocated⁵ – the characters become, as the narrator himself states, puppets (122). In the same way that its protagonist has found ways to exploit his mind-body split (his “psycho-somatic fistula”) to take refuge from the world in the chaotic torpor of his inner mind, the novelist has found ways to exploit a congenital dualism in the mechanics of the novel – namely, the split between signifier and signified. If the clinical precision of Flaubert is tempered with an edge of hostility (Flaubert sharpens the blade of his style on the whetstone of his middling characters), the rampant stylistic abstractions in *Murphy* often amount to an outright assault on its characters. In this sense, the novel can be said to enact the perceptual dilemma suffered by its characters.

⁵ Rubin Rabinovitz has saved me the trouble of a great deal of research by methodically unearthing the immensely detailed layer of pattern and symmetry embedded in *Murphy* – a layer that is inevitably passed over on one’s first reading of the novel. Specifically, he points to the way in which these patterns operate in twos: actions are repeated twice, phrases are repeated twice, locations are doubled, allusions are made twice or to pairs of figures (Narcissus and Belacqua, Ixion and Tantalus). Rabinovitz boils this down to a series of antitheses: symmetry versus asymmetry, mental reality versus physical reality, and form versus content. “The style whispers about the perfection of what might be; the content grumbles about the chaos of what was; and together, irreconcilable, they reveal what is” (85).

Beckett illustrates this technique in one of the most emotionally pregnant episodes in the novel: Murphy's landlady Miss Carridge's enters the room of the "old boy," Murphy's neighbor, only to discover that he has killed himself:

She stood at the foot of the stairs while Miss Carridge climbed them softly, listened at the door, knocked, knocked louder, pounded, rattled the handle, opened with her duplicate key, took a few steps in the room, then stood still. The old boy lay curled up in meanders of blood on her expensive lino, a cut-throat razor clutched in his hand and his throat cut in effect. With a calm that surprised her Miss Carridge surveyed the scene. It was so exactly what she would have expected, and must therefore at some time or other have imagined, that she felt no shock, or very little. She heard Celia call "What?" She said to herself, if I call a doctor I must pay his fee, but if I call the police... The razor was closed, a finger was almost severed, a sudden black flurry filled the mouth. These details, which she could never have imagined, caused her gorge to rise, these and others too painful to record. She came speeding down the stairs one step at a time, her feet going so fast that she seemed on little caterpillar wheels, her forefinger sawing horribly at her craw for Celia's benefit. She slithered to a stop on the steps of the house and screeched for the police. She capered about the street like a consternated ostrich, with strangled distracted rushes towards the York and Caledonian streets in turn, embarrassingly equidistant from the tragedy, tossing up her arms, undoing the good work of the samples, screeching for police aid. Her mind was so collected she saw clearly the impropriety of letting it appear so. When neighbours and passers-by had assembled in sufficient numbers, she scuttled back to hold her door against them.

The police arrived and sent for a doctor. The doctor arrived and sent for an ambulance. The ambulance arrived and the old boy was carried down the stairs, past Celia stuck on the landing, and put into it. This proved that he still lived, for it is a misdemeanor to put a corpse, no matter how fresh, into an ambulance. But to take one out contravenes no law, by-law, section or sub-section, and it was perfectly in order for the old boy to consummate, as he did, his felony on the way to the hospital. (135-6)

In the moment of shock, the text shifts to a fluid evocation – "The razor was closed, a finger almost severed, a sudden black flurry filled the mouth" – then recoups itself and

switches back to the rigorous abstraction that comprises the bulk of the novel: a rupture in the fabric of the novelistic world that is contained by the reinstatement of a fastidious order. The pain of the world, transmuted by style, one might be tempted to say – except that the style here has transmuted the raw material of the world so far as to parody it, to cast it into disrepute, and reinstate the rules of what Beckett calls in *Proust* Habit. The Proustian transition from one Habit to the next, precipitated by the moment of shock, seems almost to be enacted at the level of the text. This becomes even clearer in the second paragraph of the passage, a vicious parody of the laws governing suicide. (The passage is, incidentally, based on a real incident experienced by Beckett – see *Letters*, 274-5). The violence of the old boy's suicide becomes the pretext for a precise comic routine that relies for its effect on playing with the intransigent absurdities of the legal system. The narrative turns rapidly into a comic exercise in deductive reasoning – in short, the management of a chaotic event by the filtering of it through the net of abstraction. The project of *Murphy* can then be read as the relentless re-containment of the inchoate sufferings of the individual ego by the narrative voice. This voice must continually escape from the sensory experience of the world into the abstractions of conceptuality.

But what about Murphy, who of all the characters is not, as the narrator informs us, a puppet? Murphy may have left Dublin, but he refuses to arrive in London. His

adventure is, as Patrick Bixby has noted, a satire on the classic “voyage in” narrative, the provincial arriving in the metropolis to make his name and fortune (Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* is of course another in this genre). Bixby argues that Murphy’s experience is one typical of the motley stratum of immigrants from the Empire who have arrived in London in the early 20th century, and goes on to argue that his ritual escapes into his mind stem from “a utopian desire to withdraw from the insistent degradation and commodification of everyday life in London, however alienated and mystified that impulse might be” (Bixby, 101). Bixby therefore dismissed this behavior, and instead identifies the critical aspects of the novel in Murphy’s dromomania, his strategic engagement with the streets of London. But let us instead examine what exactly the nature of Murphy’s withdrawal is. Murphy’s meditative withdrawals cannot quite be completely explained by the disdain with which the English view him, although the disdain is certainly extreme (“ “E don’t look rightly human to me”” states one prospective employer [77]). They are rather in keeping with the vision of freedom articulated by Arnold Geulincx, the 17th century Belgian Occasionalist, which Beckett himself saw as lying at the heart of his writing⁶. Geulincx’ denial of material causality (all causality proceeds from the mind of God, he argues) leads to him to the position that

⁶ From a letter to Sigle Kennedy: “If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my points of departure would be the ‘Naught is more real...’ [Democritus] and the ‘Ubi nihil valet...’ [Geulincx] both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational.” (*Disjecta*, 113).

the subject is merely a spectator within his body. This view of complete physical restriction alongside a limited degree of mental freedom leads to an ethic of quietistic inwardness, and to Murphy's ethic: where you are worth nothing, there you want nothing. Murphy's solution is to practice forms of escape into the mind, which "functioned not as an instrument but as a place" (178).

Murphy's demise, in chapter 9, occurs as the result of a complex set of balances and maneuverings, a kind of philosophical endgame played by the author in which Murphy is finally checked and mated. (Beckett even provides instructions as to how the action is to be understood in the form of an epigraph from Malraux: "*Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens*" [It is difficult for one who lives outside the world not to seek out his own kind] (156)). When Murphy is finally goaded into taking a job as an orderly in the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, or M.M.M, an insane asylum, he finds the environment congenial. Not only does the institution exist in a kind of no-man's-land "in the boundary of two counties" (156), but its inmates can be conveniently idealized by Murphy. The inmates, for Murphy, are to be viewed "not as banished from a system of benefits but as escaped from a colossal fiasco" (178), and Murphy sees in them refined versions of what he himself would like to be. It is here, however, that the contradiction of his philosophical system is revealed to him, in the course of a game of chess with Mr. Endon, the inmate whose obliviousness Murphy most seeks to emulate.

After the game ends with Mr. Endon's pieces reassembled in their starting positions, Murphy undergoes a kind of existential implosion. Looking into Mr. Endon's eyes he comes to the conclusion that "Mr. Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen" (250). Murphy's mind then proceeds to evacuate itself of all connections to a stable world of identity, in a passage from which Deleuze surely borrowed for the opening of *Difference and Repetition*: "He could not get a picture in his mind of any creature he had met, animal or human. Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight before him" (252). Shortly thereafter, Murphy is gassed to death in his garret. The death is peculiar, since, in Geulincxian fashion, it is caused by no material agent. We are to assume that he has been killed by the author, who subtly indicates the method of his murder: "The gas went on in the w.c., excellent gas, superfine chaos" (253). The act thus becomes, if we continue with Geulincx (for whom all material events are effected by divine causes), the intervention of God in the material world of causality, God in this case being none other than the author. The conclusion that must be reached is that it is the author who plays the role, not so much of villain, but of sovereign. For each of the cruel injustices that are suffered in the fictional world by his characters, the author may choose to magnify it into grotesquerie, jeer at it, or, on occasion, sympathize.

This provides one solution to the problem of unfreedom. Since Murphy himself cannot escape, Beckett as author does it for him. Or more precisely, the author demonstrates the impossibility of freedom within the "great world", but in the process constructs his own domain of freedom through writing. Since the fantasy cannot be realized at level of plot, it is realized at level of style.

The freedom here becomes the freedom to do as he likes with his characters. This is not so much freedom as the assumption of sovereignty. The construction of elaborate textual designs, the patterns, the balletic choreographies, the puppeteering, the weaponization of words: all of this implies an author who is not merely a benign arranger and moralizer, but the omnipotent force over the text.

One must therefore examine more closely the narrative texture itself, within which the secret laws of Beckett's universe are hidden. On reading solely the story of Murphy, the novel may still be understood to be working within the grammar of humanism, with its thematics of suffering, dignity, redemption. Yet the moment the reader attends to the surface textures of the narrative, sifted through an obscure lexicon that hints not so much at deep learning as at mania, an entirely different aspect of Beckett comes to the fore. Murphy's suit is "not green, but aeruginous" (71); the London streets that Murphy roams in his quest for employment are precisely mapped and named; times and dates are submitted to a precise calculus (the moon, we are told at the beginning of chapter 3,

“was 29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years” [26]). The specificity of description does not impress with the detail of a deeply imagined world; to the contrary, it creates a heightened sense of abstraction, as if things were not just being described as they lay there, but were being willfully bound to a specific datum. The effect is not startling verisimilitude, but rather the sense that the objects of the novel are in thrall to a crippling and unjust system. (The prevalence of obscure vocabulary denoting connection is telling: syzygy [yoke; pair; union], seneschalesque [relating to the senior servant of a household]; fistula [a narrow passage or duct formed by disease], etc.: as if the words themselves are pointedly noting their own bondage to language).

The lapidary precision of the language is its most obvious quality, although it is certainly not the same precision as Flaubert’s. Beckett’s appropriation of language in *Murphy* highlights its systemic properties – its existence as an abstract system. Implanted with obscure vocabulary and perverse idiomatic devices, it becomes strange and mechanistic. One could say that Beckett’s view of language is that it is primarily an impediment: his letter to Axel Kaun, written in 1937, a year after he had finished *Murphy*, states his approach to language with a surprising explicitness:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or Nothingness) behind it...Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it already has come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that

might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole into it after another, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (172)

Beckett is then confined to using language as a means to do away with language. His early method, in *Murphy*, is efficient misuse. He exploits the large cargo of idiomatic expressions and habits of speech that have become ossified features of the English language. In many cases, he merely inverts one's expectations of how the language will function: "On this part of myself that I am about to indigest may the lord have mercy" (81); "the encounter, on which so much unhinges" (114); or the many inversions that Murphy's actions are subject to: he "lapsed into consciousness" (105), his "regress" is slow.

Having disrupted the easy referentiality of language, Beckett then proceeds to demonstrate the way in which his language can function entirely independently of the external content to which it refers. "His acathisia was deep-seated and of long standing" he writes of the character Cooper. Cooper suffers from a peculiar inability to sit (acathisia); this sentence tells us that this malady is deeply ingrained and that he has suffered from it for a long time. Yet it also tells us something else entirely: the joke embedded in this sentence is entirely independent from its referent in the external world, and depends purely on the way the words "sitting" and "standing" can be pulled out from beneath the idiomatic forms into which they generally disappear. This is not so

much a pun as a game being played with language, a game in which the language's ossified history is exhumed. The author is playing with the properties of the language as pure sign without a signifier.

The argument I am making is that the abstracted language here, which initially seems to function as part of the constrictive mechanism of the novel, is really a space in which the author can exercise his freedom. We can now return to our starting point: how is *Murphy's* textual modernism related to Ireland? On the one hand, the narrator's derisive contempt for all things Irish is hard to ignore: he ruthlessly mocks Irish attempts to construct and perform a local culture and deploys the most degrading of English stereotypes about the Irish against them. One finds an exemplar of the Celtic Twilight tradition in the person of Austin Ticklepenney. Miss Counihan (whose name echoes that of Kathleen ni Hounihan) is, the narrator states, "quite exceptionally anthropoid" for an Irish girl (118). Yet, as Pascale Casanova points out, the novel's relentless cataloguing of and derision for all aspects of Irish life point to an ambivalence within Beckett, where "his very insistence – the systematic, fanatical opposition – demonstrates the country's sway over him" (Casanova, 40). The novel can be read as a failure to jettison Ireland, but it can also be read as the attempt to find a literary form in which Ireland can be satisfactorily dealt with.

The scene, clearly calculated to provoke, of Neary bashing his head against the buttocks of the statue of Cuchulain (hero of Irish mythology, and of a number of poems by W.B. Yeats) in the General Post Office (site of the Easter Rebellion), has of course not gone unnoticed⁷. Less commented on is the curious letter in which Beckett asks an Irish friend to measure for him the height of these buttocks from the ground. Beckett's friend A.J. Leventhal recalls that: "[Beckett] sent me a post-card [from London]. Would I go to the post office in Dublin and measure the distance between the ground and Cuchulain's backside?" (qtd. In Casanova, 39). Why this precision in Beckett's planning of the Cuchulain scene, the calculation of the physical possibilities that obtain in Neary's attempt to bring disrepute upon a national myth? Here the kind of mensural realism I've been describing functions to insist on the limitedness of the empirical body in those instances in which it is faced with the supra-individual, the mythic, the nation-state: entities unrestricted by the limits of flesh.

The final chapters of the novel recount the farcical laying to rest of Murphy, and are notable for the vigor with which they insist on the Irishness of the preceding story. The birthmark on Murphy's posterior inspires in Neary visions of "Clonmachnois on the slab, the castle of the O'Melaghlines, meadow, eskers, thatch on white, something red, the

⁷ Terence Brown describes the way in which heroic symbols – like Cuchulain – were revived around the turn of the century in order to replace what were seen as the more hackneyed Celtic symbols of the past (68-72).

wide bright water, Connaught" (267), while the brief final chapter ends on a wistful lyricism, as Celia goes kite flying with her uncle and feels "that uncton of soft sunless light on her eyes that was all she remembered of Ireland" (280). These two nostalgias for Ireland have different valences, the first mockingly reinscribing the dead Murphy, who tried so insistently to escape from the world of nationalities, as Irish; the second more nostalgic, a valediction to Ireland.

The major characters in this London novel are of Irish provenance, and their suffering – from what the narrator terms *eleutheromania*, mania for freedom – is identified as an Irish malady. Tellingly, *eleutheromania* is the most consistent Irish trait in the novel. One of the painful symmetries of the novel is that the desire for freedom seems to exist in direct proportion to the degree of constraint.

Murphy ultimately takes up, mimics, and amplifies in its form the very structures that it detests. Underneath his tirades against the Irish Free State is the suggestion that it was at bottom a missed opportunity, perhaps the last of the missed opportunities, and that the exile from a national space is henceforth permanent. Beckett's characters are thus condemned to a world of constraint. The novel's heightened representation of the latter paradoxically serves to reveal what is usually lost underneath it. "The wild and unreal dialogues," Beckett writes of *Murphy*, "are the comic exaggeration of what

elsewhere is expressed in elegy, namely, if you like, the Hermeticism of the spirit”
(*Disjecta*, 103).

From the *Bildungsroman* of Defeat to the Defeat of the *Bildungsroman*, Pt 2: *Watt*

The style of *Watt* marks a fundamental break with that of the earlier work, and its ramifications clearly extend well beyond the cosmetic appearance of the narrative. I have suggested that *Murphy* be thought of as attempting to pose a private authorial sovereignty in response to a revulsion against the possibilities of sovereignty on offer within the Irish Free State. With *Watt*, we can say that the writing now divests itself of authorial sovereignty: it cannot crystallize itself into Flaubertian insight, nor can it take refuge in a sovereign language that violates the fabric of the represented world, as in *Murphy*. Instead, the author here is at the reverse end of sovereignty: not the author of *Murphy*, who knows all, and knowing all, disdains it; but rather, knowing almost nothing, casts even this into doubt. (This is of course its own form of power). In *Watt*, there are no traumatic confrontations with reality – reality is, as it were, bracketed. The transcendence of the author is now foreclosed: he now occupies the same position of ignorance as his characters.

The inability to know what has really happened is then the central dynamic of *Watt*. It is allegorized in the plot itself, in which an itinerant wanderer named Watt

preoccupied with penetrating the nature of external reality stumbles into the estate of the mysterious Knott who continually thwarts knowing. In response to the question – what? – Watt receives the answer, not. The filtering of information is encoded in the text itself. The narrative we read is supposedly written down by a character called Sam, who met Watt in an insane asylum, where Watt dictated to him a story concerning Watt's inability to get to the bottom of the mystery of Knott. The chain, from Knott to Watt to Sam to Samuel Beckett, who creates Sam) is a long one, and liable to fall into error, especially when confessions like this are made by Sam:

Mention has already been made of the difficulties that Watt encountered in his efforts to distinguish between what happened and what did not happen, between what was said and what was not, in Mr Knott's house. And Watt made no secret of this, in his conversations with me, that many things described as happening, in Mr Knott's house, and of course grounds, perhaps never happened at all, or quite differently, and that many of the things described as being, or rather as not being, for these were more important, perhaps were not, or rather were all the time. But apart from this, it is difficult for a man like Watt to tell a long story like Watt's without leaving out some things, and foisting in others. And this does not mean either that I may not have left out some of the things that Watt told me, or foisted in others that Watt never told me, though I was most careful to note down all at the time, in my little notebook. (126)

To read *Watt*, one is forced to perform a series of decodings and decryptions. In one of the extended skits in the novel, Watt and Sam go for daily walks in the ground of the asylum, during which Watt relates the story of his time with Knott. Watt speaks in code, starting off inverting the order of words in the sentence, and later, once Sam grows used to this, inverting instead the order of letters in the words, then the order of sentences in

the period, and all possible permutations, until finally he begins to “invert, no longer the order of the letters in the word together with that of the sentences in the period, but that of the letters in the word together with that of the words in the sentence together with that of the sentences in the period” (168). Here is the uncoded version of Watt’s final permutation:

Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin fo trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On. Tonk ot klat taw? On. Tonk ta kool taw? On. Taw to kool tonk? Nilb, mun, mud. Tin fo trap, yad la. Nem owt, dis yb dis. (168)

It can be decoded as follows:

Sid by sid, two men. Al day, part of nit. Dum, num, blin. Knot look at Wat? No. Wat look at Knot? No. Wat talk to Knot? No. Knot talk to Wat? No. Wat den did us do? Niks, niks, niks. Part of nit, al day. Two men, sid by sid.

[Side by side, two men. All day, part of night. Dumb, dumb, blind. Knott look at Watt? No. Watt look at Knott? No. Watt talk to Knott? No. Knott talk to Watt? No. What then did us do? Nix, nix, nix. Part of night, all day. Two men, side by side].

The reality presented “unmediated” in the realist novel is now presented as garbled, needing to be decoded before it can be understood. At the core of this encoding, furthermore, lies an image of the failure of communication. The world of other people, despite all attempts to decode it, remains closed off.

Varieties of the Body-Politic in Watt

How does the loss of sovereignty in the textual realm reflect upon the nature of sovereignty in the Ireland that the text appears to represent? One of the questions commentators on *Watt* have tried to answer is where to place the novel geographically: is it to be understood primarily as an Irish novel that happens to have been written in France during the war? Or is it really a novel about a catastrophic war that takes the disguise of a Big House novel? Written in the remote mountain village of Roussillon in the south of France while Beckett was on the run after his Resistance activities had been exposed, its themes of confusion, survival, and uncertainty would appear to derive directly from Beckett's war experience. On the other hand, its setting, characters, and conflicts are unmistakably Irish. Some of the classic readings of the novel resolve this by separating form and content: for Hugh Kenner, for example, the novel derives its categories from Beckett's experience during the Occupation, even if it takes its contents as Ireland (Kenner 1973, 73). This, however, is too neat a division, as recent criticism exploring the Irish roots of Beckett's poetics clearly demonstrates. For one, many of the "categories" informing the novel – including its doggedly irrational pursuit of rationality – belong just as much to the history of Irish colonization as to one of the war. A later generation of critics will thus see the novel as at bottom Irish in both intent and execution. John Harrington emphasizes "its excavation from specifically Irish, local cultural paradigms one of the more influential representations in literary modernism of

a general, cosmopolitan intractability" (109)⁸. More recently, Bixby rejects outright Kenner's claims on behalf of a cosmopolitan modernity in order to read Beckett as a postcolonial writer, although in order to do so he must also reject critical focus on its formal innovation. Is it not possible, however, that Beckett fits the mould neither of postcolonial subject, nor of cosmopolitan? Has he rather ended up in a no-man's land where the loss of the nation is not made up for by a corresponding purchase upon a cosmopolitan space?

The relation of the text's formal innovation to Ireland is indeed complex. That the main action of *Watt* takes place on an estate presided over by a Mr. Knott lends the novel to being read as engaging with the long history of English colonial presence in Ireland. Beginning in the early 1600s, what Roy Foster has called the "administrative conquest" of Ireland was set in motion through the creation of plantations. The intention was to landscape a mostly rural Ireland into village patterns structured around the local plantation estate, and thereby to effectively modernize Ireland, to lift it out of the disorder – Gaelicisim – in which it languished. Modern historians have pointed out the ways in which this putative disorder rested in large part on a misunderstanding of

⁸ "*Watt* extracts...intellectual and political impasse from conventions common over a period of Irish social and literary culture" (111-2); "[The] narrative elements in *Watt* have been treated most often solely in formalistic terms, but these precedents alone also suggest the specifically Irish context. The issue of rhetorical detachment from 'material' for fiction, just the detachment that may make *Watt* appear irrelevant to Ireland, is a consistent problem in Beckett's work and in Irish literature..." (113)

the complex structures of Irish social life. Nevertheless, the project of Anglicization – a fundamentally colonial project – justified itself by recourse to claims of reason and rationalization: illegitimization of ancient Brehon law, the institution of stable modes of land measurement and division. The result was “social *bouleversement*”: ancient scions of Gaelic chieftainry working the land their clan had owned. By the 18th century, with the beginnings of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, this had become the tradition of the Big House, with an attendant body of literature that addressed its peculiar status in Ireland.

With its roots in the English colonization of Ireland, the Big House comes to occupy a distinctly isolated place in the political geography of the Free State. This is most clearly seen in the torching of 192 houses between the years 1921 and 23, a series of acts which throws into relief its long history of isolation from Ireland as a whole. The Big House, in its fragility and distinct cultural valence, becomes a critical site in the literary contestations over contemporary Irish culture, particularly for Protestant writers. For example, in the poetry of Yeats, whose nationalist sympathies are always at war with his horror of populist chaos, the fate of the Big House comes to represent a refined but fragile civilization toppled by the mob: “...all is changed, that high horse riderless...” (Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931; qtd in Brown, 122).

This has led historically minded critics to read the novel as working within the tradition of the “Big House novel”, or at least as undermining that tradition. The

radically disruptive style of the novel, the argument goes, does not cover over the underlying Irish reality that is being represented. These critics are of course marking their own distance from the first wave of Beckett critics, who tended to read the novel as exclusively preoccupied with the forms and protocols of Western rationalism. However, their efforts have tended to rob the novel of its most powerful element: that is, its uncanny stylistic effects.

Beckett's use of the Big House as locale is less polemical than Yeats': there is no tragedy attached to the Big House, as there is in Yeats, and no implied call for cultural reevaluation. Neither, it would have to be said, does his use of the Big House reveal it as the kind of heart of imperial darkness that Patrick Bixby has argued for⁹. What we find instead is merely a slow and persistent madness. The house itself seems to have no origin and no end (we are informed of an endless chain of servants stretching in to the past), and persists in utter dysfunction. A whole host of paradigmatic scenes from the colonization of Ireland are replayed within the novel, chief among these the two main interpolated tales of Watt's narrative: the anthropological farce of Mr. Louit and his mathematical prodigy Nackybal, which I will not address here, and the morbid history of the Lynch family, apparently remnants of the Irish peasantry living as tenants upon

⁹ He argues that "Beckett's novel may be seen less as a kind of formal exercise, merely mocking inadequacies of language and epistemology, than as a parodic and satirical novel that mimics the protocols of realist fiction in order to criticize the Big House as the heart of irrationality, chaos, and darkness" (Bixby,133)

Knott's estate. The whole affair is headed by the mysterious Knott, who nominally occupies the position of sovereign within this space.

