

“The Self and the Impossible Pursuit of Justice in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians, Disgrace and Foe*”

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ABSTRACT

In its engagement with J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace* and *Foe*, this thesis explores how the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida can be used as a framework for understanding the self's relationship with the other. In contrast to postcolonial readings of these texts, this thesis does not consider the separation between the self and the other in terms of social or cultural differences but rather the radical alterity of the other that is perceived in the face-to-face encounter. This study aims to illustrate how the engagement with alterity exposes the instability of the self's structures of knowledge that, in these instances, are grounded in the Western metaphysical tradition. The effects of the self's encounter with the other are seen in the personal transformation of Coetzee's protagonists whose initial flaws and problematic worldviews are revealed in the context of the injustices done to the other. Furthermore, the study examines the extent to which the self is complicit in the suffering of the other and how this ultimately complicates their pursuit of justice for them. While the focus of this thesis is primarily on the characters, it also shows how the writer's careful treatment of otherness functions to confront and engage the reader with the alterity of the other and the ethical dilemmas inherent in attempting to conceptualise it. The study concludes that the protagonists' engagement with others and their subsequent confrontation with themselves lead them to consider what an ethical response to the other might be. This ethical turn results in positive change, however ambiguously, in their thoughts about and behaviours toward other beings.

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INTRODUCTION

Levinas's Self and Other

The “self” and “other” are theoretical concepts frequently associated with the marginalisation and oppression of the postcolonial other, that is, a person from a colonised or previously colonised country. However, it could be argued that such formulations tend to overlook the strangeness, the absolute alterity, of the other. Because the postcolonial other is a construct grounded in the self's perception of difference, they remain part of the self in that they do not exceed the cultural field of the self but originate from within it. On this basis, standard conceptions of the postcolonial other are not truly other.

The French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas conceives of an other whose alterity is not socially or culturally inscribed but who is radically other: an other that is other than the self, other than being, and other than the realm which is presented to the self (see Lingis xxxviii). In the face-to-face encounter, the self distinguishes an unrecoverable distance and an absence in the other's countenance, which renders them infinitely inaccessible (Levinas, *Totality* 13). The face of the other, the way they present themselves, transcends the illusions and the ideas held of them by the self, enabling a relationship of radical openness and receptivity (50–51). Radical alterity therefore exceeds social and cultural difference, thereby destabilising those categories on which postcolonial discourse is premised.

In contrast to the postcolonial other, the alterity of Levinas's other is not formed out of resistance to the self but is prior to any initiative or imperialism of the self. The other is therefore a free agent over whom the self has no power and whose presence calls the self's spontaneity and freedom into question (*Totality* 38–43). In other words, contrary to the relationship between the self and the postcolonial other in which the former holds power over the latter, the relation between Levinas's self and other is one in which the roles are somewhat reversed, although by no means hierarchical and totalising. Because the other calls into question the self and their structures of knowledge, they possess a degree of authority, albeit one devoid of power since it is given by and dependent on the self (39–40). Moreover, in this relationship, the separation between the self and other is not based on opposition or difference but the inner lives of distinct beings (53–54). The separation is an inevitable consequence of thought and interiority (104).

The human self, for Levinas, is by nature biased and egocentric. As such, the “I” takes precedence over other people and things and they are perceived either as extensions of the self or alien objects to be manipulated. The self fails to see that the other inhabits a different world and is not to be absorbed into the self’s restrictive systems of classification (*Totality* 12–13). Levinas’s “self” or “same” comprises the ego, the knowing subject. The domain of the self includes their intentional acts of consciousness and the intentional objects that give meaning to those acts, and which are made possible by consciousness. Thus, while the self maintains a relation with otherness, it is one in which the ego constantly attempts to reduce the distance between the self and the other, thereby diminishing their difference (see Critchley 4–5).

As a finite being situated in a bounded cultural epoch, the self is predisposed to engage with the other with what Levinas refers to as a totalising mindset. Yielding to the natural tendency of the self, the totaliser is satisfied with their orderly systems that are grounded in, and perpetuate, structures of power and control, and they prefer to keep to themselves and their in-group (see *Totality* 16–17). This point of view hinders communication and community with those outside of their in-group, however, and prevents the self from learning anything other than what they already know. But totality and everything it involves presupposes infinity and vice versa. What makes totality simultaneously possible and impossible is infinity, and what makes infinity both possible and impossible is totality. It follows then that the possibility exists for the self to engage the other as an infinitiser. In contrast to the totaliser, the infinitiser is one who desires that which is other than themselves and is more interested in the person who is speaking than that which is said. Infinitisers do not uphold the status quo or judge others by what they do or produce, but rather value the arbitrariness of the individual (17–19). When infinitisers encounter the other, it arouses in them a desire for the infinite – a desire that can never be satisfied. This desire is insatiable because the face of the other at each moment destroys and overflows the image the self has of them (50–51). We might say that the face of the other and the way they express themselves cannot be assimilated and contained since it always surprises the self.

In discussing how the self engages with the other while leaving their otherness and integrity intact, Levinas describes the dynamics of a face-to-face conversation between them. Despite themselves, the self submits to the questioning glance of the other and answers responsibly (*Totality* 14). In this encounter, the self is exposed to the expression

of the other and learns and receives from them (51). While language facilitates a conversation and brings the self and other into relation with each other, it does not establish a common ground between the two. A real conversation permits the mutual freedom of interpretation and spontaneity, and therefore the autonomy of both parties is preserved (14–16).