Let me briefly discuss these two parallel economies, or bodies-politic (that of Knott and that of the Lynches). It is, somewhat surprisingly, not at all difficult to see elements of clear social critique in the representation of the estate owner. Although putatively the most powerful figure in the novel, he remains, as part of the novel's game, notoriously mysterious. A full description of the person and habits of Knott only occurs quite late in the narrative, but when it does, it covers a full thirteen pages. This doesn't mean, however, that it tells us anything about Knott: "With regard to the so important matter of Mr Knott's physical appearance, Watt had unfortunately little or nothing to say. For one day Mr Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middlesized, yellow and ginger" (209). Knott's attire and daily routines are similarly subject to almost infinite possibility. Watt does postulate one piece of knowledge regarding Knott, namely that "except, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, Knott needed nothing, as far as Watt could see" (202); later: "And Mr Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease" (203). Watt's description of Knott as heedless aristocrat, unconnected to the pressing fixities of the world, gives us a

perverse version of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Beckett would have encountered Hegel via Kojève, who was in Paris at the same time as Beckett). Kojève writes that the master "can be satisfied only by recognition from one whom he recognizes as worthy of recognizing him" (19). Not only is the form of recognition provided by Watt highly suspect, but the demand for recognition on the part of Knott seems unexpressed. As Hegelian slave, Watt is also deficient, failing to manifest any control of the concrete reality of the world, and therefore failing to pose any kind of threat to the "mastery" of Knott. It is also unclear what the sources of Knott's power are: their origins are part of the mystery of Knott. Knott and his endless procession of servants therefore come to constitute a strange, almost immaterial and abstract social order, uncontaminated by material problems of reproduction, subsistence, policing (nobody protests of abuse or exploitation), and not subject to time or history. The apparent complexity of its organization, with an elaborate system of servants and rituals has been set in place since time immemorial.

The counterpoint to the Knott estate is the Lynch family. The Lynch family is effectively summoned into being through Watt's reflections upon the dog that appears to eat Knott's leftovers. Their precarious dependence upon Mr. Knott's house and beleaguered existence – not only extreme poverty, but physical ailments, disease, congenital afflictions – is only able to be sustained through their tremendous

reproductive capacity. The Lynch family thus recalls the tirade against the “pure Gael” in Beckett’s censorship essay. The Lynch family has set its sights on transcending its worldly squalor through the achievement of its “millennium” – that is, reaching the sum total age of 1,000 years, a goal which is continually thwarted through unforeseen deaths in the clan. Beckett is more willing to empathize with the misery of the lives at issue: “Watt had not been four months with Mr. Knott when Liz the wife of Sam lay down and expelled a child, her twentieth, with the greatest of ease as may well be imagined” (104). (This is narrated in a prose that hovers undecidably between arch melodrama (“If all were spared, the living spared, the unborn spared...But all were not spared” [104]) and dry taciturnity – not so much a drawing away from the material as a recounting of it without a moral interface.)

This clearly amounts less to realist social critique than to a satire, even going so far as to announce the prohibition, in the final line of the novel, of any allegorical form of reading: “No symbols where none intended” runs the final line of the novel

What is the function of these images of bodies-politic in Beckett’s work?

It must be kept in mind that, even after Beckett had effectively left Ireland for good (with the infamous proclamation “rather France in wartime than Ireland in peace”) he never reattached his allegiance to any other nation. His various attachments to causes – for example, the French Resistance – were provisional affairs about which Beckett

tended to be self-effacing. The need to assert for himself a space within (or against) the Irish imaginary seems to have given way to an exploration, rather, of the possibilities that obtain in this new no-space for which the Big House has come to stand. This can be seen in the text: the clear distinction between the different spaces in *Murphy* – specifically, Dublin, London, and the “third spaces” of the insane asylum, and of Murphy’s mind – no longer exists in *Watt*. The entire narrative world seems to function as a third-space, within which various grotesque and improbable communities form.

Critics who read the novel politically should expand their critical lens to include those aspects of the text less assimilable to the paradigm of subversion and mockery. Witness those scenes in which Watt uses his position of impotence to explore radically other forms of sovereignty. Here is Sam relating the events of his walks in the garden with Watt:

But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt by the stream. They were long and black. We brought them such titbits from our ordinary as rinds of cheese, and morsels of gristle, and we brought them also bird’s eggs, and frogs, and fledglings. Sensible of these attentions, they would come flocking round us at our approach, with every sign of confidence and affection, and glide up our trouserlegs, and hang upon our breasts. And then we would sit down in the midst of them, and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog, or a baby thrush. Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative.

It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God. (156)

There is no indication in the narrative of there being anything amiss in this scene – indeed, it seems to deliberately aim for the same unruffled, punctilious, vaguely lyrical tone as the relation of, say, Watt’s spending the night in a ditch. The motif of the dysfunctional body-politic – the squalid community presided over by a deranged sovereign – returns here yet again. (In *Murphy*, one can think of the insane asylum, presided over by the Clinch clan, as one instance of this). If not itself a symbol for Ireland, it can still be said to perform a particular function in Beckett’s fictional imaginary, in which the rejection of a role within the creation of an Irish nation is offset by the insistent return within his work of substitute communities. (The community of two is of course the paradigmatic Beckettian situation). In the above passage, Watt and Sam figure as maternal figures, nurturing the “flock” of rats, which, in a particularly grotesque turn on the mothering motif, they suckle. The turn to “cannibalism” occurs quite logically here, although no rationale is given for their actions. What is explained is their post facto consensus that they have assumed the role of God, the supreme figure of radical sovereignty (one wonders exactly what other hypotheses were exchanged, though, in arriving at this conclusion). The community imagined, in any case, is one ungoverned by law, ethical or otherwise. It is the pure state of exception, in which the suckling of the rat, the feeding of the frog to the rat, the feeding of the thrush to the rat, and the feeding of the rat to its parent, all occupy morally equivalent positions.

This can be contrasted with an episode in which is described Watt's handling of the key to the garden shed. At first, Watt is responsible for daily handing over the key to the estate caretaker, Mr. Graves. Watt's feeling for Mr. Graves, initially "a little short of liking," abruptly wanes, and Watt takes to leaving the key out overnight for Graves to retrieve early in the morning. "Then one bitter night," the narrator relates, "Watt left his warm bed and went down, and took in the key, and he wrapped it in a snippet of blanket, that he had snipped, from his own blanket. And then he put it out again, under the stone" (145). This sudden and unpredictable burst of care for the non-human world will become a feature of Beckett's later work (it reappears in Molloy's careful husbanding of his stones), made all the more striking by its coexistence with the reckless violence that occurs just as unexpectedly (Molloy at one points clubs a stranger to death).

What conclusions can we reach after these observations? The course we have charted from Flaubert, a course which sees the status of the novel within the social world radically metamorphose, seems to reach a certain end-point in *Watt*. In Flaubert, to recap, the novelist, through his recourse to a still intact high-literary language, is able to rise above and comment upon a degraded social reality. By the time we reach Beckett's *Watt*, the novel itself is terminally mired in an inoperative reality. The novel's ability to

structure and make sense of social reality appears to have not merely eroded but completely broken down.

In *Watt* this breakdown consists of what I will term its two forms of delirium: on the one hand, a *bureaucratic delirium*, in which the procedures of logically thinking through and ordering the events of the novel are seized upon and ransacked. On the other, one finds an *ethical delirium*, in which the actions determinative of a character's relation to the world cease to obey any master code. The bureaucratic delirium can be said to be working against the long history of the English administrative conquest of Ireland, which took the forms of a rationalizing of the Irish people and countryside. The ethical delirium is harder to classify. My contention has been that it has its roots in Beckett's experimentations with the limits of authorial sovereignty as a site of resistance to other, extradiegetic ("real") forms of sovereignty, of power. The original "real" forms of sovereignty are refracted into the obscene forms of sovereignty one finds in the narrator's role in *Murphy* and in *Watt's* community of rats.

These observations serve to place Beckett's writing within the school of "alterity ethics" – a move long since made by Beckett criticism, particularly the French school. Shane Weller, discussing this strand of criticism, argues that it is precisely in the incalculability of the ethical actions described by Beckett's writing, their radical otherness, that Beckett's writing is supremely ethical. Its unmasterable otherness serves

as a point of resistance to both the totalizing discourse of History and the programmatic discourse of Politics¹⁰.

Beyond the ethics or not of Beckett's writing, the return of community in this obscene and grotesque form is a phenomenon worth examining. After Ireland is rejected as a site of community, one can see in the writing the reappearance of various substitute communities, imaginary or impossible. The body-politic, excoriated and rejected in the censorship essay, nonetheless continually returns in increasingly irrecuperable and distorted forms, acting as a substitute community that proves unsustainable and is discarded. They prove to be, in the words of Watt, not "fixed and stable" entities but merely "paradigms" (131). This is a feature of Beckett's writing until the end: the dysfunctional body-politic appears most explicitly in his late short piece, *The Lost Ones*, but is present elsewhere too, not explicitly in the referential content of the writing but in the domain of textuality itself. The continual listing, combining, and paring down of linguistic resources restages the problem of community at the level of the text. Both the methodical lists of *Watt* and the tight structures of Beckett's late pieces indicate a desire to recoup within words the community that he finds impossible outside of them. But

¹⁰ Weller ultimately wants to make a case for Beckett's "anethicality," that is, the consistent ambiguity between the non-systematic and incalculable (the ethical) and the systems that Beckett is continually drawn to. It seems to me, however, that this is just a displacement of "alterity ethics" onto a different level. One could well argue that the inability to choose between the system and the non-systematic is precisely the purest form of ethics in this sense.

these communities of words, the moment they are assembled, serve to block access to the real world, to lead their author further away from, rather than towards, real community. They must therefore be continually reduced and cut away, while at the same time becoming more and more necessary. This is the vicious circle of Beckett's writing.

Chapter Two

The Art of Evasion: The Novel and the State in J.M. Coetzee

Georg Lukács famously diagnosed the condition of the modern subject as one of “transcendental homelessness” – his term for the radical and irremediable fissure between human existence and meaning that suddenly renders the world an inadequate venue for the acting out of human desires. The emergence of the novel as a literary form that functions as a surrogate home for these rootless modern subjects is the prime expression of this condition (*Theory of the Novel*, 41). In his “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said extends Lukács’ diagnosis to a consideration of the phenomenon of the modern state, which Said reads as an attempt to effectively annex a “national” home from the transcendental homelessness of modernity. Quoting Simone Weil, Said writes, “To be rooted...is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul,” and goes on to suggest that of all the “remedies for uprootedness in the era of world wars, deportations, and mass exterminations,” it is “the state – or more accurately, statism – that is the most insidious, since worship of the state tends to supplant all other human bonds” (183). Said here outlines what we can call a psychopathology of the modern state, and helps give a peculiarly modern answer to the question, posed so powerfully by Rousseau in the opening lines of his *On the Social*

Contract, of why the home of a state turns so easily into a hell: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (141).

Coetzee’s recent works, especially his *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), have explicitly articulated political critiques that his earlier works addressed only elliptically in the form of parable or allegory: specifically, the nature of the political and of the form in which the political finds its modern home, the state. *Diary of a Bad Year* opens with an essay on the origins of the state by a character none other than John Coetzee (“C”), or at least a semblance of him, six years older and less successful. It takes the form of an attack on the social contract:¹

Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that ‘we’ – not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one – participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only ‘we’ we know – ourselves and the people close to us – are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are (3).

As Rita Barnard points out, it is the narrative form taken by the state that is of interest to Coetzee as a writer: the state’s narrative production of its own temporal anteriority not only renders its citizens subject, unable to dissolve or escape the state, but, as Barnard

¹ While the polyvocality of this work might lead the reader to give less than wholesale credence to these “opinions,” these diary entries by “C” nevertheless articulate in concentrated form several of the major problematics – clustered around the nature of political modernity – that recur throughout Coetzee’s fiction. The ironizing of these opinions by way of the novel’s polyvocality should be understood not as a way of delegitimizing them, but rather as a means of more fully realizing their concerns at the level of form. I lack the space here for a larger elaboration of this issue, but see, for example, Jonathan Lear, who has argued persuasively for the importance of the formal qualities of the novel to Coetzee’s political thinking.

has suggestively argued, serves to render its own origins unimaginable (“Tsotsis”, 543). If these origins are only available in the mythic form provided by the state, she suggests, one can nevertheless “imagine the unimaginable...by creating fables and stories about the origins of the state.” That is to say, one way of challenging subjection is through the rewriting of it – the “it” here being, specifically, the contract.

The question of how to challenge this subjection is very much at play in Coetzee’s powerful and enigmatic 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, the tale of a solitary gardener’s thwarted attempts to live off the land in a war-torn South Africa. Much contested at the time of its publication for its alleged evasion of pressing political issues (it is written during the crisis years of the apartheid era), Coetzee’s novel, I suggest here, can be read as a fable that is as much about *surviving* subjection as challenging it, its protagonist choosing, in more vehement form than Coetzee’s other protagonists, the “third way” mentioned by C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*: “the way of quietism, of willed obscurity, of inner emigration” (12).

In imagining (or staging the difficulty of imagining) the unimaginable and unlawful time before the Hobbesian contract is signed, the novel has a lineage that goes back at least to Rousseau’s “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality” and shares some of that text’s yearning for the idyll of pre-social life. In this sense, at least, it engages with the tradition of the pastoral idyll. “Because this innocence and good fortune seem

incompatible with the conventional relationships obtaining in society as a whole,” wrote Schiller, “poets have...assigned the idyll a place in humanity’s infancy *prior to the beginning of culture*” (Schiller, 227). Yet the unmediated world of Rousseau’s natural man is not available to us as moderns: the State will not be rolled back, and the genre finds itself in the awkward position of catering to an audience that is almost by definition excluded from the pastoral ways it celebrates – indeed, we might say, actively engaged in their destruction. The more self-conscious the genre is about its own foundations, therefore, the more it tends toward the elegiac. In the elegy, wrote Schiller, “nature and the ideal are presented as objects of mourning, where the former is presented as something lost, the latter as something unattained” (227).

To invoke the pastoral here is not unwarranted, since Coetzee’s novels so actively engage with that South African appropriation of the pastoral, the *plaasroman* (farm novel), and indeed work to complicate its inherent tendency towards the simple, the pure, the idyllic. As in Schiller, the pastoral is for Coetzee a necessary genre, in that it gives expression to the deep nostalgia of the modern subject for the plenitude of nature. Yet Coetzee writes with the historical knowledge of the pastoral’s entanglement in the history of the South African state and its attempts to render the alien African land legible and productive for its white settlers, to make it a home: it institutes its own history, its own time, and banishes that which threatens its idyllic plenitude. This dual

valence of the pastoral – where the head condemns while the heart cannot let go, as Coetzee writes of Breyten Breytenbach’s attachment to an older, rural South Africa (*Stranger Shores*, 257) – informs Coetzee’s writing within the genre. “I would ask whether it is in the nature of the ghost of the pastoral ever to be finally laid” he writes (*White Writing*, 83), alluding to the complex ways in which the genre continues to haunt the social imagination of political modernity.

Rita Barnard has pointed to the deep sense in which the idea of the pastoral as a political genre informs Coetzee’s fiction. *Life & Times* “allows Coetzee to reveal the dystopian dimensions of the Afrikaner’s dream topography of beloved farms and fences,” she argues, suggesting that the roots of Coetzee’s own ambivalent pastoral impulses can be traced to his situation as a white South African under apartheid, in which, she says, “he felt he should restrain from pastoral indulgences” (*Apartheid and Beyond*, 30, 25). However, admirable as it is, Barnard does not push her analysis far enough: Coetzee’s novel engages with and rewrites, through the lens of the pastoral, not just the South African farm novel and the rustic life it celebrates (that is, the Afrikaner nation and its political instantiation in the apartheid state), but the larger ideological underpinnings of the modern state as such, and, indeed, of some of the major strands of political modernity, stretching back to the origins of the modern nation state at Westphalia and its prime theorization in the social contract of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

The first part of my essay aims to outline some of the ethical and epistemological dilemmas faced in the writing of a literary character as “other” as Michael K, and examines both the uncomfortable linkages and the critical differences between the discursive productions of the state and the possibilities offered by novelistic discourse. In the second part I suggest a number of “master narratives” of the state that are covertly embedded and re-scripted in the text. Here I introduce Hobbes’ theorization of the social contract, its rebuttal in Rousseau’s “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” and two of the grand narratives of South African history – Jan van Riebeeck’s garden and the Great Trek – as narrative forebears of *Life & Times of Michael K*. I argue that the novel attempts to counter these narrative underpinnings of state sovereignty, not so much with a rival literary sovereignty, but with its own strategies of rescripting, defamiliarization, and evasion. I conclude with some speculations as to the kind of politics – or anti-politics – articulated by the novel, and the place of literature and narrative within this politics.

Anti-Subject and State

As an attempt to imagine a radically other being as the full protagonist of a novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* seems anomalous in Coetzee’s work, which for the most part is preoccupied with staging the failure of access to the other. Yet the drama of

contact with the Other is not absent: it is merely re-encoded at a different level, for this is a work in which a self-conscious representative (Coetzee) of one highly-developed strand of Western culture – the novel – turns his attention to a being that to some extent stands outside of and indifferent to the main currents of this culture.² In this sense, then, it is a literary reprise of a classic colonizer-colonized relation, and we would have to say that *Life & Times of Michael K*, for all its evasiveness, clearly lays itself in political territory, although the terrain on which it locates its politics is not the generally accepted one.

If the state, like the novel, has a vested interest in mapping and articulating the lives, thoughts, and desires of its inhabitants, then, at the very least, there is an uncanny morphological similarity between the two forms, and, at the most, the trajectories of state and novelist risk intersecting. Indeed, it has been argued that the literary valorization of alterity merely rehearses the othering gestures of empire.³ One should distinguish then, right away, between the kind of othering conducted by the colonial state and the representation of alterity at issue here. While the modern European state is founded on a claim of sameness, that is, on the homogenization of a disparate set of peoples into a unified nation, the colonial state operates through the management and

² I draw this idea, and much of my following analysis of K's otherness, from Derek Attridge's reading of the novel. Attridge describes the novel as extending an "invitation to the reader to apprehend, and follow in its twists and turns, a consciousness unaffected by many of the main currents of modernity" (49).

³ For strong instances of this argument, see McClure, Appiah, Suleri Goodyear.

production of *difference*. It is, in John Comaroff's analysis, a *state without a nation*, whose indigenous populations, while "said to be on the high road to civilization and citizenship" were "portrayed, to themselves and the world, as anonymous antimoderns, condemned to live for the foreseeable future in the primal mire of ancient custom" (Comaroff, 13,20). Cartography, government commissions, ethnological reports, all fixed and naturalized otherness, displaying it back to natives in museums and schools (18). The *difference* produced by the state (a difference that can be codified, ethnographized, etc.) should be differentiated from what I will here call, following Derek Attridge, *alterity*, whose distinctiveness is precisely its resistance to codification.⁴

How does Coetzee's novel encode alterity, rather than difference? The title, *Life & Times of Michael K*, simple and understated as it is, alludes to a vast repertoire of Western culture. "Life & Times," as others have noted, suggests a number of genres: the chronicle, the *Bildungsroman*, the diary (Head, 5); the K immediately summons up Kafka's hapless protagonists. The title of the novel thus positions it both firmly within the tradition of the Western novel, as it invokes and suggests its indebtedness to the enormous cultural history of this tradition, yet at the same time on its borders, in the

⁴ In his own critical work, Coetzee has traced the presence of this form of alterity back to the early colonial Cape. Here, he argues, the figure of the Hottentot presented a scandal to European settlers precisely in that Hottentot idleness presented no grounds for an anthropological discourse of difference: the Hottentots were, in effect, not different enough (*White Writing*, 23).

way it presents its subject matter almost dismissively (the ampersand, the lack of an article). At one point, the novel explicitly undermines itself as a form of authority by having its protagonist call into question the value of storytelling itself:

If I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenius instead of potato peeling and sums, if they had made me practise the story of my life every day, standing over me with a cane till I could perform without stumbling, I might have known how to please them. I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drink; women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me in the dark. Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground. (181)

Storytelling – as the practice of creating and performing an identity – appears as one more technology of subjugation from which K spends his life trying to escape. It is as if the entire tradition called up is at the same time dismissed as meaningless pomp when brought up against the experience of Michael K. The novel thus conjures up and embeds within itself its own antithesis; it is a work in which all the resources of high literary writing are brought to bear on a character who desires to exist almost completely outside of culture. Aristotle calls the artist one who lavishes care on those unable to return it: nowhere is this truer than in this novel.

Life & Times of Michael K comprises three sections. The outer sections are narrations of K's wanderings through a war torn South Africa (set in a projected future

in which the state of emergency of the 1980s has given way to a full-out war), his attempts to make a home for himself on the land, and his various captures by and escapes from army camps; the middle section is the diary of a well-intentioned physician – the “Medical Officer” – who becomes fascinated with K during the latter’s stay in a makeshift prison hospital. We thus have a symmetrical structure: two framing sections, in which Coetzee seems to bypass the explicit problematization of the other (so much a part of his other novels) and moves directly to the narration of his story “as it is”; and an embedded inner section, in which we are presented with more standard Coetzeean fare: the contortions and agonies of the liberal conscience in its attempt to understand its relation to the other (the hallmark of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*).

The Medical Officer functions partly as a foil for Coetzee himself, and the sudden interpolation of his voice in the midst of the narrative foregrounds an authorial desire that is unacknowledged elsewhere: the desire to assimilate subject matter by rendering it transparent and legible. He thus occupies a far more ambivalent position than does the state, whose interest, as we see it here, extends solely to the disciplining and management of its subjects. Yet the Medical Officer’s position as unwilling functionary of an oppressive state, a palliative, humanistic figure fascinated by subjectivities on the margins of the state yet unable or unwilling to enter into a position of outright defiance, suggests dark analogues with the Magistrate of *Barbarians* – in particular his final

insight, "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he [the torturer Joll] the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow" (133) – and with Coetzee himself.

The Medical Officer's narrative thus functions as the novel's most thorough critique of the writing enterprise, and serves to foreground those qualities of the outer sections – ambivalence, desire, evasiveness – that are not overtly thematized. If we examine Section One we notice that it is far from being a straightforward narration from within a strange consciousness. We start off estranged from K ("The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip" [1]) and never, at least not until the enigmatic final scene of the novel, can claim to know him completely. When we do begin to enter into K's consciousness much later in the narrative, it is not in K's voice but, as Derek Attridge has observed, in the voice of Coetzee, ventriloquizing thoughts that K would be unable to express himself (Attridge, 50). Furthermore, key portions of his narrative are left out: between parts Two and Three, he mysteriously escapes from a prison camp: we never find out how. At this nuts and bolts level of narrative – the lack of an internal monologue holding together the temporal succession of his thoughts and actions – he is not completely present in the novel. Aside from a few brief rejoinders here and there, he is not allowed – and has no desire – to present his case, make his report, narrate his world.

The complex set of maneuverings by which the novel keeps K distant implicitly stages the novel itself as a disciplinary technology that, in dark and unexpected ways, mirrors the state. It is not enough to say that Coetzee is resisting speaking for the other, resisting doing violence to the other by articulating him in terms that are not his own. This only tells half the story: it seems that the more we know of K, the more clearly we see the radical nature of the challenge he poses to some of the axiomatic notions of political modernity underpinning the state. The novel carries out – through the figure of K – an interrogation into the foundations and origins of the state and its subjects.

According to official records, Michael K is a Cape Coloured (“CM,” Coloured Male, 70), that is, in apartheid terminology, mixed-race, and hence politically marginal, neither completely of the colonizer or colonized caste. (The reader’s conception of K as Coloured might be said to allow Coetzee to claim for him a lineage extending back to the nomadic Khoi who originally inhabited the Cape⁵). He is called a gardener, earthworm, or mole (by himself), an *opgaarder* [hoarder] (by official records); the Medical Officer, who wrestles most strenuously with the meaning of K, resorts in the end to calling him an escape artist (166). But before all this, from the first sentence of the book, he is

⁵ The Cape Coloured community resulted from the interbreeding of Malay, native African, and Afrikaner stock. More pertinently, they represent for many South Africans, including it seems Coetzee, the only people who can convincingly claim descent from the Khoi-khoi who originally inhabited the Cape. They are thus in some deep historical sense heirs to the land (at least in the Cape) in a way that Afrikaners and black Africans of Bantu descent are not (again, *pace* Coetzee, or at least “Coetzee” – see *Summertime*, 232). Of course, as nomadic people, the Khoi did not “own” land in any of the senses in which we now think of ownership.

marked, physically by a harelip, and textually, by the letter K. Nadine Gordimer's early review dismissed the Kafka reference, saying that it most likely stands for a commonplace Afrikaans name like Koekemoor or Kotze – the latter, intriguingly, a variation on Coetzee (Gordimer, 139). One aspect of this name has been hitherto uncommented upon. I would like to speculate that this is partly a textual game; that we might read the "K" as an orthographic sleight-of-hand, as "I<," the conjoining of an "I" and the "<" sign. That is, K is "less-than-I," a continually receding subject. This understanding of K is in fact bolstered by reading him as a version of Kafka's K, consigned to a kind of liminal, incomplete subjecthood, while he tries in vain to gain access to the Castle, where his indeterminate identity – interloper or guest? – will finally be validated. If K is a character who slips away from the forms in which he is represented, his very representation slyly encodes this slippage, indicating at the very least that the novel is partly about the problematics of representation and the production of the social being.

Social Contract and State Narrative

One way of understanding the split significance of K (as sign and referent, as an explicitly "literary" character who actively seeks to inhabit an anti-literary world) is as a dramatization of the central conflict at the heart of the social contract – namely, that

between the pre-social self and the socialized subject. In other words, the problem of literary representation comes to stand, in Coetzee's text, for the problem of political representation.

Social contract theory is more properly described as a narrative, a story that retrospectively posits a pre-social human being and charts his course into society. The individual exchanges one series of benefits (e.g. physical freedom) for another (e.g. physical protection). Among other things, the social contract charts the making legible of the human individual. In Hobbes' account, the most famous and influential, the compact turns all men into subjects of a sovereign; using the language of theatre, Hobbes tells us these men now become "actors" on the public stage and "represent" themselves through "personae." The private feelings and motives of the actor do not interest Hobbes, insofar as they have no immediate relation to what occurs on the public stage (presumably private experience can still be mediated and reach the public sphere in some reduced or disfigured form). Even those men "whose words and actions are their own" (i.e. who represent themselves in their own body and are not represented by another) still have to become a "person" – don a public mask – in order for those words and actions to be legible and socially meaningful.

The culmination of the "person" in Hobbes is the state itself: the multitude of the citizenry is unified in one immense virtual body, the state. This virtual person is held

together with chains (civil laws) that are “fastened at one end to the lips of that man or assembly to whom they have given the sovereign power, and at the other to their [the subjects’] own ears” (138). Where does the freedom of the subject lie for Hobbes? Only in those spaces between laws, those things the sovereign has omitted to legislate.

Individual liberty (or individual constraint) falls outside the public sphere and is of no interest or inherent meaningfulness. In this regime of contractual representation, bodies are distinct from their signs (their *personae*), which attain value only within the community legitimated by the sovereign.

Thus at the very heart of the discourse on the state we find a notion of politics as an exclusionary mechanism, embodied in the notion of the person as *persona*: a form of representation which in the very act of making the self legible as a political subject places this self within a set of contractual obligations, disciplinary behaviours, and structures of power. Foucault has described the particular technology of the contract as a method of turning an unwanted conquest (particularly apposite to the South African state) into a willing contract. “Hobbes turns war, the fact of war and the relationship of force that is actually manifested in the battle, into something that has nothing to do with war,” writes Foucault (97). The state’s painful and violent disciplining of the subject into particular forms of social behavior is transformed by Hobbes into the drama of

representation, in which the fundamental structures of the contract are taken for granted and “war” is transformed into “politics.”

While Hobbes’ model of the state still to a large extent underpins the modern understanding of the state, it has not been without its critics. We could cite, first and foremost, Rousseau’s, in the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. The social contract, for Rousseau, is not the *originator* and *guarantor* of society, as for Hobbes, but the *culmination* of society in its most degraded form, where a succession of progressive dependencies and inequalities have created a society so unstable as to require the powerful to placate a restive underclass by means of a wholly ideological construct, called “the social contract”. Rousseau’s project then becomes to sketch out this alternate myth of the origins of the state. Partly a reply to and rebuke of Hobbes, Rousseau’s fundamental intervention in the discourse on the state of nature is not so much that he sees man as “naturally good” but rather that he sees human nature as inherently blank, molded by the conditions in which it exists.

Rousseau’s primary critique of Hobbes is that Hobbes applies to his analysis of man in the state of nature the features of the men he sees around him in society, rather than admitting that the passage into society has changed human beings in ways they are not aware of. To sketch his own view of the state of nature, Rousseau then posits a “natural” man: a man utterly uncorrupted by society. Rousseau’s Second Discourse is

then troubled by the question of how one can imagine a being outside of culture and language from a position within culture and language⁶. The “natural” savage is solitary, temporarily bonding with others only in order to mate, neither good nor evil but endowed with a natural pity for the suffering of others. His long fall from his natural state turns on the key moment in which he begins to value the opinions of others over his own. The implications are existential: “the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others” (81). The savage, motivated by *amour de soi* (love of self), pursues that which is necessary to his survival: food, shelter. The civil man, motivated by *amour-propre* (self regard), pursues that which aggrandizes him, which improves his standing in relation to others: status, power, beauty. This does not necessarily mean that natural man is fully present or psychically unified (although he is certainly autonomous); rather, the need for presence and unity only becomes a problem in civil man, who, living in the gaze of others, forgets who he is, no longer understands the nature of his desires.

⁶ Derrida is particularly attuned to this problem in Rousseau’s thought – see *Of Grammatology*, especially the section “...That Dangerous Supplement...,” 141-164. Fredric Jameson usefully glosses the problem as follows: “To work our way back mentally to a situation that must have once existed...requires us to postulate, either in language or in writing, a condition from which both of those ‘properties’ are absent, something whose many incoherences and contradictions can at least be dramatized by this one: namely, the difficulty for a being who ‘possesses’ speech/writing to imagine what their absence could possibly entail” (*Postmodernism*, 226)

Natural man, according to Rousseau, is inherently satisfied (he has few passions and is self-sufficient); for this reason he does not progress through generations but remains a child (51). In the civilizing process, man unwittingly undergoes a series of alienations: most significantly a temporal one (devotion to the future rather than the present) and an existential one (his needs can no longer be satisfied by himself). Man's primordial freedom has given way to his enslavement to unquenchable desires. Once man has become aware of his own alienation, it is already too late: having once bitten the hook, he is snared. Civil man has been tainted by his socialization, and all yearning for natural states is essentially sentimental.

The Second Discourse is a narrative of a fall, in the mode of Genesis, juxtaposing the iniquities of the present with an ideal and inaccessible past. How does Rousseau imagine this natural man, who exists nowhere? Natural man is in the literal sense an ideal creation, drawn not from history but rather from speculation as to what must have been⁷. He is in this sense a fiction, an ideal fiction held up against reality in order to highlight the shortcomings of man as he is. Rousseau reaches his natural savage by a process of projecting backwards, stripping away the accretions of society. If Hobbes'

⁷ Note that in this respect natural man is different from *tribal* man, about whom ample anthropological evidence was available to Rousseau. On *natural* man, before the formation of society, Rousseau says: "I will suppose him to have been formed from all time as I see him today...when I strip that being...of all the artificial faculties he would have acquired only through long progress; when I consider him, in a word, as he must have left the hands of nature..." (40).

world is a world of masks, Rousseau preaches an ethic (and aesthetic) of authenticity: the unveiling and revealing of the true self. Whether there might not be any such thing as a true self behind the mask is not a possibility Rousseau appears to entertain.

One immediately notices the similarities with Coetzee's project, which I will not belabor unnecessarily. The most obvious thing we can say about the Rousseauvian strain in *Life & Times* is that Michael K shares much with Rousseau's savage. K is in fact Rousseau's ideal savage – free of the desire for recognition or for foundation⁸ – living in a fallen civil world. This world, in which an oppressive government regime has declared a state of emergency in its efforts to contain an insurgency, and wide tracts of the country are essentially a lawless no-man's land, approximates not the Rousseauvian state of nature but the Hobbesian one, i.e., a state of war (which is where, for Rousseau, the unchecked development of civilization ultimately leads). The state of emergency through which K travels should therefore not be read as the dissolution of the state, but as its apotheosis. Thus, unlike Rousseau's natural man, K is pulled by various social forces (including the interpretive desire of the reader⁹) that effectively press him into a

⁸ Like natural man, he "peacefully awaits the stimulus of nature"; once his need is satisfied, the desire dies. It is his ignorance of vice that prevents him from doing evil, rather than a specific knowledge of and desire for the good. For a fuller reading of the Rousseauvian elements in the novel, particularly in relation to Rousseau's own later writings, see Michael Valdez Moses, "Solitary Walkers" – a reading of the novel to which my own is deeply indebted.

⁹ Part of Coetzee's ploy is to conflate the state's gaze with the reader's. See Marais, "Hermeneutics of Empire," for a full reading of this aspect of the novel.

making a representation: it is in the pull of these forces that he experiences a need to legitimate himself, to present a truth, a story. He is haunted by an insubstantiality, a “gap,” that renders him untranslatable into the representational languages of society, of politics, of war. The extreme measures to which K goes to avoid inscription in any form of social order (refusing food while he lies emaciated in a hospital bed, for example) are not ultimately political reactions, or even mystical-religious abstinences, but instead, as Michael Moses has suggested, attempts to attain a state of reverie available only within the radical freedom of Rousseau’s natural man (Moses 1994, 140).

But it is crucial to realize that Coetzee’s text does more than present us with “natural man” trying to survive in a collapsed social world: it also covertly re-enacts the passage into society, in particular re-enacts the foundation of the modern state. It is in his moments of seemingly complete freedom from the social order that the demands of the social begin to make claims on him, and that K is paradoxically privy to the repressed and hidden existential terrain that underpins and precedes the creation of the state and its forms – the lack, the doubt, the absence, upon which are inaugurated the major projects of political modernity: the state and the modern subject.

Indeed, one of the recurrent obsessions in this text is the act of foundation. Because at first glance the narrative seems to have so little to do with the founding of nations and the creation of the state, one could say that it *defamiliarizes* these things: the

state appears as something strange and uncanny. K's narrative as a whole follows the archetype of what we could term the "narrative of foundation," in which the hero leaves a moribund or decaying society and sets off into uncharted territory to start a new line. The classic literary archetypes here are the *Aeniad* (Rita Barnard notes that K carrying his mother in a wheelbarrow echoes Aeneas carrying his father on his shoulders) and Exodus (since the narrative is also about trying to return to some primordial "home"). *Robinson Crusoe* is a variation on these elements (Crusoe reinstates the forms and rhythms of English life on the formless wilderness of his island), and it appears as a subtle shadow in *Life & Times*: K's building of his shack from the odds and ends of an abandoned farmhouse, the cultivation of his crops.¹⁰ K's narrative, while following the first movement of the narrative of foundation (escape, abandonment, shipwreck – the "epic" elements), does not allow itself to conclude the second part (foundation, establishment – the "pastoral" elements):

There was much else he could have taken to make life easier for himself: a grid, a cooking-pot, a folding chair, slabs of foam rubber, more of the feed-sacks. He scratched among the odds and ends in the shed and there was nothing for which he could not imagine a use. But he was wary of conveying the Visagies' rubbish to his home in the earth and setting himself on a trail that might lead to their misfortunes. The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam. Even his tools should be of wood and leather

¹⁰ For more on the *Robinson Crusoe* analogies in the text, see Marais (2009), 38-42, Kossev, 143-4, and Kaplan, 154-5. Marais argues that Michael K moves from a possessive and instrumental relationship to the world, embodied by Crusoe, to a mimetic one.

and gut, materials the insects would eat one day when he no longer needed them.
(104)

The other narrative of foundation echoed here is more localized. The text traces in ghostly form the foundation of the modern South African state, or at least its historical mythologization. K's journey to the interior via a wagon cobbled together from a wheelbarrow and a bicycle that carries his ailing mother is a stripped down (and faintly parodic) echo of the *Voortrekkers'* journey by ox-wagon through hostile country to stake out their own territory, their "promised land" free of British control in the heart of Southern Africa. The heroic magnitude of this event as the pivotal and foundational moment within Afrikaner history cannot be overstated.¹¹ Furthermore, K's creation of a garden outside the abandoned farmhouse and his beginning of life as a "cultivator" links directly back to the garden-station founded at the Cape of Good Hope by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652.¹² Van Riebeeck's garden, beginning as a refuelling station where sailors rounding the Cape could stock up on fresh produce, soon outgrew its bounds:

¹¹ The Great Trek, a migration of around 12,000 Afrikaners from the British-ruled Cape Colony into the interior to found what became the regions of The Orange Free State, Transvaal, and Natal, took place in the 1830's and 40's, and was motivated by discontent over British rule. Its role as the historical myth undergirding Afrikaner national identity is immense; it occupies a space not dissimilar to the exodus in Jewish history. Most historians agree that the major factors leading to this migration were the introduction, via the British, of capitalism, which threatened to destroy the traditional feudal structure of Afrikaner life, and the shortage of open land available to Boer settlement. (I have drawn my historical information from two general histories of South Africa, one by Thompson, the other by Bundy and Saunders, eds.).

¹² Van Riebeeck was not the first European at the Cape (he was preceded by the Portuguese), but under the auspices of the Dutch East India company he was the first to found a permanent fortified settlement, including a garden whose aim was to provide fresh produce for vessels rounding the Cape. He governed the settlement from 1652 until 1662.

inhabitants grew restless, “free” burghers staked out claims on land outside the station, bit by bit a permanent colony formed. The garden, of course, has its most resonant echo in the biblical garden of Eden. These two precursors of K’s garden, one a prelapsarian state of nature in which a social contract is unnecessary and unthought of, and the other a founding element of what would become the modern state of South Africa, are both at play and in tension in K’s garden (and gardening). (The term used by K, “cultivator,” seems to contain both possibilities). This also turns on the distinction between garden and farm, the latter clearly legible as having social utility, the former more ambivalently valued as at best having the non-essential value of “cultural” space (it is said that North America was thought to be empty space because the European colonizers thought the Native Americans did not farm – since it was the women who labored, it was assumed to be merely gardening). Both of these significations are at play: the farm as a state form that is fully legible as a social tool; the garden of Eden as a lost space of full presence (i.e. absence of desire, absence of politics) from which man has been banished. The world K inhabits is fallen, both in the biblical sense (man has to farm the land to make it flourish) and in the political sense (warfare). (Notably, in its suspension between utility and gratuitous indulgence, the garden also seems to be a symbol for writing itself).

Here, of course, the narrative of foundation intersects with the pastoral, a genre with which Coetzee has had a long engagement (his novel *In the Heart of the Country* is

among other things a rewriting of the South African *plaasroman* or farm-novel). "At the center of the mode," Coetzee has said, "lies the idea of the local solution. The pastoral isolates and defines a space in which whatever cannot be achieved in the wider world (particularly the city) can be achieved" (*Doubling*, 61). The pastoral as local solution finds its undoing in this novel in the unavoidable fact that there is no virgin, unclaimed land. The land K claims as his, it turns out, belongs to a family, the Visagies, whose grandson turns up and attempts to commandeer K as a manservant. Before it belonged to the Visagies, one can assume it belonged to someone else (a black someone) who was driven from the land in order to make way for the agrarian dream of the Afrikaner people to be given birth. This, indeed, is the story of the Great Trek, which, with its ambitions of founding an Afrikaner Nation living in unity under God in an idyllic promised land, also runs aground when this land turns out not to be an empty Edenic expanse but populated by the Bantu tribes of the interior, who had to be bloodily subjugated before they found new roles as menservants working the Afrikaner fields.¹³ (If I seem to be eliding the role of the British in the founding of modern South Africa, it is only because the liberal mythology they created had little purchase on the national imagination

¹³ The Voortrekkers created a myth that the Highveld into which they trekked was empty, depopulated as a result of the *Mfecane* (the diaspora of Bantu people resulting from Shaka's expansion of the Zulu kingdom). Historians have shown that the reconnaissance reports to this effect were quite unreliable, exaggerating the effects of the *Mfecane* and taking liberties with the sizes and locations of the unpopulated areas. Bantu tribes had occupied the interior of South Africa for at least 200 years before the arrival of the Boers.

during the apartheid era. While the actual formation of the state, and the violence demanded for this formation, were to a far greater extent the product of British imperial ambitions, the ideology and mythography of the late 20th century Nationalist republic stemmed very much from the Afrikaner tradition).

The garden then alludes to several foundational stories: of the South African colony, of the social contract, and of Judeo-Christian history (among others). It is also bound up with another over-determined symbol, the earth: one thinks of “mother earth” and all its connotations, and especially of Heidegger’s strife between world and earth. This mythic strife imagines the creation of the human world through work, study, and use, as it continually emerges out of and is pulled back into that mysterious, unmasterable quantity that always exists outside of human history and human decision and that Heidegger names earth (“The Origin of the Work Of Art,” esp. 38-76). Heidegger’s grand opposition is *à propos* here, for K’s existence – apolitical, asocial, ahistorical – is placed in the midst of the terrain of society, the polis, and history. Again, one becomes aware of the distance between the particularity of K’s (meagre) garden and the expanse of the symbolism to which it alludes. For K, the garden is not an echo of Rousseau, of Eden, or of the Cape: it is just a space of land to grow food. Indeed, his presence to some extent subverts and undoes the interpretive frameworks applied to him. If the garden and the Trek constitute the foundations of the *passage* to the modern

South African state, K's tracings of them constitute instead a non-passage, or a stalled passage. K's garden is not – like Van Riebeeck's – used to feed people (it barely serves to nourish K). His dwelling (his "kennel") is deliberately built not to withstand time, to leave no trace.

K's thought and subjectivity follow a similar anti-foundational logic. Hence the trope of an abstract masculine, paternal line which runs through the text: authority, the law, which reproduces sameness and acts as the binding fabric of the state. Alongside it, in its shadow, runs the feminine, maternal line, which behind its seeming presence is always absent. "My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory," K thinks, "and my mother is buried and not yet risen" (105):

He thought of his mother. She had asked him to bring her back to her birthplace and he had done so, though perhaps only by a trick of words. But what if this farm was not her true birthplace? Where were the stone walls of the wagonhouse she had spoken of? He made himself pay a daylight visit to the farmyard and to the cottages on the hillside and the rectangle of bare earth beside them. If my mother ever lived here I will surely know, he told himself. He closed his eyes and tried to recover in his imagination the mudbrick walls and reed roof of her stories, the garden of prickly pear, the chickens scampering for the feed scattered by the little barefoot girl. And behind that child, in the doorway, her face obscured by shadow, he searched for a second woman, the woman from whom his mother had come into the world. When my mother was dying in hospital, he thought, when she knew her end was coming, it was not me she looked to but someone who stood behind me: her mother or the ghost of her mother. To me she was a woman but to herself she was still a child calling to her mother to hold her hand and help her. And her own mother, in the secret life we do not see, was a child too. I come from a line of children without end.

He tried to imagine a figure standing alone at the head of the line, a woman in a shapeless grey dress who came from no mother; but when he had to think of the

silence in which she lived, the absence of time before the beginning, his mind balked. (117)

What is not immediately apparent in this remarkable passage (which seems almost to arrest the temporal flow of the narrative and tear itself free from the rest of the text) is the extent to which it draws on and rewrites classic pieces of Western foundational thought. At one level it reproduces the first moment of the Kantian sublime – the collapse of the imagination as it contemplates something beyond its limits – while failing to enter into its second moment, or completion, in which the rational intellect compensates for this imaginative failure and consolidates the subject as an autonomous self (*Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 128-150). At another level, it reproduces a classic Rousseauvian progression: it begins with the experience of lack/absence (the loss of the mother), and then by a series of substitutions/supplements (thought, imagination) it attempts to recover this absence – to bring about, as Derrida has it, the “reappropriation of presence” (*Of Grammatology*, 144). For Rousseau, the loss of the mother is the primordial loss (the story of his *Confessions* is, among other things, the story of his attempt to replace the mother he lost at birth, to restore the “natural” mother-child relationship; in *Emile*, the child must leave the mother in order to begin his education by the state). It is this loss which education (*e-ducare*, not just to “lead out,” but to lead away from, to wean) both engenders and functions to substitute. The maternal becomes a figure for a lost original plenitude, a transcendental home. We could say that the

compensation for this loss is what we call civil society: the systems of law, education, language, in which we find an alternate home. This is the realm of the father, who, as Derrida puts it in his commentary on Rousseau, becomes the institutionalized supplement within society that “forget[s] the vicariousness of its function and make[s] itself pass for plenitude” (Derrida, 144). This logic, the substitution of the father for the lost mother, becomes the logic of the state.

K’s attempt to reappropriate the mother as presence ends by foundering on the fact that this presence did not exist to begin with: “To me she was a woman but to herself she was still a child calling to her mother to hold her hand and help her.” We know that from the start K’s primordial separation from the mother (his birth) is compounded by his hare-lip: “Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close” and, furthermore, K is separated from the maternal teat by his disfigurement: “The child could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger. She tried a bottle; when it could not suck from the bottle she fed it with a teaspoon” (3). (K is also alienated from the supplemental father of the school, from which he is removed due to his slow mind – he is placed instead in a home where he is forced to perform rote tasks).

K’s radical separation becomes a space of freedom, but not a space of presence. The freedom revealed is one of doubt and loss, hovering between absence and presence, between the lost mother and the supplement of the father. This non-passage constitutes

a kind of exposé of those narratives that structure themselves around passage: of state sovereignty, in its exposure of the absent void which the supplementary state form fills up (the passage from a natural state to a civil state); of the sovereignty of the autonomous subject, in its failure to complete the Kantian sublime (the passage from submission to intellectual self-mastery). Thus a critique of sovereignty is articulated here, both at the level of the state and of the individual, as a narrative based upon a repressing or a concealment of absence: to repeat Derrida, of the supplement which forgets the vicariousness of its function and makes itself pass for plenitude. If the mythic birth of the South African state is traced in ghostly form through K's trek inland and his gardening, then the birth of the modern subject is traced, and evaded, through K's negotiation of the absence of the mother.

The Politics of Evasion

The generalized loss of sovereignty found in the novel – of the state over its subjects, of the subjects over their bodies – is mirrored finally in the text's loss of sovereignty over K. K is first of all enigmatic, even to himself. We do not know, and it seems he does not know either, why he does certain things. He is troubled by what he perceives as a gap in himself: a gap in his story, a gap in his truth. Because he cannot reliably "read" himself, he seems to solicit readings from others. K's lack of legibility

teases the reader: we expect to find the truth of K, as he does himself. Part of the condition of being present (metaphysically) and being represented (politically) is that one possesses (or performs) a coherent identity. In all theories of the state, one gives up a portion of one's self into the public domain. The individual is split between a public persona, which represents, and a private self. Not to represent, or to represent deviantly, is to fall outside the public realm of the state, or to be perceived as inimical to the state, or not to be perceived at all.

What does Coetzee's refusal to grant K either an ontological or a textual plenitude signify? Why does he leave gaps in the text, motivations unexplained? One reading is that K's textual incompleteness is an indictment of a political regime that deprives its subjects of full political status. However, K, in a crucial scene, passes up the opportunity to join the insurgency, to take up arms against the oppressive regime and thus provide a model for political action. (It should be noted that in interviews Coetzee is careful not to endorse K's refusal). The text overtly resists an explanation for this refusal: K dismisses the reason he first proffers (a perfectly good reason, in my view: that he must keep the idea of gardening alive) but cannot articulate the "real" one: "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words" (110).

Michael Marais' article "Hermeneutics of Empire" argues that the gaps in Coetzee's texts are really enactments of resistance to the colonizing gaze of the reader. I want to expand here on the political implications of Marais' highly suggestive observation, for K is doubly elusive in this sense: he is not only resistant to the reader's powers of knowing, but of his own. His inability to interpretively colonize himself makes him a problematic subject not only within the context of the South African state, but, potentially, for any future state. Through K's demurral to participate in the battle over sovereignty, Coetzee suggests a perspective from which the modern political order as such – with its struggles over who has power, who is included and who excluded, who is represented and who not – is defamiliarized. It is not so much an unjust regime that is the problem here, but the very existence of a regime per se.

In an essay on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael Valdez Moses draws a similar conclusion, arguing that the Magistrate's "repudiation of Empire implicitly rejects all political regimes, none of which may lay claim to a philosophically defensible conception of right," since the State can only "establish its claim to justice by discriminating itself, its form, from the Other which lies outside it" (123). *Life & Times of Michael K* takes the precarious utopian step of narrating from the perspective of an Other who is persistently able to elude or undermine those definitions placed upon him from within the State. The novel thus pits two utopias against one another: the concrete

political project of the South African state with its pastoral-utopian ideological underpinnings, and the perpetually shifting and elusive utopia sought by Michael K. The novel's critique of state utopianism thus also becomes a form of self-denial, for it means that the novel cannot bring itself to fully realize its own utopian pastoral yearnings. The elusiveness of K's utopia thus seems aimed at protecting, for some as yet unimagined future, the utopian impulse harbored by the narrative from the kind of appropriation that has been diagnosed as lying behind the state, whose pastoral dream of plenitude is always-already slipping over into its hidden obverse, the Hobbesian logic of the contract.¹⁴

Clearly, the absence of a political regime does not solve all political problems: the arrival of the Visagie grandson – also on the run from the state – at the farmhouse does not result in the formation of a new utopian stateless community but instead in the re-instantiation of hierarchy and domination. At the end of the novel, one doesn't have higher hopes for the community K imagines he will form with the old man he imagines is living in his room, a non-reproductive community of the destitute on the now land-mined farmland. Even this exists more as a utopian dream than a practical hope, and the novel gives no inkling that it might actually come to pass anywhere outside of K's

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno's discussion of utopian aesthetics also articulates this tension: "At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation." (*Aesthetic Theory*, 32).

imagination. In this case, we should understand the logic of the state, or at least the political relations it authorizes, as having permeated the very fabric of society, including the literary text (the apparatus of the novel, the archetypal narrative desires for foundation that the novel reproduces and from which it tries to escape). This can be seen in the novel's final insistence on an inviolable element within the individual imagination, made with the desperate but imperious force of a condemned man who must flee or face the gun. We can then understand the text's deliberate withholding of meaning as gesturing towards a place outside of itself – that is, the imagination, the interpretive acts, of its readers. With its gaps, mysteries, withholdings, Coetzee's text lays itself out before the reader, inviting consummation and the granting of meaning. Yet the consummation is always frustrated; like Friday in *Foe*, K conscripts his readers into spinning out endless webs of interpretation. The Coetzeean text refuses the possibility of its own utopian plenitude, insisting on remaining fundamentally unfillable.

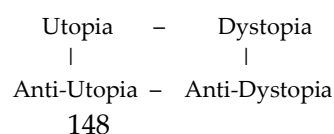
Thus the perhaps surprising phenomenon of a text that seems to refuse to overtly set up its own literary sovereignty in rivalry with the state – the well known rivalry proclaimed by Shelley, that the poets are the true legislators of the world – leads to a different payoff, a mechanics of contestation in which the text accrues power precisely by its evasion of rivalry. Why should Coetzee be so insistent, not only that his characters

should fail to interpret, but that his work itself should evade definitive interpretation (or, what amounts to the same thing, provoke endless interpretation)? Here Coetzee seems to be raising a question about the status of the literary itself within the realm of the state, whose logic is that of definitive answers, transparent representations. One is reminded of C's investment in the resistant powers of language itself, in *Diary of A Bad Year*: "The masters of information have forgotten about poetry, where words may have a meaning quite different from what the lexicon says, where the metaphoric spark is always one leap ahead of the decoding function, where another, unforeseen reading is always possible" (23). It is not too much of a stretch to say that K, in his extreme *allusiveness*, as well as his elusiveness, in many ways comes to represent the contested fate of the literary itself in a political culture hostile to the hermetic, the ambiguous, the unclassifiable. "To strive for a systematic, supra-political discourse about politics is futile," writes C in *Diary of a Bad Year* (9). Nothing in Coetzee's oeuvre seems to contradict this, yet, in its attempt to find a space from which to speak of the political yet stand outside of politics, *Life & Times of Michael K* can be read as a response, *avant la lettre*, to this lament.

Settler Utopianism

Fredric Jameson has argued for the potentially utopian meaning of the pastoral: its peaceful images of harmony and nature constitute “violent ruptures with what is” (VD, 415). Conversely, he notes that “the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish fulfillments and Utopian gratifications” (416). I want to argue that this intertwining of utopia and dystopia is one of the driving contradictions of *Life & Times of Michael K.* Coetzee’s world is deeply fatalistic and, despite its secularity, has strong Christian overtones: people are thrown into a world that is already fallen, they are trapped within social formations and histories that precede them and delimit the sphere of possibilities in which they can operate. The catastrophe of History has always already happened, and the paradisiacal world that preceded it is always a mirage, out of reach. They are thus fundamentally dystopian narratives. Yet it is worth noting that the dystopian is not the antithesis of the utopian, but rather an inverse image of it.¹⁵ Pertinent here is Jameson’s observation that while the dystopia is generally a narrative, Utopian texts are mostly non-narrative: “The Utopian text does not tell a story at all; it describes a mechanism or even a kind of machine, it furnishes a blueprint...” (385). The dystopian setting thus provides a pretext to narrativize an “escape” into a utopia, and therefore the dystopia, unlike the anti-

¹⁵ A Greimas square would look something like:



utopia, always carries within it the possibility of utopia (the “utopian enclave,” Jameson calls it). However, as I have been suggesting above, both the “dystopian” narrative of the South African Republic and K’s “utopian” narrative are connected by a hidden thread, observable in the link between van Riebeeck’s garden at the Cape and K’s vegetable patch. The novel seems to effectively short-circuit the dialectic between utopia and dystopia.

In particular, the utopian impulse in Coetzee’s writing is deeply tied to and emerges in the form of the pastoral: the pleasures of a life outside history, the harnessing of the bounty of the land, a political harmony without fissures and struggle. This could be called a *settler utopianism*, where the history and troubles of the home country are left behind and a new land can be invested with the desires for a new Eden. The Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in the final days of Empire, waits for the barbarians to arrive and wonders whether they will “grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise” (143). Later he decides to leave a record of his outpost for posterity, and composes the following pastoral fantasy:

No one who paid a visit to this oasis...failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of the waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth. (154)

Coetzee's utopianism seems inextricable from this settler fantasy, a narrative that continually takes recourse to its own paradisiacal fantasy as an indemnity against its actions. Traces of this settler utopianism are implicit in the Magistrate's dreams of a pastoral life outside Empire as well as in Michael K's garden.¹⁶ Yet Coetzee's novels insist on the connection between these settler utopias and their appropriation and consolidation into dystopian regimes. I do not want to make the case that Coetzee's politics are reactionary, however, since the fundamental political project of these novels is not to banish the utopian outright, but rather to preserve elements of the utopian impulse within a fundamentally fallen world.

Here I want to point out that the anti-pastoral and hence anti-Utopian critique embedded in *Life & Times* is a form of self-denial: the text itself harbors its own Utopian and pastoral yearnings which it cannot bring itself to fully realize. This can be measured in the text's desire to safeguard K from the forms of libidinal investment that seem to accrue around him, both from those he meets in the novel, and from his readers and interpreters. There is therefore a certain ambivalence to the Utopian implicit in the very

¹⁶ I should perhaps make a distinction here between utopianism and messianism: utopianism, as a secular discourse, is a fantasy of a completely ameliorated world that stems from human projects; messianism, on the other hand, dreams of a rupture in the fabric of the present, supervening from outside and utterly transforming and/or redeeming a fallen world: the contours of the new and redeemed world, so much a part of utopian thinking, remain mysterious and obscure. Messianism is fundamentally an engagement with an absolute alterity. The Magistrate's fantasies of a barbarian invasion, finally leveling the Empire, belong to the messianic rather than the utopian.

narrative texture of the novel, most explicitly in the final scene in which K, now back in Cape Town and homeless, his old room having been occupied by a squatter, who he imagines accompanying him back to his garden:

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying, 'What are we going to do about 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. (184)

This is as utopian a moment as one can find in Coetzee, but it exists strictly outside the bounds of realizability. Although the pattern that has become clear by the end of the novel is that of K's ability to find freedom in situations of increasing constriction, these final passages of the novel are radically different from what has preceded them. Here the temporality of pure being – without desire or *telos* – is decisively banished, as is K's perpetual doubt, along with the holes and gaps that engendered it. K seems furthest from Rousseau's savage, and closest to us as readers, in these final passages of the novel, in which his access to his "natural" life in "his" garden being barred, he gives himself over to the imagination and to the future. There are also crucial differences in K's subjectivity. K now actively desires community (albeit a peculiar form of community, shorn of any potential for reproduction). The teaspoon, that symbol of estrangement

from pure presence that began K's narrative, reappears but is now the means of agency rather than alienation, the means by which K can effect his dream of being a "parasite dozing in the gut," or living in the interstices of the South African state.

The text leaves us by bringing K fully into the realm of imagination, interiority, the social, and at the same time severing K's connection to the material world. In this sense, it can be read as K's coming-into-subjectivity, and hence as a document of the impossibility of K's less-than-I form of existence in the modern state – K's dream is acknowledged to be only available in the realm of the imagination; K is for all intents and purposes doomed; the land he wishes to return to has been mined; his previous outing almost ended in his death; his room in Cape Town has itself been usurped by someone else. Indeed, Martin Puchner, extrapolating from the inverse relationship between the health of K's body and the vividness of his thoughts, has speculated that this is the scene of K's physical death.

Yet at the same time that the novel describes a dystopian objective world, there is also an enactment of the utopian power of the imagination itself. The formal valence of the text – its power to move and affect beyond its explicit meaning – is in direct contradiction to the knowledge the reader possesses of the "real" situation K finds himself in. At a purely rhetorical level, these closing lines are not doom-laden but joyful. Thus there opens up a bifurcation of meaning between a textual content that proclaims

the impossibility or illegitimacy of utopia, and a textual form that is consistently utopian in its address toward the possibility of a radically other redeemed world. (Although as I've mentioned, this Utopia is explicitly imagined to be non-reproductive). Coetzee concludes his study of the South African *plaasroman* by explicitly connecting it to the utopian yearning: "Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?" (*White Writing*, 81). In this sense, *Life & Times of Michael K* does not fully belong in the tradition of the "anti-pastoral" that Coetzee identifies in South African writing. Like the prime exponents of this tradition – Olive Schreiner's *Story of An African Farm* and Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* – Coetzee's novel attempts to delegitimize "[t]he pastoral solution of how the white man shall live in South Africa" (WW, 83). Unlike them, it refuses to dismiss pastoralism as such, rather redirecting it toward an as yet unspecifiable and non-concrete future, a utopia held in suspension.

Coetzee's Late Style

Homais, c'est moi

-J.C., Diary of a Bad Year

In a public lecture given early in his career, in South Africa in 1987¹⁷ Coetzee defended fiction against what he called history ("The Novel Today"). In good times, Coetzee argued, fiction and history are as two cows grazing peacefully side by side in a field. In times of crisis, however, fiction is forced into a position of rivalry with history, the latter seeking to employ or explain the former; the former seeking to assert its autonomy from the latter. "[T]he colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity," he states. "I speak...as a member of a tribe threatened with colonisation" (3).¹⁸ Yet, in his very defense of fiction, Coetzee is forced to step outside of fictional discourse into what Coetzee calls "metalanguage," whose weakness he diagnoses as its translatability into history:

¹⁷ South Africa was in a state of emergency from 1985 to 1989

¹⁸ In an essay dense with figures – elsewhere, he refers to novels as cockroaches – Coetzee's choice of the metaphor of colonization is deliberately provocative: he invokes and re-orientates the political discourse of decolonization in a historical moment dense with political tension (South Africa was under a state of emergency).

I speak...on an occasion arranged by an active and unashamed proponent of this colonising process, for a record which, I have every reason to expect, will be recuperated by next week into the discourse of history. I do not even speak my own language. This is not an occasion, let me remind you, at which storytellers have been invited to tell stories or poets to read poems. Our charge is to address what are called problems and issues. I speak, therefore, a fragile metalanguage with very little body, one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics, a sub-discourse of the discourse of history." (3).

Coetzee's position is an extreme and troubling but revealing one. The anti-politics enunciated here merits more discussion than I have space to give it here. As I have tried to demonstrate in my reading of *Life & Times of Michael K*, by declining to engage directly with or endorse specific political blocs, it is able to critique the political as such. For Coetzee, the resistant potential of fiction lies in its endless capacity to outwit and evade those categories laid down for it by history. For now, however, I will sidestep its politics and draw attention to the form of the public address and Coetzee's sense of his status as public intellectual. The "fragile meta-language" of public discourse becomes, for Coetzee, a form of exile from fiction, a position into which he is forced in order to defend the autonomy of his work from history, but in which this very autonomy threatens to come undone. A scrupulous adherence to fictional discourse, to

masks and parables, is the strongest defense against the encroachments of history, and indeed, this is what we find in Coetzee's work under the apartheid regime. Yet in his late work, we find ourselves in a different world. In these late works, Coetzee lavishly employs the very authorial voice that he seems to forbid above, and uses it, moreover, to deal with precisely "what are called problems and issues."

This late fiction is marked by a number of features that distinguish it from the early writing. Some of these are stylistic and seem related to ageing: the looseness of construction, the seemingly lighter – or less highly wrought – style, the sketchiness of plot and the mechanics connecting things together. Others are related to Coetzee's emigration – in particular, these books are less restricted to a discrete national space. But two seem to crucially alter the fundamental political attunement of Coetzee's work. On the one hand, the figure of radical alterity, so important to the early work, persists, yet now begins to take the form of animal life. (Ideally, I would examine the role of the animal here, but this topic would require an entire chapter, if not more, to itself). Corresponding to this, we find the emergence of the authorial story-lecture, that is, the embedding of lectures or extended musings within the fictional text, usually (but not always) given through the mouth of a Coetzee-surrogate. Elizabeth Costello, the first of these, seems to differ substantively from Coetzee only in her gender. Although early criticism accused Coetzee of using Costello as a screen to avoid taking responsibility for

his opinions, the same could not be said of later works. In *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime*, the authorial avatars are refracted versions of Coetzee himself. In these works, fictional avatars of Coetzee deliver lectures or state opinions on a range of topics that seem designed to provoke – animal rights, politics, the state, the “great writers”, intelligent design. These seem to be Coetzee’s own, and that seem to belong not to the realm of Coetzee the novelist, but to Coetzee the academic, critic, and public intellectual. These features would all seem to point to the emergence of the “real” or public Coetzee, critically feted, globally respected, no longer bound and hampered by literary form, engaging in issues of the utmost importance.

Adorno has argued in an essay on Beethoven that late style, although commonly thought of as the “product of uninhibited subjectivity...which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself,” becomes, in certain artists, the very opposite of this (“Late Style in Beethoven,” 564). Adorno writes, “Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form” (566). We can leave aside Adorno’s invocation of the romantic “master” and nevertheless see in his notion of late style the attempt to address a paradox of literary esteem – one of the paradoxes that runs through this dissertation – in which the very success of these works normalizes and renders safe their strangeness, what I have been calling their capacity to disconsole. Indeed, the works I study exist at the very center of what Pascale Casanova has called

the “world republic of letters,” described by Casanova as “one of incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself – an endless succession of literary manifestoes, movements, assaults and revelation.” The cultural capital in this battle to have the decisive say on the nature of the literary is measured in the awarding of prizes, in translations, in institutional approbation. By the late 2000s, Coetzee (not to mention Ishiguro and Beckett) clearly meets all these criteria. Yet what happens when an author’s claim to fame is made on the basis of a negation of the literary, on a negative aesthetic? Here one’s very success would seem to negate this original negation (in a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung*) and leave the work bereft of the very negativity that gave it its original impetus.

Late style can be read as a form of continued resistance – an insistence on the negative – once absorbed into the circuits of cultural production. Rather than aiming for the reconciliation of subject and object through the mastery of form, these works acknowledge their separation. Subjectivity is not displayed but withdrawn from these late works, which remain mysterious and distant. As Richard Leppert points out, late works therefore register not personal history but the “ravages of history” as such – the continual cycle of lost opportunities and catastrophe that for Adorno characterized modernity (516).

One point at which to date the emergence of Coetzee's late style is the year 2003, in which Coetzee published the first full novel of his late period – *Elizabeth Costello* – and won the Nobel Prize.¹⁹ Why connect Coetzee's late style with his canonization? Coetzee had previously, on two occasions (1983 and 1999), declined to collect the Booker Prize, yet his receipt of the Nobel was marked by the presentation of an elaborate address – albeit not the expected disquisition on the value of literature, but an enigmatic fable on the craft of writing.²⁰ One can speculate as to whether Coetzee's acceptance of the Nobel but not the Booker relates to its provenance from a small country (Sweden) rather than Britain, to Coetzee's increasing moderation with age, or to the possibility that Coetzee might have finally grasped his way to a literary solution to his reluctance to engage in the public circuit. I would like to pursue the possibility of the latter: that the fiction delivered at the Nobel ceremony provides clues to the aesthetic solution (which is also a political solution) that his late work reaches vis-à-vis his own position in the canon. That is to say, Coetzee develops a particular kind of late style that responds, personally, to both his absorption into the literary canon and his departure from the historical cauldron of South Africa, but that is fundamentally geared, not towards personal

¹⁹ Admittedly, *The Lives of Animals* was published in 1999, and some of the lectures that came to comprise *Costello* were given as early as 1996, but at this point it was unclear – possibly to Coetzee as well as to his readers – whether this would be a mainstay of his fiction or whether it was a side project.

²⁰The fiction had clearly already been written before the Nobel announcement was made, but clearly suited his purposes.

rumination or expression, but towards a disconsolatory politics – a politics that critiques, disrupts, resists, renders strange.

To say that Coetzee's late style emerges from personal biography and history is not to reduce it to these things. Rather than finally delivering to the gaze of historical discourse the unmediated subjectivity of Coetzee, they both represent Coetzee and at the same time conceal him. The Coetzees of *Diary* and *Summertime* are refractions – similar enough for the reader to draw the parallels, but different enough – in age or success – to cast doubt on these. In particular, both cast Coetzee in the shadow of death: in *Diary* he is older and suffering from an unspecified condition that affects his fine motor control (Parkinson's is suggested at one point); in *Summertime*, he is already dead. We are therefore on the opposite bank of the social world – not the young writer fighting for recognition, but the writer who has already become a name and is now receding from the world.

The use of a fictional Coetzee thus allows Coetzee to return to the world of Defoe, in which the boundaries between fiction and reality are indistinct. This is not the reconciliation of Coetzee's academic and literary personae (the two lives of Coetzee have always seemed intimately connected); rather, it is the rejection of the academic persona in favor of the literary. His surrogates, far from speaking as academics, speak as characters who, in the words of Elizabeth Costello, want to "save their souls." These

works do not attempt to resolve the intellectual or philosophical tensions articulated by their protagonists, but rather present them in unreconciled form, antagonistic to their surroundings. I will examine here, as explorations of contrary facets of Coetzee's assimilation, two different "late" works: the Nobel Prize address (2003), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Both these works – different as they appear – leave the reader with the sense of abandonment. In the Nobel address, given in fictional form, the fictional character becomes the author; in *Diary*, the author (Coetzee) becomes a character. Rather than imagining aging and literary fame as leading to reconciliation with the social order, as a place in which the fictional output becomes part of – reconciled with – a larger social order and can take its place in histories of that order, they present figures that are stubbornly unassimilable. The authors of these texts are fundamentally lonely and isolated beings who do not find, in the fictions they weave, the home for which they yearn. I read late Coetzee, then, not as all of a sudden speaking directly to his readers, but as registering a sense of exile from modernity.

The Character as Author

The Nobel address finds Coetzee reading to the audience, not the customary lecture, but a story in which the relationship between history and fiction, author and character, is restaged. This story is told from the perspective of a literary character, Robin, a

refracted version of Robinson Crusoe. As with the earlier novel *Foe*, it takes apart Defoe's original novel – one of modernity's archetypal narratives of exile, home, and triumphant return – and reconstructs it from a hitherto unseen angle: this time, from long after the original novel left off, as an ageing Crusoe, restless with his lot and increasingly distant from his island adventure, decides to take up his quill and write the biography of his creator.

The epigraph of the story is taken from the original *Robinson Crusoe*, and refers to Friday: "I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak" (1). There are two contradictory desires in Crusoe's wishes for Friday, although both suggest the incorporation and training of Friday within an order dictated by Crusoe. "To make him useful" indicates a subordination of "him" to the desires of the speaker. "To make him speak" is a far more ambiguous desire: in order for Friday's speech to be satisfactory, it cannot merely parrot Crusoe. The need to hear Friday speak suggests Crusoe's desire for companionship, and thus betrays a lack in the desiring self. To make Friday speak in the way he desires, Crusoe must cede authority to the speaker.

The story Coetzee delivers inverts the perspective and the order of precedence of the original: the "he" of the title, the narrator of this piece, now refers to the secondary creation, Robin; Defoe is now reduced to "his man," a nameless figure who travels

England, sending Robin letters, from the content of which we can infer that the writer is Daniel Defoe. One of the dramas of the earlier rewriting, *Foe*, is that the secondary figure, Friday, cannot or will not speak, and by doing so becomes the central obsession of the text. In "He and His Man," Coetzee explores the opposite possibility: that the secondary figure, granted speech by his maker, oversteps his bounds. The Robin of "He and His Man" not only survives but becomes garrulous, taking over narrative authority from his author, when, in order to rekindle his waning writing muse, he decides to begin writing "a page or two of his man" (7). Indeed, he eventually begins to think of himself as the author of Defoe, fabricating for him a biography: "A man of business, he thinks to himself. Let him be a man of business, a grain merchant or a leather merchant, let us say" (8). Soon he begins to think of Defoe's story as merely a "figure" – a fictionalized correlate – of his own life on the island. Then, later, he begins to think of Defoe's other fictions – *Diary of a Plague Year* – as further figurations of his own primordial island adventure. Robin, in his attempts to write the story of his author, in effect finds himself becoming an author of fiction, zealously – from our perspective – projecting his own story onto everything Defoe has written.

Critics have argued that the story is about the relationship between the author and the character,²¹ but it seems equally possible that it is about the relationship between the reader and the writer: that is to say, it is about the way fiction interprets the world and the world interprets fiction. Robin's fictions about his creator are undercut by the obviousness of his desire to see himself in the world around him, to reduce the endless multiplicity of the fictional universe to his own particular history: into all of Defoe's stories (which are now to be thought of as Robin's stories), including that of Defoe's biography, Robin reads his own suffering on the island. The words "figure" and "allegory" continually appear in this section. Defoe's financial ruin and flight from his debtors is "a figure for the shipwreck and the island where he, poor Robin, was secluded from the world for twenty-six years" (9). A character from *Journal of a Plague Year*, isolated from his plague-ridden family, is also "a figure of his, Robin's solitude on the island" (11). In a *reduction ad absurdum* of this logic, the parrot's squawking of "Poor Poll! Poor Poll!" is interpreted by Robin to be a statement of metaphysical exile and abandonment: "What island is this...that I am cast upon, so cold, so dreary? Where were you, my saviour, in my hour of great need?" (5). The philosophy of literary meaning entertained by Robin is that of innumerable private sufferings speaking to other private

²¹ See, for example, Attridge.

sufferings through literary figures that may or may not be being misread. Fiction itself, he seems to suggest, is a figure for the real, and as a figure, can only ever grasp at it. Why this emphasis on allegory and figuration? In one of the more influential readings of Coetzee's writing, Derek Attridge argues that Coetzee's work is "against allegory": against the forces of abstraction implied by the allegorical impulse; and implicitly "for" the concrete. In Adornian terms, we could say that allegory posits a false totality that subsumes material specificity, whereas the material specificity in Coetzee always resists this incorporation into allegory, revealing the totality to be false, and indeed, violent. Yet Attridge's readings overlook the ways in which allegory also functions to relieve characters' existential loneliness – that is, allegory can also be a *symptom* of a fractured world, rather than the cause of it.²² Allegory and figuration are therefore the modes through which this fissure is both registered and attempted to be overcome: these are the literary devices by which Robin can make the world similar to him and meaningful to him. Allegory and figuration posit the imaginative joining of two separate realms of existence: in its original religious context, allegory posits worldly correlates for spiritual essences. In this story, allegory and figuration become what convention is in late Beethoven: those aesthetic technologies that are usually mastered, but are here

²² This is also Jameson's reading of allegory – see "Cognitive Mapping"

abandoned as dysfunctional, thus exposing the fictional world as open-ended and fragmentary.

Near the end of the story, Robin parenthetically muses of one of his characters, "But of what else does he secretly sing, he wonders to himself, this poor afflicted man of whom he reads, besides his desolation? What is he calling, across the waters and across the years, out of his private fire?" (12). Robin is thus plagued by what he cannot reduce to his own island history, and finally acknowledges this, ceding his claims on the truth of his own story. Without trying to account for all the aspect of this strange and ambiguous story-lecture, I want to suggest that it is fundamentally informed by Coetzee's desire to reassert in the "colonising" context of a public address, the fundamental difference of fictional discourse; to preserve, if not his own marginality, than that of his writing, from attempts to colonize it. It does this partly by dispelling those illusions of wisdom, safety, and home that we impute to the "great works." Saul Bellow, in his 1976 Nobel Prize address, had argued (strangely echoing the early Lukács) that the novel was a broken form and lived on as a temporary shelter.²³ Coetzee's address similarly raises the possibility that fiction does not provide a stable home or identity. In the domain of fiction we find here, the author is not the sole authority over

²³ "The novel can't be compared to the epic, or to the monuments of poetic drama. But it is the best we can do just now. It is a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter." (http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1976/bellow-lecture.html)

his fictional words: in the numerous fictional rewritings of the Crusoe story – including Coetzee’s own parable – Defoe’s characters take on lives of their own, unanticipated by their original author.

The Author as Character: *Diary of a Bad Year* as Exilic Text

If Coetzee’s absorption into the circuits of literary esteem has occurred with a kind of ineluctable sense of fate, it is a fate that Coetzee has courted at the same time as resisted. The receipt of the Nobel – for, as the institution put it, “in innumerable guises showing the surprising involvement of the outsider” – foregrounds this tension.

Coetzee’s work has insisted on the power of the marginal to destabilise, disrupt, call into question, or defamiliarise the dominant. What remains of these possibilities once the work has been so fully absorbed into the center? Here, I do not mean just the Nobel, but also the entire institution of Coetzee studies. Of his domestication by the institutions of literature, the protagonist of *Diary*, an older, less renowned version of Coetzee, concurs: “One of these days some state official or other will pin a ribbon on my shrunken chest and my assimilation into society will be complete” (191).

Diary of a Bad Year (2007) is a strangely dissonant novel. A distinguished elderly author is commissioned, along with six other *éminences grises*, to write a series of disquisitions on issues of world importance. In the book we encounter, these opinions

are printed along the top section of each page. While it starts with a lengthy and powerful polemic against the state, it gradually drifts towards a wide range of topics: music, intelligent design, the afterlife. Beneath them, separated by horizontal lines, run two briefer personal narratives. First, the roughly sketched outlines of the author's private diary; below that, the sketchy interior monologue of his typist and love interest, Anya. These two narratives form the plot, as it is, of the novel: the author hires Anya under the pretext of needing a typist; she is already in a relationship with another man, a banker, who attempts to defraud him by planting a money-skimming virus on his computer. While the upper section could plausibly stand alone without reference to the lower sections, the reverse is not true. As we read, we find out more: the author, it turns out, is initially from South Africa, which he has since left for Australia, has attained a modest reputation, in particular for his work *Waiting for the Barbarians*. His initials are J.C. His views, it would seem, are Coetzee's own. In the Nobel address, we expect Coetzee, and we find fiction; this time round, we expect fiction, and we find Coetzee. Except, of course, that it is also not Coetzee.

This is all to say that while the novel thus stages the bulk of its narrative in the "fragile metalanguage" of non-fictional discourse, in effect courting the very form of colonization that his earlier works set out to resist, it is continually self-reflexive about this, asking under what condition this exile from fiction takes place. That is, it fractures

further some of the “embeddedness” that we find in Elizabeth Costello’s lectures. *Diary* is at heart an exilic text, in exile from a country, in exile from erotic life, in exile from his language (the entries will be translated into German, but will not be published in English), in exile from the novelistic tradition, and in exile from the self, now feted, canonized, and absorbed. (I use the term exile, but maybe an émigré is more accurate, since the position is chosen). Edward Said places late style within the history of exile, describing it as that point at which an artist gives himself over to his unreconciled state, “a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it” (8). This judgment might seem perverse, given the extent to which Coetzee becomes available in his late work, but I want to suggest that the connection with the established order that he violates here is that of the fictional contract, the contract between writer and reader. (The Nobel address similarly breaks this contract by delivering a fiction in place of a lecture). Indeed, a recurrent concern of J.C.’s “opinions” in *Diary* is the status of the canonical novelist on the public stage: the later Tolstoy, turning away from realism towards the “one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live” (193); the dying Harold Pinter, too ill to travel to Stockholm, who records, for his Nobel address, a speech calling for Tony Blair to be put on trial (“there come times when the outrage and the shame are so great that all

calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak" [127]). (Indeed, the spectre of Pinter seems to haunt the novel in some ways, contrasting so obviously with Coetzee's own address).

Throughout these entries, J.C.'s concern is on the way in which these writers depart, in their old age, from the fictional contract. Of course, one could argue that, by virtue of its appearance within a novel, these entries are merely forms of fiction. Martin Puchner takes this approach. Locating *Diary* in the tradition of the European novel of ideas, he contrasts it with the European novel of ideas (Thomas Mann, etc.). In Coetzee's late novels – although lavish with ideas – we see none of the intricate intellectual back and forth, the play of ideas amongst each other, that forms the backbone of the European novel of ideas. Characters such as Elizabeth Costello refuse to engage in debate; the focus of J.C.'s opinions might be made "gentler" by the influence of Anya, but they appear, on the pages we find them, starkly separated from the rest of the novel, impervious to dialogue and engagement. "Laments, fulminations, curses" (138) J.C. calls his strong opinions at one point; the soft opinions might equally well be called seductions, pleas, flatteries, rooted as they are in his growing infatuation with Anya. In other words, the novel is – as all of Coetzee's novels – what Puchner usefully calls a "novel of thinking," rather than of ideas. Its own generic self-stipulation as diary thus seems apt: these are opinions, but they are fluctuating opinions attached to moods,

private angsts and longings. That is, they are concerned with the ways ideas are embedded in lived experience.

While this reading illuminates the ways in which the intellect is rooted in a body, is an animal that thinks, it does not account for the formal *dissonance* of the novel. For the bottom half of the narrative reads in part like a Philip Roth plot – the protagonist is too old and infirm to bed the young woman he desires. While Coetzee’s novels have always been intellectually dense, as concerned with representing the way in which the real is constructed as with representing the real itself, this late novel appears to stage the author’s exile from fictionality itself: the lectures are not embedded, like those of *Costello*, but free-floating. It is possible to read them entirely on their own, without reference to the “story” that takes place beneath them. There is thus another way of reading this formal quality of the novel, as engendering a set of *reading* practices that defamiliarize precisely the notion of home to which the novel appeals. The experience of reading the novel is that of desiring to remain within one of the strands, to follow it to its conclusion, while at the same time being continually drawn out of it. As Benjamin Ogden has noted, the fundamental formal dynamic of the novel is that of the border crossing.²⁴ Thus, the

²⁴ Ogden argues that “*Diary of a Bad Year* is a statement about literary form made in relation to those questions raised about state formation: to what extent is the form of the novel due to the fact of novelists being born-into a long standing tradition, and to what extent do writers participate in the coming into being and prolongation of that tradition and thereby become culpable for its uniformity?” (472). This usefully places the novel squarely within the field of contestation and resistance that to some extent echoes

novel does not so much resist “the state” as it models a multiplicity of states – mental states, physical states, emotional states, intellectual states, narrative states, fictional states – which are continually displaced and viewed from the outside. These “states,” these homes, must be continually entered and exited, looked at from outside. This is not a relativism so much as a defamiliarization: the monadic existence within each entry can be inspected from outside, leading to a continual shifting and reconfiguration of the reader’s orientation; the reader is never really at home.

Confronting J.C. in the climactic scene of the novel, as the three protagonists meet over dinner, his nemesis Alan adduces as counterargument to J.C.’s vision of peaceful human collaboration the example of their own situation:

Contrary to what you prefer to believe, life really is a struggle of all against all, and it goes on all the time...Anya struggling to save you from me and my voracious depredations. You struggling to split Anya from me. Me struggling to cut you down to size.” (195).

J.C. does not defend himself, and indeed Alan is correct to characterize their relationship as a war of all against all, except in one crucial respect: that he disregards the social conditioning of the state in forming these three subjects. Most crucial of the differences

Casanova’s speculations on a world republic of letters. Ogden reads the two forms – state and novel – as merely parallel and isomorphic: a critique of the state providing a pretext or ruse under which to explore the novel. Ogden’s argument might lead us to ask questions about the precise nature of the relationship between the political state and the novel: do they exist in benign parallel, or are they not deeply co-implicated?

between the *Diary* and *Life & Times of Michael K* is this: that if the latter attempted to unearth in the character of K a form of subjectivity that might lie *before* the state, *Diary* intimates the forms of subjectivity that come *after* the state, once the desires bred by society are no longer constrained or satisfied by it – the loneliness of J.C., the rapacity of Alan, the seductive ennui of Anya. Its questions are ultimately about what legitimates authority – the authority of the state over its subjects, and the authority of the author over readers. It is as though this shifting, ambivalent moving of the novel away from home and into various states of exile is Coetzee’s method of undercutting the authority of his double, “his man,” J.C, or of his man undercutting the authority of himself.

Chapter Three

No Home-Like Place: Kazuo Ishiguro and the Lesson of History

“[A]s with a wound on one’s own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things” (54): so confesses Etsuko, the narrator of Ishiguro’s 1983 novel, *A Pale View of Hills*. This admission refers not just to her eldest daughter’s suicide, an image of which has taken residence in her mind and accompanies her continually, but to a larger, elided, historical trauma. The intimacy with devastation, the sense of terrible historical guilt, the unlocalizable shame that continues to accompany her even after she marries a British citizen and moves to the English countryside; all this is bound up with the historical events of Etsuko’s early life in post-war Nagasaki, whose hills, which escaped nuclear devastation, symbolize an unrealizable yearning for a refuge from history. As a statement of the essential theme that will come to dominate much of Ishiguro’s work – how one survives after historical catastrophe – it is also, implicitly, a rejoinder to Theodor Adorno’s famous proclamation, made from the ruins of post-war Europe, that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (*Prisms*, 34).

This claim Adorno was later to qualify in his philosophical *summa*, *Negative Dialectics*. Conceding that “[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream,” Adorno goes on to raise the “less cultural” question of

“whether after Auschwitz you can go on living,” especially when “mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz” (362-3). The horror for Adorno was not just Auschwitz, but our ability to disregard that horror, to put it to one side as we go about the process of living. “After Auschwitz,” says Adorno, “our feelings resist any claim for the positivity of existence as sanctimonious prating” (361). Hence Adorno’s famous proscription on poetry: if poetry is a creative act, it is an affirmation – of the human spirit, of culture, of language. But can one affirm the human spirit if this same human spirit is also responsible for Auschwitz? Should one not just abandon the whole project of enlightened modernity?

Adorno’s position remains a controversial one, more so because of the blanket moral complicity it attributes to modern society as a whole. It is not only that one must live every aspect of one’s life with the knowledge of Auschwitz – that is, that one can never forget it, brush it to one side, go on as if it didn’t concern one. It is, also, an acknowledgement of the radically compromised nature of human life itself, which must now internalize the intolerable fact of its existence within a system that is fundamentally and inescapably inhuman. It was out of the need to find a way out of the hopeless web in which he saw modern society as entangled that Adorno developed the notion of negative dialects, a restless, unhappy, and relentlessly critical mode of thinking.

Precisely due to its ability to continually elude conceptualization, aesthetics occupied a privileged position within this anti-system. The very aesthetic practices Adorno denounced as barbaric still harbored the potential to be salvaged and recuperated as possible spaces of resistance. This was because art existed both inside and outside the social world it represented, not so much a representation of it as its negative reflection, “the negative knowledge of the actual world” (“Reconciliation,” 160). In particular, Adorno found a measure of legitimacy in the autonomous art of the modernists. Autonomous art was not wholly bound to the logic of its social context but was able, through negation, to separate itself from it. The writings of Kafka and Beckett did not affirm anything; rather, they refused meaning, and in this way resisted the neutralization of suffering as it was subsumed into an ideal realm.¹ For “only what does not fit into this world,” claimed Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “is true” (59).

Adorno’s aesthetics emerged from the sense that history had, in a profound sense, failed to instruct; that in the face of the horrific revelations of the concentration camps, Europe was unable to do anything more than avert its gaze and go about business as usual. This sense of unprecedented historical catastrophe and all its

¹ The most extensive elaboration of Adorno’s notion of enlightened modernity appears in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which argues that Enlightenment has not liberated humans from myth but instead replaced myth with its own master myth centred on instrumental rationality. Adorno’s argument for autonomous art is made in several places, most forcefully in the essays “Commitment” and “Trying to Understand *Endgame*.”

implications for life thereafter also constitutes the buried horror of Ishiguro's novels. Ishiguro's novels, however, do not retreat fully into the autonomous world of Adorno's aesthetics, but, ultimately, turn their gaze back onto history itself. This essay attempts to understand that reverse gaze as it operates in an early Ishiguro novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which formulates an aesthetics in which history's failure to instruct becomes a form of instruction in its own right. This novel examines, in the context of twentieth century Japan, the ways in which the history of the twentieth century has been repressed, hidden, manipulated, and distorted in order that the present may flourish. Yet a reading of this novel ultimately illuminates a broader concern with the "use and abuse" of history as it appears in all of Ishiguro's writing. The same aesthetic strategy is deployed to investigate historical consciousness in a fading British country estate in *Remains of the Day* (1989), behind the jostling of imperial powers in Shanghai in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), and in a dystopian but eerily familiar England of human cloning and organ harvesting in *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Despite their diverse thematic foci, these novels are undergirded by a common concern with individual and collective forms of a kind of knowing not-knowing: of willed ignorance, self-delusion, and misapprehension with regard to larger social and historical forces. History is the absent presence of all these narratives, which are not "about" historical catastrophe, so much as that every element within them is structured by its presence.

While ostensibly concerned with such run-of-the-mill humanistic themes as the wellbeing of society, the dignity of the individual, the difficulty of family relations, they hint at the same time at a nightmare world through which human subjects grope in blind desperation. One senses that beneath the placid, banal surface of the everyday lies a horror too powerful to be viewed directly, a horror whose unconcealment must proceed, not by the presentation of events, but by indirection, dissemblance, projection, concealment, silence, and anamorphosis, that trick of perspective in which the object appears at first obscure and distorted, like the elongated smudge in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, that reveals itself, at the correct angle, to be a human skull.

The Blindness of History

Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is narrated by disgraced war painter Masuji Ono. An unwanted relic of imperial Japan, he is trying to marry off his younger daughter, a process which requires him to symbolically "kill off" his old self. Ono spends much of his narrative ruminating over the past, in particular his involvement with the anti-Western imperialist movement: a project that has not merely failed, but failed catastrophically. In its wake have come the atomic bombing and military occupation of Japan, the loss of Japanese sovereignty, and the demotion of its traditional symbol, the emperor, into a puppet figure. Ono has also, it emerges, lost his

own son to the very militarism he championed. His reputation in tatters, he has been forced to retire from painting. None of these events is mentioned directly, and Ishiguro's text thus avoids the potential danger of becoming gothic, of placing deeply shocking events in the realm of the supernatural and caricatural.² Rather, the horrors of the novel are buried in the silences of Ono's day to day ruminations, and only fully emerge through the excavations of the reader. It therefore grapples more fully with that peculiar Cold War sensibility that Susan Sontag describes as the "continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror" ("The Imagination of Disaster," 42).

The temptation is to read Ono's narrative as a form of bad faith, in which he continually finds ways to evade the truth or protect himself from it, and thus refuses to take full responsibility for his morally reprehensible support of the imperial cause. This allows the reader to distance him or herself from Ono's self-delusions, and thus participate in the judging of Ono. It is Rebecca Walkowitz's insight that the novel relies on historical distance in order to dramatize a cautionary moral lesson: "Ishiguro would have his readers see, as Ono begins to see, that what is 'correct' has changed: Ono needs to betray his past – to display it, to question it, and to turn away from absolutism – in

² See for example Goddu, *Gothic America*, 140, on Toni Morrison's resistance to having *Beloved* read as a gothic novel.

order to live responsibly in the present” (Walkowitz, 128). Similarly, Cynthia Wong comments that “Ono...gains a reader’s sympathy: how could any one of us have performed or behaved differently from him? At the very end, however, a reader’s better sensibility takes hold, and Ono’s false sense of himself in the context of world history resonates too much with a sense of self-inflicted wounding; his warped views of the past ultimately cannot offer redemption when his life is woven from such a dense fabric of lies” (Wong, 51). Walkowitz and Wong are undeniably correct in their judgment of Ono’s character and the reliability of his narrative, which clearly cannot be taken at face value.

Having embraced this observation, one must wonder if indeed the true subject of the novel is not really Ono at all, but History. In examining Ono’s guilt, one should not forget that guilt, like shame, is a social emotion, and that its presence can often tell us more about the society producing it than about the individual experiencing it.³ The critical tendency to find Ono guilty, while not misplaced, has the unintentional effect of recapitulating in a different form the very act of judgment by which post-war Japan finds Ono guilty. Rather than refute the critical readings done on the novel, then, I wish

³ One is reminded of David Riesman’s thesis in *The Lonely Crowd*, that shame, guilt, and anxiety are forms of socially produced affect that are mobilized to create conformity. (Note, in this regard, the presence of detectives who roam through the novel policing marriages, like some grotesque emanation of Kafka into the world of Jane Austen.) Also related is the late Freud’s notion of guilt as a civilizational mechanism for defusing instinctual desires (see *Civilization and its Discontents*).

extend them, showing how Ono's personal self-deceptions and concealments point to the much larger forms of self-deception and concealment at the level of the nation. The guilt, in other words, is not purely Ono's. Instead, Ishiguro uses Ono as a figure to examine what Milan Kundera has called the *tribunal of history*⁴ – the subtle means by which the present condemns the past in order to surreptitiously validate itself. In this reading, the focus of the novel is not the guilt of Ono but the historical construction of moral right.

Indeed, what Ono actually experiences is technically speaking not guilt but shame. Guilt is an individual and private emotion – the sense of deviation from an internal compass – whose effects are felt irrespective of the fashions of society. Shame, on the other hand, is far more rooted in the values of the group, and is felt as a departure from a socially accepted norm.⁵ By emphasizing shame over guilt, I am therefore trying to wrest the novel away from a historical perspective that accepts the premise that the new Japan is superior to the old and moralizes from this point of view. I am certainly not, on the other hand, attempting to invert this judgment and defend the old Japan as superior to the new. My position – or at least the position I think is implicit in the novel – is closer to a Foucauldian one: that what we call historical progress is really just the

⁴ See *Testaments Betrayed*, 198-238

⁵ This distinction is also drawn from Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*.

reconfiguration of a set of power relations into forms that are less visible or obvious.

This sense of history means that Ishiguro cannot be read as working straightforwardly within the paradigms of either liberalism or the Hegelian/Marxist tradition. His view of progress is too ambivalent for the former, and his sense of the inherent meaning of history too pessimistic for the latter.

The situation in the novel is one of regime change. Discussing revolutionary France, Paul Connerton writes: "Those who adhere most resolutely to the principles of the regime and those who suffered most severely at the hand of the old regime want not only revenge for particular wrongs and a rectification of particular inequalities. The settlement they seek is one in which the continuing struggle between the new order and the old will be definitively terminated, because the legitimacy of the victors will be validated once and for all...*To pass judgment on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order*" (Connerton 7, my italics). Of course, a distinction needs to be made between revolution (in France) and defeat and occupation (in Japan). One might begin by noting that the new Japanese regime is motivated by shame rather than fear; but the essential dynamic remains similar: a new dispensation must solidify its hold on its members through the implantation of new forms of disciplinary behavior, in particular, through a kind of psychological monopoly over the act of judgment. Ono's prior life is now viewed as monstrous otherness; a sin for which he must atone in order

that society may be healthy again. In one of the subtle continuities from pre-war Japan, taking one's own life is considered a satisfactory form of atonement, as is attested to by the sense of approbation with which honor suicides are discussed by Ono's acquaintances. To Ono's shame over his past life is added the shame of his continued existence.

Part of Ono's narrative strategy is to de-naturalize and even invert that moral condemnation, so that he appears not so much a historical monstrosity, but instead an idealist who happens to have fallen on the wrong side of the inexorable wheels of history. Thus, in the portrait of himself that Ono sketches, he is driven by the noblest of impulses: the desire to participate in a larger form of community and to live a more historically meaningful life. Rebellious against his authoritarian father's desire that he follow his footsteps into a career as a bureaucrat, he becomes an artist. He works at first for a commercial firm, churning out prints for foreign collectors. In frustration at the banality of this career, he makes his way into the studio of Sensei Seiji Moriyama (Mori-san) where he apprentices with a dedicated group of young artists. Mori-San works within the tradition of *ukiyo-e*, or art of the "floating world," whose subject matter is the ephemeral beauty of Tokyo nightlife. (The "floating world" refers to the pleasure district of old Tokyo, destroyed during the war and finally outlawed under the new regime). Mori-san is engaged in merging traditional *ukiyo-e* with some of the features of

European art: subdued colors, night scenes, a mood that aims to capture the melancholia of city life as seen in the lives of the women who work in the pleasure district (141).

After an encounter with a local political firebrand, a radically conservative Restorationist – although Ono at first takes him for a Marxist revolutionary, which tells us something about his level of political awareness – Ono begins to realize that his art has sealed him off from the real social problems of modern Japan: the vast slums, the political corruption, the overwhelming sense that the nation has decayed. In what he casts as a courageous break from his Sensei, Ono begins to create political art that reverts to the traditional Japanese style of hard lines and bright colors: “Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible...My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world” (180). The floating world, blind to the larger structural realities of Japan, becomes paradigmatic for Ono of the form of private, self-interested consciousness that must be transcended.

At least, this is the story as he presents it: the progressive participation in greater social spheres: familial, commercial, artistic, and finally political: a classical, Aristotelian, path of advancement, in which the individual realizes his *telos* in the political sphere. Yet it is Ono’s realization of his *telos* that has led, perversely, to his current dishonor. There is thus something classically tragic about the story Ono tells, along the lines of the

Oedipus story, in which the hero's best intentions are revealed to have led to catastrophe (Oedipus tellingly blinds himself at the moment of discovery). The twist is that the novel by no means endorses Ono's version of events, thus leaving the reader to make the choice between the several competing narratives that it plays with: is Ono's story really one of classical tragedy, or is tragedy merely the form he has retrospectively imposed on an ordinary life in order to endow it with historical meaning? Should we feel sympathy for Ono, or is his story merely an attempt to absolve his guilt by claiming himself as a victim?

Ono comes as close as he can to admitting that his story might be distorted, although, characteristically, he displaces the consequences of this admission onto other people: "I can't recall a colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty" (67). Nonetheless, there are strong hints that Ono's story might be entirely more banal than he is willing to admit. Occasional comments and references hint that, far from being the hero of a historical tragedy, Ono is merely a bit-player in a somewhat conventional marriage novel. The actual plot of the novel, insofar as it is visible through Ono's preoccupations, actually involves the marrying off of Ono's younger daughter, Noriko. The elder daughter, Setsuko, has suggested that the recent failure of her sister's marriage arrangements can be attributed to Ono's failure to adequately satisfy the prospective family's investigators. Ono in this sense becomes merely the obstacle that

disrupts the traditional novel of marriage, and indeed, much of the plot of the novel, such as it is, involves him marching around the city trying to defuse aspects of his past before they are discovered by the family of Noriko's latest suitor, who have deployed detectives to this end. Therefore, one could quite reasonably read the novel as working not within the genre of historical tragedy, but within the genre of the marriage-novel, with all its attendant anxieties concerning the fate and stability of the culture as a whole. It must be noted that Noriko's marriage is finally solidified on the second try, after Ono has satisfactorily repented, and the threat, at least to this particular family, is successfully averted.

This generic instability can be read as the expression of a period of historical uncertainty, in which various forces are struggling to lay claim to a history whose meaning is still disputed: Ono's tragic drama (as representative of the old regime) and his daughters' marriage novel (representing the new regime) do not cancel one another out, but engage in a battle for primacy. There are good reasons for Ono to want to view his life in grandiose terms. The historical window of his narrative runs from October 1948 to June 1950. It therefore begins at the point at which Japanese national morale is at its lowest: Japan, in the succinct words of one historian, "emerged from the atomic horrors of 1945 as a defeated, occupied nation" (Catchpole, 332). While this fact remains unmentioned in the novel, the country was now administered through the military rule

of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, who, while envisaging himself as creator of a new, democratic Japan, ran the country for all intents and purposes like a shogun. (Among his significant acts was the demotion of the emperor to a purely nominal figurehead).⁶ Meanwhile, the economy had fallen into a catastrophic slump, with even food supplies running scarce (Goto-Jones 89-97). The narrative window ends abruptly with the beginning of the economic revival in the 1950s, when Japan first began to emerge as the economic powerhouse of Asia that it would become during the Cold War.

Ishiguro chooses this window of 1948-50 for very specific reasons. It is a deeply ambiguous moment in the history of modern Japan. At this point in time it is not yet clear what the nature of the new Japan will be. At one point, Ono looks out over the city and sees part of MacArthur's rebuilding scheme, the new apartment blocks under construction for future employees, commenting that "one might even mistake them for the bombed ruins still to be found in certain parts of the city" (99). Ono is at this point still able to equate the emergent new Japan with American destruction and the disappearing old world in which he had flourished. In its reconstruction of these ruins,

⁶ For more detail on MacArthur's rule – which began with the wholesale democratic restructuring of Japanese society but soon, by late 1947, transformed into a military and police repression of the nascent left emerging as a result of this very democratization – see Goto-Jones, 89-100.

which “become more and more scarce each week,” the new Japan is able to definitively stamp its claim on the present.

The novel is thus situated at the cusp of a historical inversion. Ishiguro identifies this as a major concern of his fiction in an interview:

How people justify to themselves the kind of life they’ve led...how they try to do something that will give their lives some kind of dignity, to do something and then have to come to terms with their ordinariness. Therefore I’m interested in historical periods that are topsy-turvy, where people who’ve spent their whole lives doing something are suddenly told it’s wrong. The things they could be proud of are suddenly something to be ashamed of.⁷

History appears here as an unaccountable and inexorable force that respectively incorporates and rejects its protagonists with an arbitrary shrug. This is history not from the perspective of the Absolute but from the perspective of Hegel’s empirical ego, as “the slaughter bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized” (Hegel, 21). Hegel’s term for this was the Cunning of Reason: Reason uses the passions and actions of men in order to realize its own ends; once these ends are attained, the individual actors are no longer necessary, and “they fall off like empty husks from the kernel” (31). The great World-Historical Figures think that they are creating History, when the truth is that History is piggy-backing on their passions, which it will eventually turn against them. Hegel does not

⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro in *Conversation*, hosted by Clive Sinclair, ICA Video, Northbrook, Ill.:1986

concern himself with the fate of these human remainders: their perspective needs to be transcended to reveal the greater order of history, and thus human failures are really the successes of the Absolute. "History," says Hegel, "is not the theatre of happiness" (26).

Ono is no world-historical figure, but, in his attempt to transcend his private desires and enter into a larger collective project, he is still one of the unhappy actors who have been ejected from history's stage. Nevertheless, it is at this grand historical level that Ono is able to valorize his great failure, in contrast to the plodding mediocrity of those like his colleague the Tortoise, of whom "one despises their unwillingness to take chances in the name of ambition or for the sake of a principle they claim to believe in." These types of people are constitutively unable to participate in history, for "[n]otwithstanding the small sorts of respectability they may sometimes achieve as schoolteachers or whatever, they will never accomplish anything above the mediocre" (159). The individual who is willing to embrace a position, to take a stand on the public stage, and is finally crushed by history is worthy of a certain tragic grandeur. These views echo Nietzsche's arguments against the "last man," who seeks nothing beyond his own comfort, who sees no point in the pursuit of grand projects, and with the arrival of whom the wheels of history grind to a halt.

Therefore one sees creeping into the text echoes of Francis Fukuyama's thesis regarding the "End of History," the argument that Western style liberal democracy, built

on the foundation of a capitalist economy, is the final stage of history, the social form in which the freedom of human beings is most fully realized. Indeed, there is a growing sense through Ono's narrative that a new and definitively final regime is emerging in Japan (Western capitalism and a form of liberal democracy) that is not only pushing out the old world, but has sealed off the very forms of heroic action and tragic failure that Ono thinks of himself as having participated in.⁸ The concluding pages of Ono's narrative, which seem to aim at unburdening the nation from his own individual sins, appear to constitute a vision of the end of history:

It must have been approaching the lunch hour by then, for across the road I could see groups of employees in their bright white shirtsleeves emerging from the glass-fronted building where Mrs Kawakami's used to be. And as I watched, I was struck by how full of optimism and enthusiasm these young people were. At one point, two young men leaving the building stopped to talk with a third who was on his way in. They stood on the doorsteps of that glass-fronted building, laughing together in the sunshine. One young man, whose face I could see most clearly, was laughing in a particularly cheerful manner, with something of the open innocence of a child. Then with a quick gesture, the three colleagues parted and went their ways.

I smiled to myself as I watched these young office workers from my bench. Of course, at times, when I remember those brightly-lit bars and all those people gathered beneath the lamps, laughing a little more boisterously perhaps than those young men yesterday, but with much the same good-heartedness, I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been

⁸ For arguments on the relationship between the end of history and the end of tragedy, see Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. For its implications for literature, see Michael Valdez Moses, *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture*. Alexandre Kojève, in a famous 1959 footnote to his lectures on Hegel, wrote that Japan "has for almost three centuries experienced life at the 'end of History' – that is, in the absence of all civil or external war" (161, footnote). It is perhaps a sign of both the startling degree to which post war Japan had recovered and reconsolidated itself, and the Olympian perspective afforded by Hegel's philosophy of history that, a mere 14 years after World War II, this shockwave through Japanese history seems not to have warranted mention.

rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well. (206)

It could be said that Ono has finally come to accept the passing of his world and its values, and that his acceptance of the new regime, as a fundamentally superior stage in the passage of history, is a painful but necessary and honest one. However, the closing passage is in fact far more sinister than this initial reading suggests. It is necessary to reintroduce the historical context deliberately excluded from the narrative in order to feel the full force of what exactly lies behind this new Japan.

The final section of Ono's narrative is dated "June 1950" – a crucial date in the history of the Far East and quite literally the turning point of the economic depression into which Japan had sunk after the war. On the 25th of June, 1950, under a fog of mysterious conditions whose nature historians still debate, North Korean soldiers crossed the border into South Korea, and, the Korean War was underway.⁹ In Japan the ramifications were far clearer: a surge of orders from the USA for military equipment, and the influx of UN troops into the country, providing an instant market for consumer goods. It was immediately apparent to the Japanese that this was the end of their

⁹ Initial intelligence reports point to the possibility that the South Korean 17th regiment may have made a skirmish over the border to provoke North Korean retaliation. Responsibility for the war has been debated, inconclusively, by decades of Korean War historians. A 2011 history of the war by Bruce Cumings finds this question ultimately opaque, writing that "[w]ar came on the last weekend in June 1950, a weekend about which much remains to be learned" (9).

economic woes: the Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida called it a “gift from the gods”; in business circles there was talk of “blessed rain from heaven.” From an economic standpoint, they were correct: from 1949 to 1951 exports nearly tripled, and production rose nearly 70%. By the mid ‘50s, Japan’s GNP had grown by 250%. (Gordon 239, Goto-Jones 98), due almost entirely to massive American spending in Japan, totaling nearly three billion dollars between 1950 and 1954.

The Korean War also “saved” the United States, to use the word employed by the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Cumings, 210). For the war was, crucially, the stimulus for Truman’s approval of NSC-68 (National Security Council Report 68), one of the most significant and far-reaching resolutions of American Cold War policy. This proposal “gave credence to a ‘Kremlin design’ for world domination” (Hixson, 508), and recast containment as an open-ended military project with limitless global reach. To this end, it allowed for unlimited military spending during peacetime, leading directly to the passage through Congress of a quadrupling of American defense spending (Cumings, 210), and precipitated the escalation of the arms race over the subsequent decades. For proponents of NSC-68, the ultimate endpoint envisioned was “the collapse of Soviet

power and the emergence of a 'new world order' centered on American liberal-capitalist values" (Hixson, 508).¹⁰

Behind the laughs in the sunshine and the glass-fronted offices, then, lies not just the seemingly benign American-inflected modernity that Ono dedicated his life to resisting, but something far darker: Japan's assumption of a crucial role within the new, violent, battle for a total global *imperium* that we call the Cold War. For the US funding of Japanese economic expansion was a crucial strategic move in the Cold War: as Brian Catchpole notes, the US decision to authorize military purchasing in Japan was made with the idea that Japan would "become capitalism's eastern bulwark against Russian and Chinese communism" (334). One should recall that part of the ideological platform of the imperial Japanese politics in which Ono was caught up was the liberation of other Asian nations from the perceived scourge of Western modernity (the "co-prosperity sphere" was Japan's euphemistic name for its empire): the Japanese Empire in Asia would supposedly "overcome" Western modernity and replace it with its own, ideal modernity.¹¹ Korea, of course, had long been the whipping boy of Asia, a pawn in

¹⁰ For more on this historical background of the Korean War, see Cumings and Catchpole. Hixson outlines two schools of American thought on the Cold War: orthodox or conservative historians, who "view the collapse of the Soviet Empire as vindication of nearly half a century of American...containment" and critics, who argue that the collapse "resulted from internal causes and that American diplomacy needlessly prolonged the East-West conflict" (507).

¹¹ This was only one of the responses to Western modernity. For a succinct overview of the variety of these responses, as well as the ideology of Japanese "anti-imperialist imperialism" see Goto-Jones, 62-88.

conflicts between China, Japan, and Russia in the late 19th century. It is now caught up once again at the center of a different geopolitical struggle, the Cold War. The new, post-war Japan, is still effectively “in” Korea: not in the form of Japanese troops marching under imperial banners, but rather as a critical component of the Cold War Western Alliance spearheaded by the United States. Post-war Japan may no longer be called an empire, but, as the key Western ally in the East, it has entered into an imperial project of far greater magnitude, reach, and power.

The historical window of the novel is once more important here: in the 1950s there was no assurance that the atom bomb would not be used again, and the fate of Korea could not have seemed anything but dire. In April of that year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US Forces had issued an order for retaliatory atomic bombing if North Korean forces attacked (it appears that it was only Truman’s reluctance to give the final authorization that prevented this outcome, although Truman admitted to actively considering it throughout the war).¹² One might ask, then, why none of the Japanese in the novel seem concerned, given their own recent experience, with the use of nuclear weapons in Korea.

¹² Nuclear weaponry – in particular nuclear weapon testing – played a key role in what Bruce Cumings calls “atomic blackmail,” yet there was more at stake than pure military posturing: Eisenhower had suggested that using nuclear weaponry in Korea would be cheaper than conventional arms, and the Joint Chiefs at one point actually recommended launching nuclear attacks against China. See Cumings, 34.

No doubt this historical context is left out due partly to Ishiguro's minimalist aesthetics – less is more – and partly to his novelistic intentions – to explore an extreme psychological situation without the screen of moral judgment. Yet there is also a third, more profound reason for the historical elision: the sense that the lives, values and beliefs of individuals and entire societies are determined by historical processes of which they are barely aware, or whose true nature is too dark and sinister to be acknowledged. The dated entries of Ono's narrative should not be read as the documentation of Ono's progressive reconciliation with his past, but of the change in consciousness impelled upon him by the changing historical situation of the nation. The values articulated by Ono here, it should be remembered, are, conveniently, those endorsed by the new regime. That Ono has finally come round to a position of acceptance is less the result of grace than a convenient complicity, secretly informed by the sense that, with the economic upturn triggered by the Korean War, the new regime is definitively cemented in place, and the possibility of an alternate history, of which he had still been able to entertain fantasies prior to the Korean War, is finally banished.

The key word in all this is "innocence." Lacking the grounding of a secure historical framework, Ono is unable to convincingly evaluate this new Japan as superior to the world it has replaced. In this sense his ignorance perhaps grants him greater perceptiveness: "all those people gathered beneath the lamps," he thinks, "laughing a

little more boisterously perhaps than those men yesterday." It would perhaps be overstating the case to say that the "superiority" of the new Japan is based purely on its existence in and hold over the present, but Ishiguro sets up enough structural parallels between the new and old Japan that one is led to question whether this "final" stage of history is at bottom any different from its predecessor. Certain elements within the country have quite clearly progressed – notably, the position of women. Yet Ono's confidence that the new Japan has the weight of the End of History behind it, that it has entered into a period of historical clarity, is belied by our knowledge of the occluded Korean War. The entry of Japan into the "end of history" is quite literally contingent on the plunging of Korea into the destructive inferno of history itself. The novel thus reveals, through its own silence, a structural blindness within the triumphal discourse on the end of history, in particular that discourse's own silences regarding the material grounds by means of which its post-historical utopia props itself up. The novel instead hints at an underlying historical circularity, metaphorized in our narrator's palindromic name – Ono – in which each successive historical regime finds and masks its own particular monstrosity.

The Abuse of History

Ishiguro uses a number of subtle techniques to underscore the historical parallelisms between the new and old Japan. Rebecca Walkowitz has commented on the use of echoes and repetition to “make allies of American democracy and Japanese militarism, both certain of progress and continuity” (130). For Walkowitz, it is a structure of loyalty that connects the two Japans. Thus “oaths of loyalty recapitulate an undernoticed coercion...the new loyalty enforces old positions: no longer a sensei, Ono must be a student” (130). But I want to examine more closely the roles of silence and occlusion in the formation of these historical configurations. Witness, for example, the role that silence plays in the maintenance of social norms at Mori-san’s villa, as he invites his acolytes into his studio to observe his new works. “The convention of these occasions,” says Ono, was that “we behave as though our teacher were not present” (138), and indeed, expressions of admiration give way to impassioned debate as to the Sensei’s intentions in his new work, while the Sensei stands to one side, apparently oblivious and slightly bemused. The idea behind this convention is clearly that an expression of admiration directed explicitly to the Sensei would be taken as insincere; the fiction must be that all these utterances are natural, that is, completely outside the convention of polite appreciation and deference to the master (hence the debates over the master’s true intentions). For the Sensei to speak would be to break this illusion; therefore, his silent presence in effect authorizes the fiction and is essential to its

maintenance. It cannot be explicitly acknowledged, yet without it, the entire charade would be pointless. Silence is built into the ritual, and allows otherwise shameful or dishonest actions to take place.

Stylistically, this manifests itself in the strange sense of incompleteness in Ono's narrative: the sense that the reader is never given enough information, that the words themselves never say everything, that the real meaning of events lies in the fog of silence that weaves through the space between the words. Characters, events, and chronology seem to float nebulously through Ono's narrative. An exemplary passage is Ono's recollection of an episode at Mori-San's villa, recounting the expulsion of the "traitor" Sasaki, a gifted student whose work has diverged from the teachings of the Sensei:

Most of us had already turned in. I was already lying awake in the darkness in one of those dilapidated rooms, when I heard Sasaki's voice calling to someone a little way down the veranda. He seemed to receive no answer from whoever it was he was addressing, and eventually there came the sounds of a screen sliding shut and Sasaki's footsteps coming nearer. I heard him stop at another room and say something, but again he seemed to be met only with silence. His footsteps came still closer, then I heard him slide open the screen of the room next to mine.

'You and I have been good friends for many years,' I heard him say. 'Won't you at least speak to me?'

There was no response from the person he had addressed. Then Sasaki said: 'Won't you just tell me where the paintings are?'

There was still no response. But as I lay there in the darkness, I could hear the sound of rats scuttling under the floorboards of that neighbouring room, and it seemed to me this noise was some sort of reply.

'If you find them so offensive,' Sasaki's voice continued, 'there's no sense in your keeping them. But they happen to mean a great deal to me at this moment. I wish to take them with me, wherever it is I'm going. I've nothing else to take with me.'

Again, there came the scuttling sound of rats in reply, then a long silence. Indeed, the silence went on for so long, I thought perhaps Sasaki had walked off into the darkness and I had failed to hear him. But then I heard him say again:

'These past few days, the others have done some terrible things to me. But what has hurt me the most has been your refusal to give me even one word of comfort.'

There was another silence. Then Sasaki said: 'Won't you even look at me now and wish me well?'

Eventually, I heard the screen slide shut, and the sounds of Sasaki stepping down from the veranda, and walking away across the yard. [142-3]

This passage is remarkable for the way in which time, place, and character become unmoored through Ono's careful use of silence and suggestion. Fact imperceptibly dissolves into metaphor – note the liberal use of the word “seems” – and events are subtly dissociated from individual human agency: at crucial points, it is not Sasaki who is speaking, but merely his voice. The anecdote ostensibly tells of a conversation between the traitor Sasaki and Ono's neighbor, with Ono, lying next door, an objective witness. But the lack of a respondent to Sasaki's questions leaves their addressee ambiguous: is “the room next to mine” really Ono's own room? Is the neighbor's silence Ono's own silence? Is Ono projecting his own anxieties onto an external screen where they can be managed? Is the entire story, in fact, fabricated by Ono for this very purpose? Indeed, we learn of Ono's own expulsion from the villa shortly after this scene, and later, of Ono's expulsion of his own students. Not only this, but the anecdote also echoes an earlier trauma in Ono's life, his father's burning of his youthful paintings. Indeed, every event in Ono's account seems to resonate with other

events: there are not only doublings, but triplings and quadruplings. At various times, Ono occupies the position of both the silent rejecter and the plaintive rejected.

It appears that all of these stories, however, are ways for Ono to talk about (or, rather, to not talk about) what Walkowitz calls the “primal scene” of the narrative, the arrest of Ono’s student Kuroda, whom Ono has reported for questionable artistic practices. At this point in his narrative, shortly before the outbreak of war, Ono has become official advisor to the Committee for Unpatriotic Activities (182), and the brief scene merely narrates Ono’s arrival at Kuroda’s house, to find Kuroda gone, his house ransacked and his paintings in flames. The conflagration and arrest Ono finds excessive: “I had no idea...something like this would happen. I merely suggested to the committee someone come round and give Mr Kuroda a talking-to for his own good,” he says plaintively to the policeman at the scene; “[t]hings have gone much too far” (183). Ono does not mention why he is at Kuroda’s house in the first place, but presumably he intends to somehow allay the severity of the police crackdown on Kuroda, in which case he must, at some level, have anticipated its possibility. His pained response illustrates a critical element of the historical dynamic of the novel, in which Ono consistently neglects to consider the larger historical context within which his actions take place, and therefore is unable to take full responsibility for their ramifications.

While these features can be read as constituting a sociology of Japanese culture, with its hierarchies and rituals, its indirection and silences, it is also clear that the larger structure they describe applies to historical consciousness far more broadly. (If it is a sociology of Japan, I suspect it is in the manner of Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, a partly invented fantasy based on the idea of Japan). Ishiguro has described the novel as about "the need to follow leaders and the need to exercise power over subordinates, as a sort of motor by which society operates" (qtd. in Wong, 50). The world described here, in which the boundaries between individual and collective, past and present, are blurred, counteracts attempts to apply a linear historical narrative to it, but instead sees an unbroken continuum between the present and the past (an anti-Hegelian position) in which the legitimacy of the regime is granted not by a transcendental appeal to Reason or Spirit, but instead by its own immanent force, which acts to consolidate itself as the dominant. Of course, the new (liberal) regime does not enforce its values by persecutions and burnings, arrests, and the like. It enforces them psychologically and culturally, through the use of social norms. Witness the dinner conversation at Noriko's *miai* (or courtship), for example, in which Ono's confession of guilt – a ritual of self-shaming that he must perform before his daughter may be accepted by her new family – is met with puzzlement and bemusement, as if he had nothing to confess. The social

enforcement is surreptitious and not publicly admitted, but nevertheless powerfully active.

If the early Ono, who fervently entered into the spirit of Imperial Japan, fails to give sufficient attention to the historical context of his actions, the new Ono equally fails to recognize how embedded he is in a historical context; the extent to which his actions, and the actions of all those around him, are still complicit in structures of power. One must avoid, therefore, reading Ono's story under the too-easy guise of liberal progressivism: a reading which would align itself with the new Japan and speak with the weight of historical distance. This reading would assert that, while Ono could not have foreseen everything that would befall Japan, he was nevertheless naïve and misguided, that part of his blindness was a product of his own hubris, part the outmoded traditional structures of Japanese society. In this reading, the new Japan is quite clearly qualitatively superior to the old Japan, in that it no longer sanctions the social forms that gave rise to catastrophe (the emperor), and the new Ono is superior to the old Ono, in that he now has the wisdom to step back and reflect on his life, rather than merely acting (he is now a "backstepper" rather than an "engineer," in the slang used to divide the two classes of painter in Mori-San's workshop).

Similarly, it is tempting to take the ethos of the floating world, with its seductive aesthetic of the ephemeral and the illusory – "The finest, most fragile beauty an artist can

hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark' (150) – as the moral center of the novel. Yet it now becomes clear that the “floating world” of the title refers not only to the historical floating world, destroyed during the war, but rather functions as a paradigm for historical consciousness itself. If the floating world, for Ono, occluded the social injustice of the Japanese nation,¹³ it merely mirrors the contours of Japanese imperial nationalism, which occluded the violence of its “utopian” colonization of mainland Asia, and, finally, the triumphant democratic order of the new Japan, which occludes the Cold War imperial project on which its new economy is built.

I would suggest that the novel instead articulates a far more Adornian notion of history: the sense that the bright world of posthistorical modernity is unknowingly enveloped in the tangled mess of history. This is allegorized in the Godzilla motif running through the novel, the film’s anxieties about the nuclear age hinting at the nature of a present which cannot be fully confronted.¹⁴ Godzilla is never referred to by name in the novel. Ono merely calls it the “monster,” advertising the film to his grandson Ichiro, part of a younger, semi-Americanized generation, by stressing its

¹³ Scholars of Japanese history have suggested that the floating world effectively functioned as a “safety valve” to release class resentment against the ruling shogunate. The shogunate issued legislation against the underclasses, but at the same time gave its victims a place – the Floating World – to vent their anger against these laws. Thus, in a diabolical twist, the Shogunate had effectively disarmed anti-shogunal expressions by making it clear that they occurred in a realm that stood outside reality (Kita, 35). Kita is in fact arguing against this position, but I have drawn my description from her lucid summation of it.

¹⁴ The film was released in 1956; Ishiguro has moved it forward to 1948.

horror. The prospect of the horrific beast clearly appeals to Ichiro's masculinity: he boasts of the monster's artificiality, and after the screening proudly relates the story to his mother, warning her that it might be too frightening for her to handle. The screening itself is a different story: during the entire film Ichiro covers his face with a raincoat expressly brought with him for that purpose. To what does the metaphor of self-blinding refer? Is Ono himself the child, who cannot look directly at the horror of his own past: his enthusiastic embrace of militaristic expansionism, the death of his son in the war, the massive destruction and humiliation of Japan that resulted? Or is it rather the new generation of Japanese, sanguine about the Americanized future, and unreasonably confident that they have mastered the traumas of their past? The narrative suggests a strange, half-known and ghostly world surreptitiously seeping into the present.

At this point we can return to the historical narratives of the text with an understanding of the mechanics behind the deep historical pessimism embedded within them. The novel pits two radically opposed conceptions of history against one another. On the one hand, as I've discussed, the closing of Ono's narrative seems to want to situate itself at the far end of Hegel's dialectic of historical progress, in which the turmoil of historical upheaval has subsided and one can clearly survey and evaluate actions and events. On the other hand, however, there is a lingering suggestion of a far more

Nietzschean view of history: that the flourishing of this new modernity is made possible by a certain kind of willed and active blindness. For Nietzsche, excessive historical knowledge "slackens the rein of activity" and prevents the coming to fruition of "everything that is truly great and human" ("The Use and Abuse of History," 11, 16):

This is a universal law: a living thing can only be healthy, strong and productive within a certain horizon: if it be incapable of drawing one round itself, or too selfish to lose its own view in another's, it will come to an untimely end. Cheerfulness, a good conscience, belief in the future, the joyful deed, all depend, in the individual as well as the nation, on there being a line that divides the visible and clear from the vague and shadowy: we must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember; and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically, and when unhistorically. (16)

Active and strategic forgetfulness is therefore as central to the flourishing of human activity as knowledge or remembrance, which can paralyze the spirit of action. Yet if Ono is the representative of a historical action enabled by the circumscription of knowledge, then he is a very ambiguous one. Ono's life path is set in motion by his rebellion from the rigid banality of his father's career in government bureaucracy. His subsequent embarkation on a career as an artist is not an uncommon one. His later move from art into nationalistic politics and militarism as affording a greater scope for real action is also a familiar one, and should recall the career of a far more infamous actor on

the historical stage of World War II.¹⁵ The echo of Hitler is a jolting one, for now the story cannot be read as an apologia for those on the wrong side of history. Rather, it suggests a vertiginous incommensurability between the often horrific lived experience of history and its conceptual systematization into a philosophy. Nietzsche, rebuking Bismarck's Germany for its complacency after the defeat of France in the bloody Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, repeatedly insists that history always serves life, that "it is not justice that sits in judgment" over the past, but "only life, the dim, driving force that insatiably desires – itself" (28).

The novel thus leaves us at an impasse in which, on the one hand, the new Japan flourishes by repressing the knowledge of the Korean War, and on the other, any form of concerted resistance to this new regime is rendered inconceivable or taboo by the specter of the Japanese Empire and the catastrophic historical events it set in motion. By refusing a triumphal historical perspective, the novel counteracts the desire to definitively impose a singular narrative upon events, and thus attempts to grasp the intangible processes of post-historicity as it consolidates itself. *It therefore does not offer a philosophy of history so much as an estranged perspective on history.* On the historical currents

¹⁵ Hitler, as is well known, was rejected, twice, from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. The overbearing father, the escape from a banal petty-bourgeois existence, the final transition to politics as a stage on which the desire for greatness could be realized, all echoes Ono's own life. Ono, of course, is a bit player in the Japanese imperial project; he is at best a propagandist for the movement, certainly not a leader or theorist of it.

leading up to Ono's fateful decision to embrace the imperialist movement, the novel remains silent. On the ramifications of that decision, the novel also remains silent, as it does on the virtues and merits of the new democratic Japan as opposed to the old imperial one. That is, it offers none of the putatively transcendental justifications for human action that it is traditionally history's role to provide, no standpoint from which all can be understood as a logical unfolding and working out of social forces (the Hegelian dialectic). Instead, it registers history as felt in the subtle and unacknowledged pressures it applies on the individual consciousness.

This is not to say that there is no historical perspective, since Ono is quite explicitly recollecting and reinterpreting the events of his life. But this perspective is personal, delimited, and contingent, made from within another historical milieu that is as opaque as the one he is recollecting. In this way the novel opens up a Chinese box of historical levels, since the moment one perceives this embedding of one level of historical obscurity (Ono's memories) within another level (the narrative present of the novel), one is compelled to reflect back on oneself as a reader, and see in one's own historical context the backdrop for a hitherto unsuspected blindness.

The Politics of Nostalgia

Renan famously remarked, in a Nietzschean spirit, that the nation survives not only by remembering, but by forgetting; that is, by actively using its monopoly over history to nourish its own growth: "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation...the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (11). In understanding the mechanisms of Ono's self-deception we become aware of the greater deceptions taking place at the level of the nation, which now, though not fully conscious of it, occupies a key position in the United States' creation, through force, of a vast global empire.

The notion of a forgetting inherent to the structure of the nation suggests some reasons why Ishiguro chooses to narrate – not just in this novel, but in all his novels – from the perspective of those marginalized from historical processes, those without agency, or without agency any longer. These characters' marginal relationship to history allows them to see history from a perspective not available to those in its main current – not necessarily from a clearer perspective, but from a less familiar one, a position reminiscent of that of Walter Benjamin's famous Angel of History, blown from Paradise by the storm of progress, unable to reassemble the shattered fragments accumulating in his wake. "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe," writes Benjamin (257). The Angel of History might be the purest figure of the disconsolations

wrought by history, and the clearest exemplar of how this disconsolate figure is, as it were, compelled to turn its gaze back onto history, to excavate that which history has suppressed. Ishiguro's decision to narrate from the perspective of a nominally "bad" character – here, a right-wing Japanese nationalist – is a way of refocusing our attention onto the ruins upon which "post-historical" society is erected. By deflecting our sympathy from Ono while at the same time estranging the new Japan that stands against him, the narrative suggests the possibility of a third, hidden, element in this historical schema, and demands that we draw our gaze away from the dominant and onto that which is marginal, silenced, and occluded. It is in these spaces in the text that we find the keys to unlock the secret back doors of post-historical triumphalism.

I should stress that the situation I've discussed here is by no means confined to Japanese history. *Remains of the Day* (1989), often described as the consummate portrait of the English psyche, is in many ways the story of Ono retold. Although not personally responsible for any of the political dealings at Darlington Manor, Stevens' sense of loyalty to the principles of a moribund class structure result in his disgrace within the context of post-war Britain, which, like Japan, had entered into an unequal and compromised relationship with the USA in order to preserve its standing on the global stage. (Britain was, incidentally, the largest contributor of armed forces to the Korean

War after the USA and South Korea). Similarly, Britain's own disastrous imperial maneuverings during the Suez crisis form the hidden backdrop to the novel.

Moreover both Japan and the U.K. (under Thatcher) were in periods of economic ascendancy in the late 1980s when the novels were written. Ishiguro's excavation, in these respective national histories, of moments of uncertainty and shame pointedly destabilizes the grounds of this national self-confidence. For both Japan and Britain were, in effect, losers of World War II: the former lost militarily, the latter economically. Both were nations with strong and even overweening senses of national pride that found themselves forced into positions of compromise in order to remain world powers. They thus appear to constitute for Ishiguro privileged sites for the exploration of the contours and fault lines of a "post-historical," "post-Auschwitz" modernity. The attention to Japan can be taken as related to the particularly stark fashion in which it emerged into this late modernity, and to its particular national *misère*: a nation that tried to stop history, sealing its borders to the world for two centuries, that ended up being catastrophically overwhelmed by it. I would hazard that Ishiguro's sense of a hidden catastrophic substrate underlying late modernity emerges as a result of a particular historical configuration made visible by his subject position, straddling two nations: the old world dominated by the nation-state is gradually drawing back to reveal a new global totality – epitomized in the Cold War – whose nature and workings are as yet not

completely understood. Ishiguro's novels all emerge from the fractures of this historical transition, and thus, while his characters attempt to understand themselves in the terms of a national order, as Englishmen or Japanese, the novels themselves intimate that they are in fact operating within a field in which these parameters no longer hold.

The new global order appears to yield the possibility of cosmopolitanism as a new, post-national form of social existence, and indeed the cosmopolitan clearly exists as a utopian yearning in Ishiguro's work. Ishiguro leaves hints throughout his novels of putatively utopian cosmopolitan spaces: the disappearing floating world of Tokyo, whose seductive pleasures blind its habitués to social injustice; the gatherings of political leaders upon whom Stevens waits in *Remains of the Day*; the Shanghai settlement in *When We Were Orphans*, the unnamed European city of *The Unconsoled*, with its unquenchable thirst for high art. But these spaces are too compromised and complicit in the regimes under which they flourished to survive in a historical world (the floating world's blindness to the political; the massive imperial force brought to bear on China in order to sustain the International Settlement in Shanghai; the profound political miscalculation of Lord Darlington), and too utopian to be brought about in a post-historical one (the city Ryder visits is wracked by infighting and aesthetic fissures; of the genetically engineered medical paradise of *Never Let Me Go*, one needn't comment). One is left with Walter Benjamin's sense that it is the memory of their failure alone which remains

valuable: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (254) – but without even Benjamin’s muted messianic faith. At first, it might seem that Ono’s nostalgia for the floating world he rejected is the one commendable desire we encounter in his narrative. As a Japanese character in another novel, who finds himself swept up in the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, says, “When we nostalgic we remember. A world better than this world we discover when we grow. We remember and wish good world come back again” (*When We Were Orphans*, 263). But then one recalls the fate of those characters, like Ono, who have followed their best impulses straight to disaster, and it becomes clear that Utopianism, for Ishiguro, is only acceptable under the guise of an unrealizable nostalgia.

Imaginary Animals: Genre and Reproduction in *Never Let Me Go*

...at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins.

Derrida, “The Law of Genre” (65-6)

Boarding school cliques, a miniature art economy, fantasies of adult normativity, uncontrollable sexual urges, a doomed romance, a mysterious boat marooned on land, a shocking revelation of horror, a series of operating table murders, entered into with foreknowledge and unresisted. These are some of the peculiar and incongruous thematic features of *Never Let Me Go* (2005), whose bland “therapeutic” narrative (Bruce Robbins’ term) of boarding schools, carers, and donors masks a world of overwhelming horror, in which people are cloned, raised from childhood to adulthood, and then harvested for organs.

I start with these images rather than a feature of plot or character in order to highlight an aspect of the novel that tends to be left unremarked on when seen against the vivid outlines of its clone-plot and the political issues – of rebellion, resistance, complicity – that it immediately calls up: this is the problem of its genre. Jacques Derrida, in *The Law of Genre*, claims that genre is always effectively a principle of contamination: it cannot be proclaimed without immediately beginning to undo itself. *Never Let Me Go* exploits this instability within genre, operating at one and the same time as a love story, a boarding school *Bildungsroman*, a science fiction dystopia, and gothic horror, to name merely the most prominent of its generic models.¹⁶ Its *modus operandi* can

¹⁶ My thanks to Nathan Hensley for pointing me to the fundamental generic instability of the narrative. This has also been commented on briefly by Bruce Robbins. See “Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*.”

be described as a form of bait-and-switch, the raising of one set of generic expectations and then the subtle shifting over to another set of conventions, creating a series of parallel generic possibilities that are somehow held in suspension throughout the narrative, even after it becomes clear, in the climax, what the “real” situation of the clone protagonists is.

This technique is most obvious in the frustration of the reader’s expectation that the clones will revolt: they never do, and the narrative ends – as all of Ishiguro’s narratives end – with timorous acceptance of the social order: “I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever I was supposed to be” (288). The novel does, on the other hand, unexpectedly fulfill the expectations of the romantic drama, the male love interest dying suitably early that the couple’s love might remain unsullied. Thus, rather than being given an answer to the obvious political question the plot raises – Why do the clones not rebel? – the reader is drawn into a vertiginous set of generic possibilities and confusions: the narrative of political rebellion runs up against the conventions of romantic melodrama, the provincialism of the boarding school novel against science-fictional otherworldliness. Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) has called Ishiguro an artist of “treason”: in *Never Let me Go*, he is constantly betraying the reader.

But the novel is clearly not doing this in the spirit of postmodern play: the characters are not ironically self-aware of the conventions they inhabit, but rather

believe in them, deeply: believe that they will offer happiness or reward. This is what creates the indubitably queasy and uncanny mood of the novel: a sense that behind all this generic play something is continually pressing, something biological, something to do with reproduction, with organs, with operating theatres.

One example of generic short-circuiting occurs when the preoccupations of young adult literature, as Kathy invokes them near the start – “What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham,” she announces (37) – are brought into contact with the dystopia that emerges later on in her narrative. Here, the standard preoccupations of teen literature – Who am I? What is my place in the world? – take on an entirely different meaning. In a narrative of rebellion, the answers to these questions might provide the starting point of the plot action; in teen literature, or the *Bildungsroman*, of which it is a sub-genre, these questions serve instead as the end point of the narrative, marking the habituation of the pliant subject to an unyielding world.

One effect of this short-circuiting is to suggest the proximity of radically different ways of explaining the world. This can be seen in the instability of the overly generic character names: at one point they are called Kathy, Tommy, Chrissie – plucked straight from the young adult literature of pre-multicultural England – at another, Kathy H, Alexander J, Peter N – the last initial a signifier of dehumanized sci-fi dystopia ever

since Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. (One wonders, given the clones' lack of parentage, what exactly this initial might stand for - their laboratory of origin, perhaps). This subtle switching of nomenclature suggests the ways in which the ostensibly humanistic and liberal institution of the school serves as what Althusser called an ideological state apparatus for a distinctly inhuman society. Hailsham, we discover later, is an ameliorative project that failed – a fact that suggests that such a project (with its emphasis on individual artistic expression) is merely a fancy, humanistic gloss over a horrific, dehumanizing reality.

But for all its suggestiveness, this insight – that the most hallowed institutions of liberal society are just sophisticated forms of coercion – is not in itself particularly original, insofar as it has constituted the bread and butter of the dystopian genre since *Brave New World* (the hallowed concept here being the pursuit of happiness). This brings us to a crucial feature of the novel: the generic conventions it encodes are all, in the most banal sense of the word, generic: the novel should not be understood as imaginatively reinvigorating or providing new twists on the love story, the science fiction dystopia, the gothic, the schoolyard novel. Rather, it is almost overinvested in them; its interest is precisely in exploring the conventionality of these genres, in why we become so deeply invested in them, and what ideological purposes they serve. The cloning taking place

here is not just the biological cloning of human beings, but is, perhaps more significantly, the cloning of language and narrative form as well.

The Uses of Genre

The episode which gives the novel its name focuses on a fictional love song, “Never Let Me Go,” a cassette recording of which Kathy, the cloned narrator of the novel, obtains at a school auction. The incident is this: the young Kathy becomes enraptured with this generic love song, which she imagines to be about a mother singing to her baby, and takes to mimicking this theme by dancing alone to the song while holding a pillow that she pretends is a baby. Dancing like this in her bedroom one day, she catches the usually aloof art mistress, known by the children as Madame, standing at the open door, watching her and crying.

This minor incident suddenly opens up for Kathy the hidden fissure between the clone world and the regular world – she is different from them; they possess some secret about her that she doesn’t know – and gives rise through the course of the narrative to a host of interpretive theories. At first Kathy assumes Madame is crying because she knows clones can’t have babies, a fact Kathy herself has recently discovered (70); later on, after hearing the rumor of “deferrals” in which clones who are sufficiently in love can postpone their donations, she speculates that Madame had read the scene as her

dancing, not with a baby, but with a lover (177). A final, "true," interpretation is provided near the end of the novel, after the grownup Kathy H tracks down the mysterious Madame, who finally explains:

When I watched you that day I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. (272)

This final interpretation also marks the interjection of an outside narrative into Kathy's closed world, and provides the historical consciousness that has been lacking in Kathy's own narrative. While the first of these interpretations belongs, perhaps, in some kind of domestic drama; the second, in a love story; the third belongs firmly in a historical tragedy, and by virtue of this retrospectively invalidates the prior two interpretations (embroidered as they are out of stray pieces of personal observation). These interpretations thus follow the arc on which all Ishiguro's narratives are modeled: the revelation that all one's suppositions about the world were really naive fantasies, and that one is really playing a role one didn't suspect in a script written by others.

Yet there is also a fourth interpretation, although this is not so much "in" the novel as on the border of the novel.¹⁷ This is the one implied by the title, when it affixes the words "Never Let Me Go" to its content. What do the words "Never Let Me Go"

¹⁷ See Derrida, "The Law of Genre," for an analysis of the borders and limits of genre.

signify in this fourth, uninterpreted incarnation? This is no longer a part of Kathy's narrative: who, then, is uttering it, and how is it to be read? Is the novel to be understood as a kind of love song? An elegy for a passing world? Or something else entirely? Are the words to be interpreted as the expression of that desire which the clones themselves never dare utter? There is a puzzle thus posed here about the very framework by which the novel is to be understood. This fundamental interpretive decision is one that has to be made by the reader, who is then drawn into the fundamental generic instability of the novel. At some level, then, one is forced to read the novel as being about the act of interpretation itself.

Interpretation immediately implies genre: the almost pre-conscious social frameworks and conventions by means of which we explain events, or explain them away. In his study *Genre*, John Frow makes the important point that genre is not a property of the textual object itself, but resides outside the text, in shared or shareable "infrastructures": he therefore describes genre as "a shared convention with a social force" (102). Genre guides interpretation by narrowing down the potentially endless variety of meanings that could be ascribed to facts: "it is a constraint on...the production of meaning; it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context, and so makes certain senses...more probable than others" (101). In

this way, genre is central to the individual's ability to participate in activities within a social group. As Frow argues, genre "is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings. No speaking or writing or any other symbolically organized action takes place other than through the shaping of generic codes, where 'shaping' means both 'shaping by' and 'shaping of': acts and structures work upon and modify one another" (10).

I want to emphasize this element of *struggle* that takes place behind the seemingly placid and immobile conventions of genre. The novels I have discussed above – *An Artist of the Floating World*, *Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans* – explore, in their generic structure, periods of narrative realignment in which it is unclear what is really happening, when a consensus has not been reached on how what has happened should be understood and represented. These could be thought of as narrative "states of exception" in which various narrative factions claim sovereignty. The generic conflicts within Ishiguro's early novels express this aspect of social struggle: the claims of the new order come into conflict with those of an older order in a battle over historical legitimacy. But *Never Let Me Go* marks a shift in the stakes of this generic game, for it is now the case that genre has become less a matter of contestation over historical meaning than an evasion of it.

So, in a sense, *Never Let Me Go* amplifies a generic instability present in all of Ishiguro's novels, in which narratives are consistently undercut or cast into doubt by the presence of alternate narratives that appear to explain empirical events with equal plausibility but utterly different import. Ono, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World*, remains vaguely aware of the possibility that he might not be acting out a grand tragedy, but participating in a relatively conventional marriage novel. A similar game is played in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), when the detective Christopher Banks' image of himself as a kind of globe-trotting 20th century Sherlock Holmes, solving crimes to international acclaim, is contradicted by the dawning realization that he is part of a network of global intrigue and historical complexity (going back to the Opium wars of the 19th century) that far exceeds the scope of the Victorian detective conventions that he thinks he is acting out. These two examples are sufficient to delineate the historical predicament which Ishiguro's novels describe: the sense of an emergent world system in which the old and reliable narrative conventions, in which his characters have such profound investments, no longer make sense, but at the same time cannot be relinquished.

In *Never Let Me Go*, these forms of generic deception and indeterminacy are once more deployed. Yet the novel seems to diagnose a fundamentally different and new historical situation that contains deep similarities with the era cultural historians used to

call the postmodern.¹⁸ The new world here seems unamenable to description by any of the generic templates available to the clones, borrowed as they are from a pool of already exhausted and predictable subgenres. The novel, that is, no longer focuses on a period of historical upheaval but rather on a fully post-historical world – or at least, a world from which the possibility of historical change has been banished. It is telling that the nostalgia for an earlier historical period that so destabilizes the “present” of the earlier novels has become, in *Kathy*, purely a nostalgia for childhood, for a time of innocence.

The novel is set in a putatively science-fictional world whose events, nevertheless, have already taken place, in England, during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. As in his earlier work, a catastrophic event has taken place: the development and implementation, at some unspecified time in the past, of human cloning technology, and its subsequent integration into a social system in which clones are created as a pool of human spare-parts to be harvested by the “normals” as needed. These clones need to be husbanded into adulthood before their parts can be used, or “donated.” This leads to the logistical problem of what to do with the clones during their years of maturation: the novel hints at a vast network of camp-like facilities in which the clones are educated to a

¹⁸ Shameem Black argues that “Despite its surface similarity to Ishiguro’s earlier novels, *Never Let Me Go* can be understood, like *The Unconsoled*, as a postmodern challenge to the narrative conventions of Ishiguro’s earlier works” (805, endnote)

sufficient level where they will prove docile subjects and efficient “caretakers” of the donor clones. The clones cannot really be read as a proletariat class – a class which has nothing to offer but its own physical bodies¹⁹. They are not really in a position of to choose to sell or not sell anything; indeed, they are well provided for, at least the ones we meet. The major characters in the novel are clones being educated at an elite boarding school, Hailsham. Thus even within the clone class there exists a hierarchy, with the clones of Hailsham serving as the objects of envy and emulation for the other less privileged clones. The novel disturbingly subverts the traditional Marxian notion of class: the privileged clones at Hailsham are somehow at the same time the exploited classes. The Hailsham students therefore do not possess that privileged epistemological purchase upon totality that George Lukács attributed to the proletariat (in *History and Class Consciousness*), a privilege derived from the proletariat’s distance from the educational institutions of society and consequent ability to see the actual operations of class structure without an ideological filter. Hailsham seems to project a version of a populace that has been purged of all its ideological resistance, its labor power (clones

¹⁹ More precisely, the proletariat are "...that class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live (Friedrich Engels: Note to the 1888 English Edition of: Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels: 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in: 'Selected Works', Volume 1; London; 1943; p. 204).

cannot strike, since they cannot work in the first place), and, as Shameem Black has noted, its identitarian factionalism.²⁰

Attempting to map the clones onto our own world thus opens the possibility of a multitude of allegorical possibilities – the welfare state, migrant labour, the English class system.²¹ Shameem Black has quite plausibly suggested they be read as *homines sacri*, people who can be killed but not sacrificed (789). Entertaining these multiple possibilities confronts us with the most disturbing of the indeterminacies raised by the novel: namely, who are we to identify with? Are we the exploited clones, are we the exploiting normals, or are we, somehow, both? This question indeed seems to open up two radically different and incompatible ways of reading the novel. In one reading, the Hailsham clones might be citizens of any advanced industrial society, whose education, individuality, expressiveness, love affairs, are ultimately just techniques of rendering them docile. We are not expecting to be harvested for organs, of course, but we are nonetheless expected to contribute to society, to labor, to retire, and to die, without causing overmuch fuss. In another reading, it is the normals who are the citizens of

²⁰ Hailsham clones are educated not at all unlike middle-class English children of the late 20th century – with the striking difference, as Shameem Black has pointed out, that the ethnic and cultural diversity of these years has been entirely eliminated from the clone world: “Their truncated identities suggest the triumph of a white, fascistic racial ideal that effectively obliterates the markers of multicultural Britain so common in the late 1990s...The world of Hailsham is a world of cultural sameness, a normative ideal of white, middle class culture” (797).

²¹ Readings in this vein can be found in Bruce Robbins (on the welfare state) and Shameem Black (on the novel as an allegory of the First World absorption of the cultural identity and labour power of the Third World)

advanced industrial society, and the clones signify any of a multitude of invisible and exploited groups within it, as mentioned above. If one wants to stretch it far enough, the clone world might be said to allegorize the world of factory farming of livestock – living beings raised for the sole purpose of consumption by others. It thus makes more sense to think of the novel as not mapping out a fixed allegory, but rather as articulating a structural pattern inherent across modern post-industrial society in general, suggesting the ways in which their functioning depends upon a series of repressions.

I want to try and square this circle by suggesting that the clones are to be thought of fundamentally as *products* (in something of the same sense as we think of “animal products”). They have been created in order to fulfill a particular social need; a need that, once satisfied, proves impossible to relinquish. They are forbidden to smoke, and great emphasis is placed on their physical health (even though incapable of reproduction, sexuality is still carefully monitored). The clones have been genetically altered to be incapable of reproduction; we are not told of what other alterations have been made. Are they specifically altered to be more passive? Or is their passivity just the passivity of the human as such?

All of the above – the “real” of the story – can be deduced easily enough from the clues in Kathy’s narrative, but it only emerges tangentially to the story Kathy wants to tell, or thinks she is telling. Kathy H insists on framing the story not as one of social

exploitation but as a love story – a narrative form by means of which her normality can be reasserted. Near the beginning of her narrative she explains, “I’ve been getting this urge to order all these memories. What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham” (37). The “things” to which she refers turn out to be a love triangle, in which Tommy becomes an object of contention in the affections of both Ruth and Kathy, Ruth’s aggressive possessiveness over Tommy preventing the consummation of the “true love” between Tommy and Kathy until it is too late, and in a haze of melodrama that erupts even through the flat prose, the dying Ruth leaves Tommy to Kathy, who finally becomes Tommy’s “carer” as he approaches his final donation and “completion” (see esp. 232-3). The love story is of course a standard component of the dystopian genre: the irresistible natural demands of passionate love between two people reveals the inhumanity of the system. But one gets the queasy feeling here that the love story does not so much reveal the system’s inhumanity, but performs a different, and far more troubling function: to shield its teller from the other, horrific story she is living.

Therefore, one way of understanding this generic instability is to read it not as a property of the *novel* but as a property of Kathy’s *narrative*, itself a symptom of this larger social totality. The essential categorical difference between normal and clone is between those who can reproduce and those who cannot. The female clones cannot

reproduce, and both male and female clones can anticipate a similar future as first carers and then donors. Despite this biological similarity, however, a clear gender difference exists among the clones. Ishiguro chooses to narrate the novel, not from the perspective of the rebellious Tommy (a type similar to narrators such as Ono and Christopher Banks), but from that of the placid Kathy H, whose overriding, unfulfillable, preoccupation is to bear a child. It is one of the perversities of the novel that Kathy should cleave so strongly to these generic notions of gender, and I think Ishiguro's point here is *not* that these fantasies are biologically wired, but rather the opposite: that gender is a performance of social normativity, and the clones are driven by the desire to be normal. Kathy thus becomes a hollow reproductive conduit, her inability to reproduce biologically only throwing into relief her desire to reproduce social behavior and narrative. It is notable that Kathy H's one "deviant" characteristic, a period of compulsive sexual behavior in her teens, is related to reproduction.²² Even without the possibility of biological reproduction, the fear that she might fail in her gender role is a critical component of the way in which Kathy's behavior is regulated.

In other respects, hers is a world from which difference has effectively been erased as a significant marker: gender difference, ethnic difference, historical

²² Fear of being perceived as a gender failure: "Miss Emily had told us that it could be painful and a big failure if you didn't get wet enough and this was my one real worry. It wasn't being ripped apart down there, which we often joked about, and was the secret fear of quite a few girls. I kept thinking, so long as I got wet quick enough, there'd be no problem, and I did it a lot on my own just to make sure" (98-9).

difference, class difference, and, finally, genre difference. The inability to produce biological offspring, a fate over which the clones have no control, stands for the inability to produce new generic offspring: to produce narrative that does not at some level merely mimic existing narrative.

In the telling of her story, Kathy reconstructs her sense of her own self-delusions and blindnesses, of which she is, the novel has us understand, half aware. "We each played our part in preserving the fantasy and making it last for as long as possible," she admits when recalling a childhood fantasy in which she and a group of friends were "secret guardians" of one of the school mistresses (52, 49). "I think I sensed that beyond that line, there was something harder and darker and I didn't want that," she admits later (55). The fantasy is adhered to even while Kathy realizes it is a fantasy, and tolerated for the sake of self-protection.

Yet, despite the seemingly total penetration of institutional ideology within the clone world, there is nevertheless a distinctive clone identity. It is expressed most clearly in Tommy's drawings of his "imaginary animals," whose mechanical appearance and "busy, metallic features" (188) are expressions of some primal understanding of the human animal that emerges within the clone world. Tommy's animals are created outside the supervision of Hailsham – where he is constantly reprimanded for being "bad" at art – and can thus be considered a more "pure" expression of the clone sense of

self (free of the pressures of “creativity” and artistic normativity present at Hailsham). This clone-self dispenses with notions of interiority, individuality, and humanness and concentrates refocuses on the practical survival of the animal: “You have to think about how they’d protect themselves, how they’d reach things” (178), explains Tommy of his animals.

This seems to provide the clue to the artificiality of Kathy’s own narrative, itself a piece of “clone art,” and the single large-scale expression of the “clone aesthetic” that the reader is given. It also explains the unsettling artificiality of the clones (and in some sense, all of Ishiguro’s characters, who often seem to resemble, behind all their intimate confessions, a hodgepodge of codes and tics, and whose primary impetus seems to be to establish at any cost a sense of their normality). As Louis Menand has written, “There is something animatronic about [Ishiguro’s characters]. They are simulators of humanness, figures engineered to pass as ‘real’” (qtd in Black, 799). Passing as real is the key element here, since the desire to pass provokes an excessive investment in self-normalization. M.A. Ferreira has noted that the typical character in the clone genre will try to dispel “feelings of uncanniness” by “trying to build a life predicated, as much as possible, on normality” (qt in Carroll, 68). Kathy’s sense of difference, for example, is felt precisely as uncanniness: when the children rush Madame during a visit, she reacts with a

suppressed shudder. "We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how *we* would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders," says Kathy (35).

The reference to spiders returns us to that sense of animality or creatureliness underpinning so much of Kathy's narrative. Here one is reminded of Derrida's suggestions that to characterize the human as the "autobiographical animal" is to suggest that we are animals continually engaged in "dressing" our "animal" nakedness in language (amongst other things) (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 4-5). The characters' fundamental impetus is to conceal their naked vulnerability – their vague sense that they are other, even monstrous – through the embroidering of narrative fantasies that are, precisely, *banal*. Here it is the very banality of these fantasies that makes them effective, since it normalizes the clones, while a fantasy of exceptionality would merely reinforce the very difference that the clones aim to suppress. Therefore, the clones in *Never Let Me Go* are not merely ordinary, but the *ne plus ultra* of ordinariness: Ruth's "dream future" is to work in "a nice glass-fronted office" (142); others dream of becoming postmen, farmers, or drivers (143).

Hence the anodyne blandness with which Kathy tells her story, in language that could be used to describe a vegetable garden or a shopping trip. The clones' characterization of the non-clones as "normals" might, in different circumstances, be used in a derogatory sense: here it serves as praise. It is linked to the narrative or generic

norm. "Normalness" can be best approximated through the clones' application of narrative norms to their own lives. Hence also the use of the love story as a form by means of which Kathy's normality can be reasserted. The unpleasant political-historical narrative of the novel is in this way continually kept at bay through the imposition of a variety of other generic frames that act as defense mechanisms.

This use of genre as a protective device explains the moments of sentimentality that creep into Ishiguro's later work, in which the climactic moment of recognition of one's helplessness is taken as the pretext for an outpouring of pathos?²³ Indeed, sentiment becomes the primary means by which the narrative seems to void the overwhelming sense of personal frustration engendered by the world it describes, as in the climactic scene in which the bleak truth of their situation is revealed to Kathy and Tommy:

"Your stories this evening, they touched me too.' She looked now to Tommy, then back at me. "Poor creatures, I wish I could help you. But you're by yourselves."

She reached out her hand, all the while staring into my face, and placed it on my cheek. I could feel a trembling go all through her body, but she kept her hand where it was, and I could see again tears appearing in her eyes. [*The trembling is a response to the horror that the clones strike in "normal" people*]

"You poor creatures," she repeated, almost in a whisper. Then she turned and went back into her house. (272)

²³ See also *When We Were Orphans*, the reunion with Akira and its sentimental paean to nostalgia (undercut by the possibility that Akira is an imposter).

Here we can understand Kathy's narrative as redirecting the potential outrage such scenes might elicit into other forms of affect – romantic yearning, self-pity, and above all, nostalgia: the attempt to hold on to memories of a better world when all else is taken away. This becomes even clearer after Tommy's death, in the closing section of the narrative, which is a paean to memory: "I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them" (286).

One might raise the interesting question of whether Kathy, in her narrative, is aware of the various conventions she employs. For it seems possible that it is precisely her humanistic education, in which she appears to have read extensively (at one point, a group of clones discuss George Eliot and Kafka) that facilitates her self-deceptions, by providing her with a repertoire of tropes by means of which to normalize herself. In this case, generic cloning might be understood to be the fundamental characteristic of a late modernity from which the notion of historical change has been banished.

Narrative after history

Yet history does appear in the novel. In their extensive humanistic education in the arts and literature there is no mention that the clones are taught history, or if they are, that they understand it to be any more than another pool of stories. They are aware of the events of World War II – in one scene the students amuse themselves making fun

of life in a concentration camp – but seem incapable of recognizing themselves in it. This signals, in somewhat heavier-handed fashion than *Artist of the Floating World*, that the “lesson of history” is never really learned.

So what has changed since *An Artist of the Floating World*? Like Ono, Kathy has vague intimations of her own monstrosity, which she and the other clones go to great lengths to normalize (the possibility that the normals might be the real monsters is not entertained). However, she is distinct from Ono in one crucial sense: she does not straddle a period of historical change but fully inhabits the monstrosity of the world into which she is born. Her monstrosity is an integral *part of* present, rather than an unwanted holdover from a repressed past. Unlike earlier Ishiguro narrators, whose lives spanned historical periods and whose consciousness therefore bore the marks of this disjunction, Kathy H has no memory of any other world than the one into which she is born. There is therefore no sense within her narrative of historical crisis, no sense that the legitimacy of one historical system might be cast into doubt by the memory of another. By denying their monstrosity, by desiring to be human, the functioning of the system proceeds unthreatened; without, indeed, even the potential of a threat.

Unlike Ono, who labored on in ignorance of the larger system determining his fate, there is no grand mystery to the total system that envelops Kathy’s life: it is, finally, all out in the open, although this knowledge has little effect on the way clone lives are

lived. *Never Let Me Go* therefore marks a fundamental shift in Ishiguro's historical theme²⁴. The early novels take place during periods of historical transition and concentrate on figures in the present that emanate uncomfortably from earlier historical periods. *Never Let Me Go* marks an imaginative transition into a fully post-historical world – that is, a world that is no longer haunted by histories that could have been nor populated by resistant or uneasy subjects: a world that is purely and totally itself. Its subjects do not have to struggle to make themselves at home (and certainly do not have to transform the world to do this), since the conventions by which they can accommodate themselves to the world are all already provided for them.

I therefore want to suggest here that the novel's deep political pessimism derives not from the clones' constitutive inability to rebel (whether this is biologically engineered or ideologically enforced), but rather from a deeper concern with the status of historical narrative within late modernity. As Nietzsche suggested, collective action requires a delimitation of multiple narrative possibilities – that is, people must see their story not just as one possibility amongst many, but as *the true* narrative, as *their* narrative. If *Artist of the Floating World* demonstrates the dangers of acting with limited knowledge, *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates the paralysis engendered by excessive

²⁴ A shift not unconnected to developments in Europe and the UK since the 1980s: the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the formation of the EU and EEC, the appearance of New Labour and Blair's Third Way politics in the late 1990s.

knowledge. Ishiguro's novels read as a whole articulate a specific impasse in political thinking. On the one hand, action in the service of the "wrong" narrative is either catastrophic (Ono, Stevens) or futile (*Orphans*). On the other hand, the characters in these novels are denied a transcendental perspective from which their "true" narrative will reveal itself. Finally, the totality that is revealed to us as readers is so complex, intricate, and overwhelming that the only possible action it can effect is paralysis. If there is no transcendental point from which one can adjudicate narrative – that is, if all narrative is fundamentally generic, based on traditions and habits – then it seems one is left not with a usable politics, but purely with a philosophy of history that draws not from the idealism of Hegel or the voluntarism of Nietzsche but from the pessimism of Foucault: people are doomed to act out stories they don't fully understand, to fight for causes they only dimly grasp, and to strive for ends they don't intend. This is Hegel's Cunning of Reason, minus the Reason, or the slaughter-bench of history, unredeemed by the World Spirit.

I should conclude this by suggesting that while *Never Let Me Go* is the most fully post-historical of Ishiguro's novels, and thus depicts the "disappear[ance] of Man properly so-called – that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the subject *opposed* to the object" (158), it nevertheless manages to estrange this posthistory in a surprising fashion. While it is clear that the clone world is purged of Hegelian

negativity, Shameem Black writes well on Ishiguro's post-humanism, arguing that the ability to identify with the clones despite, or through, the generic-ness of their narratives, is an identification with the inhuman other of humanism. I think her suggestion can be pushed further: *Never Let Me Go* is a novel that fundamentally tries to get us to see the human *as* animal. In a perverse way, it confirms Kojève's thesis that at the end of history, humans would revert to their animal state:

In point of fact, the end of human Time or History – that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical Individual – means quite simply the cessation of action in the full sense of the term. Practically, this means: the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions. And also the disappearance of *Philosophy*; for since man himself no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the world and of himself. But all the rest can be preserved indefinitely; art, love, play, etc.; in short, everything that makes man happy. (159)

For Kojève's "post-historical animals, there would no longer be any "[discursive] *understanding* of the World and of self" (160). Ishiguro's novel nevertheless provides a perspective from which we can read its soup of tired and clichéd narrative genres, not for the knowledge that they provide about the world, but rather for what they say about animal being that creates them.

Afterword

This study, in the process of formulating a canon of the “novel of disconsolation,” has left out many writers. This is partly due to the inevitable constraints of any kind of taxonomic project, but also, I would submit, to the relatively small pool of writers in English who fully commit their work to this project of disconsolation.¹ If I have settled on these particular three, it is because of the neatness of their symmetry. Coetzee and Ishiguro both draw heavily from Beckett, and this triangle, with its broad geographical spread (Japan, South Africa, Ireland, England, France) and relative stylistic coherence, has the advantage of demonstrating my argument with concision and efficiency.

In a broader project, however, I would certainly include such figures as Jean Rhys (born in Dominica, moved to England at 16), J.G. Ballard (born in Shanghai International Settlement, interned in a Japanese camp during WWII, moved to England in 1946), V.S. Naipaul (born of Indian parents in Trinidad and Tobago, moved to England), W.G. Sebald (originally German, but settled in England). These authors’ geographic displacement, their marginality to the nation, is clearly crucial to this disconsolate sensibility. Yet placing them together, along with Beckett, Coetzee, and Ishiguro, it is

¹ Although I think it is equally true that *aspects* of disconsolation can be found in some of the work of many postwar writers who do not specifically emerge from the displaced positions I am describing: Ian McEwan (*Black Dogs, Atonement*) and Margaret Atwood (*Oryx and Crake*).

clear that these writers have something to do with the end of empire, particularly in the shadow of the emergence of the new, more powerful empires of the Cold War and post-Cold war periods. They in effect inhabit transitional spaces, where old imperial forms, in the process of collapsing and giving way to new ones, open small fissures of no-man's land. Coetzee, Beckett, Rhys, and Ballard are all born privileged subjects of the colonies or former colonies of the British Empire. Ishiguro and Sebald are both born in once-powerful countries – postwar Japan and postwar Germany – doing their best to shield themselves from catastrophic imperial pasts. Both relocate to England (Ishiguro through his parents, Sebald of his own volition). In a sense, then, all these writers write from the position of *those who have lost power*. One way of understanding the position of relentless negation that these writers assume is as an effect of their desire to disavow power in all its forms – that is, not just in the form of empire, but also in the form of the new states that were being inaugurated in their wake. The aftermath of Empire saw the commencement of nation-building at a frantic pace, nations that claimed liberation from empire, nations that promised a new homeland, nations that claimed a final severance from histories of domination and violence. The kind of skepticism evinced towards the nation-building project by these writers is thus to be read as an abiding concern with precisely the insidiousness of power, the unforeseen ease with which political projects can go astray. If Marxist literary criticism tends to privilege – following Lukács – the

subject position of the proletariat, a putatively universal class able to discern the true workings of class society, my project tends to privilege the subject position of the displaced, of those who for whatever reason do not belong. This subject position emerges, not from within the mainstream of history, but rather from its cast up detritus, its silt. Without any real foothold in History, and skeptical about the desire to enter history, they therefore turn away from political positions. Their own disconsolate position, a no-man's land opened up in the shifting of imperial formations, becomes the space these texts aspire to reveal for their readers. To disconsole is to jolt out of home, empire or nation, and place in this no-man's land. Do these authors – cast-offs from the grand narrative of history – have anything to teach us?

In a short story by J.G. Ballard, a giant humanoid corpse washes up on a beach. Soon, however, the corpse begins to be looted: body parts are hacked off and carted away, strips of flesh removed, a contractor's hut is set up on the site. By the end of the story, however, the giant is forgotten; only the remains of a partial skeleton are left, the ribcage jutting out from the shore like the wreck of an old ship. Remnants of the giant turn up in surprising places, re-functioned as decorative ornaments, paraded in pageants, displayed in the natural history museum. His "immense pizzle," a reminder of his one great potency is now on show "in the freak museum of a circus which travels up and down the north-west" (648).

Ballard's story is of course an Ozymandian fable about the vanity of power, about how quickly and definitively that power is forgotten, how ridiculous its pretensions seem after its demise. Yet, at the same time, it leads one to ask about the nature of that forgetting. The narrator The narrator of the story – the only character who seems even remotely interested in the larger history of the giant – observes the following scene: "His right hand and foot had been removed, dragged up the slope and trundled away by cart. After questioning the small group of people huddled by the breakwater, I gathered that a fertilizer company and a cattle food manufacturer were responsible" (646-7). In this brief moment, the story suggests a whole industrious and busy regime that goes unnoticed and almost unmentioned on. What would a cattle food manufacturer be doing with a decaying carcass, one wonders. What, indeed, is the nature of this new world in which the former imperial might finds itself forgotten? What might it mean to continue to speak from the position of the "sea-wearying gulls" who perch on the decaying rib-cage – not in a spirit of nostalgia, but in a spirit of tragic knowledge?

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This project is at bottom about modernity and its discontents, about writers whose work, which seems to decline engagement with the immediate political issues of their

context, thereby refocuses its critique on modernity as such, but a modernity so entrenched that it seems impervious to fundamental structural change. It has taken the form of a fundamentally *reflexive* project, and thus reflects its genesis as a project on radical alterity. Alterity, as a fundamentally abstract and relation term, acts, as Sara Suleri has argued in *The Rhetoric of English India*, to block knowledge about the other. I willingly concede Suleri's point. Yet the central impetus of my project has been to show the ways in which the stymying or resistant qualities of figures of alterity – the failures of knowing – ultimately function to produce unexpected knowledge about the self. Therefore, the distinction between “the Other,” as a reified object that is inscribed with difference, and “alterity,” as something continually resistant to and recessive from inscription, is a crucial one for me. It also seemed that the figures of alterity I was interested in displayed a large variety of different characteristics, that they emerged in different historical contexts and modeled different responses to them, that there were *degrees* of alterity, and that those “radically” other figures at times could blend into other figures who seemed only “mildly” other. The concept of the “other” blocked access to these finer discriminations, to a nuanced understanding of how these characters worked.

Nevertheless, it seemed to me at a late stage in my writing that I needed a coherent explanation of *why* this figures inhabited states of alterity. Otherness is generally thought of as an unwanted imposition, an act of epistemic violence, yet many of the

figures I analyzed desired this otherness, or seemed indifferent to it. Neil Lazarus' notion of a literature of disconsolation provided a framework that allowed me to place these very varied forms of alterity under a larger political umbrella, and my innovation, if it can be called that, was to place Lazarus' sense of the disconsoling project of late modernist literature into conversation with these particular figures of alterity, who I could now call figures of disconsolation, or disconsolate subjects. Furthermore, like the concept of alterity (which must always be defined in relation to a self), disconsolation emphasizes the moment of reflexivity, of the *reader's* implication into the project of this writing. It is fundamentally the way in which both alterity and disconsolation leave the reader in turmoil, introspection, and reevaluation – the way in which they reveal to the reader what he or she did not know about him or herself – that has interested me in this project. Rather than trying to draw from the figures (or indeed the novels they inhabit) a project, an answer, or a program, my study has focused on the unease they induce. That is, I have attended to the way the attempt to discover knowledge about them always turns around, in the course of these texts, to reveal a reflexive knowledge about the world in which they emerge, a knowledge about *us*.

That said, an entirely different project might be imagined in parallel to the one I have written, addressing the positive rather than the negative modalities of these disconsolate subjects. That is, by examining their desires, the forms of freedom they seek, the forms of

community they imagine, it would move towards making an inflationary, rather than deflationary, critique of late modernity. While my project is fundamentally about the exhaustion of modernity, such a project – taking seriously the more Romantic elements of these disconsolate figures – might imagine what the social systems of modernity have left out, the ways in which particular aspects of it are fundamentally unsatisfying, and in such a manner articulate the beginnings of a world that I only articulate negatively here.

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What does the future hold for the literature of disconsolation, a literature that struggles so hard to imagine the future? Jameson writes that one aspect of Adorno's wrestling with the nature of modernity is "a reflection on and a thematization of the passing of the modern itself, the reasons for its obliteration, and some dawning apprehension of an intellectual landscape in which the negative, or 'critical theory,' will have definitively become a thing of the past." (LM, 245). In this properly postmodern world, he quips, "[t]he question about poetry after Auschwitz has been replaced with that of whether you could bear to read Adorno and Horkheimer next to the pool" (248). One of the tasks I have been trying to accomplish in my readings of these novels is then to "restore the sense of something grim and impending" (LM, 248) to novels that risk

becoming harmless, in the way that Kafka has now become harmless: turned into a style (Beckett), a set of illustrations of theoretical concepts for the classroom (Coetzee), or an illustration of the dangers of emotional repression (Ishiguro).

Foucault once said the 21st century would be Deleuzian. If, indeed, the whole intellectual apparatus around negativity, coming out of Hegel and culminating in such figures as Adorno, were to be discarded in favor of a philosophy of pure affirmation, it may well be the case that the literature of disconsolation will die out, that its short burst of intensity during the late 20th century will fade and that it will once more sink into the status of the occasional, wayward complaint of a reactionary (a *Gulliver's Travels*) rather than an essential character of a literary and historical period. Yet I would speculate that the future of the literature of disconsolation lies with animals. It is from animals, and the idea of animality, that the most profound disturbances to the fundamental structures governing and legitimating the human world have come. This is both from the increasing attention given to the immense scale on which (non-human) animals have been incorporated into the human world, as products, and also, simultaneously, the degree to which, with the rise of biotechnology, it has become impossible not to recognize the human itself as a biological organism.

The animal is yet another exclusion I have made in the interests of focus. This is to ignore the unignorable presence of animals, particularly in the later work of Coetzee (as

in the work of Sebald and Kafka). A superb study by Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, identifies a practice of what she calls biocentrism in a group of early 20th century writers: Kafka, Nietzsche, Darwin, D.H. Lawrence. These writers, she argues, attempted to write and think, not like, but *as*, the animal. This practice, however, ultimately dies out, as rejection of the symbolic world of the human eventually entails the rejection of literature itself, as one of the prime constructs of this symbolic world. This study is also a lesson in the ways a radically anti-humanist literary practice finally culminates in its own destruction. For Norris, one can't really envision a biocentric politics, because politics is fundamentally a human construct and takes place within the human world.

Yet it seems to me that Norris' notion of biocentricity persists in a different mode in the literature I am describing. The question of the animal is clearly the question that continues to haunt the writing of disconsolation. Here the question of radical alterity reemerges inescapably – as the narrator of Sebald's *Austerlitz* puts it, "Men and *animals* regard *each other across* a gulf of mutual incomprehension." This quote points us to something crucial in the literary discourse on the animal: the gaze. It is through this gaze, a gaze behind which we confront an inescapable otherness, that the animal takes on its power to disconsole. In the late works of Coetzee, this re-orientation of perspective

engendered by the animal is crucial. There are moments throughout Coetzee's work where that gaze is fully inverted, and the human appears as a particular kind of animal.

Part of the uneasiness of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is the way in which it refocuses attention on the human being as biological organism. Indeed, one is led to ask the question, what distinguishes the way Ishiguro's clones are treated from the way we treat animals? Like livestock, the clones are bred and raised entirely for the purposes of being slaughtered for human use. Similarly, in the same way that the more sensitive meat-eaters among us compromise by accepting the "free-range" farming of animals – that is, animals given a simulacrum of a natural or free animal existence before they are slaughtered – the clones at Hailsham are given an education, allowed romance, friendship – indeed, much of the depth of experience of human life outside the clone world (without the possibility of procreation, to be sure). Indeed, there is the sense that an unspoken and artificial species barrier has been erected between the "normal" and the clone, a barrier that emerges suddenly in unexpected situations, as, for example, when the clones rush Madame and she reacts with disgust, as if they are spiders.

Both the late Coetzee and the late Ishiguro thus begin to reflexively implicate their characters and their readers as animals. Elizabeth Costello's lectures on "The Lives of Animals" reflexively implicate her as one of these animals. Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am (Following)* is, in this respect, an exemplary disconsolate text. Derrida,

standing naked before his cat, is confronted, he writes, by “an existence that refuses to be conceptualized” (9). The gaze of the cat provokes not so much thoughts, as certain emotions: he feels not only ashamed but “ashamed for being ashamed” (4). This sentiment of shame of course arises, as Sartre noted, in the presence of an other, under the gaze of an other. Derrida’s shame is ambiguous: “Before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* a beast [*une bête*] that no longer has the sense of its nudity? Or, on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of nudity?” (5). Is Derrida ashamed, not of being a man who is naked, but of being an animal that has fallen into humanity (as Nietzsche put it in *The Gay Science*)? In other, words, the gaze of the animal provokes the question, “Who am I?” It is this question that I think leads to Derrida’s second level of shame, which is the shame at the very impertinence or imposture of humans in assigning names to the animal, in rendering the animal mute and unresponsive.

Why does Derrida stage this as a personal, autobiographical, anecdote? I would suggest that by staging it in this form, he is attempting to depart from the abstract and rational discourse of philosophy, to begin rather with the *mood* of shame, and then unravel what this mood revealed. That is, part of the disconsolation of Derrida’s text is *the disconsolation with and of philosophic discourse itself*. Derrida writes that the philosophers who have spoken of the animal are “sound and profound,” but everything

in them “goes on as if they themselves had never been looked at...by an animal that addressed them” (14). Indeed, the conference rubric under which Derrida was asked to present, “the autobiographical animal,” suggests that the human is the animal that clothes himself, clothes himself with philosophy, with language, etc. To stage this autobiographical undressing of man through the gaze of an animal (his cat) is a narrative, philosophical, and above all *disconsoling* strategy. In this way, “As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself” [12].

I bring up Derrida’s philosophical undressing to suggest the ways in which literature has been and will no doubt continue to be the form in which that unacknowledged address of the animal is given voice. As Derrida notes it has been the “poets and prophets” who have taken on the task of coming to terms with the address of the animal. Under this gaze, we are inevitably faced with the question, as Kris Weller has put it, By what right do we do what we do?² If Derrida’s text urges a philosophical or “statutory” displacement of the human by re-viewing the human through the eyes of the animal, this is already the task undertaken by the literature of disconsolation.

² Duke Women’s Studies Grad Scholar Colloquium, September 2010.

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Biography

Timothy Wright was born in Paris, France, in 1978. From 1996 to 1998 he studied Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. After relocating to the United States, he received his B.A. in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2002. In 2005 he entered the PhD program in English at Duke University, where from 2010 to 2011 he held the Price Research Fellowship.