The self's engagement with the other makes them aware of the limitations of their point of view and, in turn, causes them to become more responsible (see *Totality* 15), which is why Simon Critchley says that "the face is the condition of possibility for ethics" (5). This is at the heart of Levinasian ethics: the presence of the other that calls into question the spontaneity of the self and disrupts their being at home with themselves (*Totality* 43, 39). Put differently, the self's encounter with the other makes them question that which they have always accepted as absolute truth. They can no longer be spontaneous because they now question the origins and legitimacy of that spontaneity. The self ceases to be comfortable with their structures of knowledge since the other questions and exposes the instability of those structures. While the self forfeits their sense of comfort and security through their engagement with the other, this face-to-face encounter enables them to listen and learn from experience and to transcend their own self-centred systems of classification (16).

The self's recognition of and relationship with the other in their alterity is what Levinas describes as a responsible response (see Lingis xix). Responsibility is a bond and command that compels a being to act, and this imperative is solicited by the appealing and contesting face of the other. Thus, the self has no choice in the matter – their responsibility is evoked involuntarily, perhaps even reluctantly. Levinas's understanding of the relationship with alterity goes far beyond social engagement and actions, however. He sees this relationship as prior to and constitutive of subjectivity, that the self's relationship with the other not only determines a being to act but also to *be*. It is the "unlimited accusation" of, and being infinitely answerable to, the other that singularises the self – allows them to recognise and identify with their own subjectivity (xxxvi). The self's entire existence is dependent on their orientation toward the other since the self is demanded, occupied and inspired by them (see Peperzak 26). Critchley interprets Levinas's proposition that "Being is exteriority" in a similar way, saying: "[W]hat it means to be a human being is to be open to the exteriority or, if one prefers, the alterity of the Other" (19).

Furthermore, the self's ethical response to and relationship with the other involves a substitution: the self takes the place of the other by assuming responsibility for their needs, deeds and even their faults and failures. It is to bear the burden of the other's actions even when one did not initiate them (Lingis xxviii–xxix). One is responsible not only for the present circumstances but also for the past, and this responsibility goes beyond one's will, intention or even one's death. Responsibility is not limited to that which is within one's control, and one remains responsible for the course of things even when one is no longer engaged in them, which is why the self experiences this infinite responsibility as burdensome. In this context, the self becomes the other's hostage by being held accountable for them (see Lingis xix–xx; xxviii–xxix).

While alterity is revealed in the face of the other and in their expressions of themselves, it always comes in the form of disruption and transcendence rather than representation and synchronisation. Alterity thus always arrives unexpectedly, without announcing itself, thereby catching the self off guard (xxxix). Because the arrival of the other surprises the self, they cannot welcome the other on their terms and in their territory, that is, on the basis of a hierarchical relationship in which the self is the authority. One might say that their encounter with the other deprives them of their power. But more on this matter in the ensuing discussion on Derrida and hospitality.

Derrida: Ethics, Hospitality and Justice for the Other

Similar to Levinas, Jacques Derrida is interested in how an encounter with alterity exposes the instability of the self's structures of knowledge. The objective of deconstruction, Derrida's critical approach, is to identify otherness in logocentric conceptuality and to deconstruct this conceptuality from the position of alterity. The goal, then, is to destabilise the assumed stability of the dominant interpretation – that is, the self's manner of knowing the world (see Critchley 26). In Derrida's own words: "Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other" (qtd. in Critchley 28). On a textual level, deconstruction aims to show the internal contradictions of language and how, regardless of the writer's intention, the meaning of a text is infinitely open-ended (27). Due to the inevitable ambiguity of language, the other can always be found in the gaps or aporias of a text.

But how exactly is Derrida's deconstruction related to Levinas's theory of alterity? First, the two thinkers are occupied with radical otherness and what it means for, especially, the Western philosophical tradition. Alterity is at the centre of their work. Second, both are interested in how otherness has and is still being ignored and/or absorbed into the domain of the self. Levinas and Derrida both describe how the domain of the self is habitually given preference over the domain of the other, how being is constantly assumed to be superior to non-being and that what is present to our consciousness is erroneously given precedence over that which is not (see Derrida, *Hospitality* 7 and Lingis xxxviii–xxxvii). Third, both philosophers define – in different ways – what the self's engagement with alterity looks like and how this interaction affects the self and their perceptions of truth and knowledge (see Derrida, *Hospitality* 5–11 and Levinas, *Totality* 13–16). And fourth, both Levinas and Derrida are confronted with the following dilemma: how to write about and engage with alterity within the confines of the language of logocentrism, which is the only language available. How can the self do justice to the other in a language that inevitably reduces alterity to sameness? (Critchley 29). Is it possible to speak about and point to something outside of logocentrism while firmly rooted in it?

Given this emphasis on justice, the intersection of Levinas's and Derrida's thought is ethics – in particular, the nature of and reason for an ethical relation with otherness. Derrida's deconstruction constitutes a yes-saying to and affirmation of alterity (see Critchley 41), just as Levinas's face-to-face encounter enables an ethical relationship between self and other. While Levinas defines what an ethical approach to the other is and how the engagement affects the self, Derrida shows us how this can be practically applied to language and meaning, and why this is important.

For Derrida, deconstructive thinking and reading necessarily confront one with and involve one in a relationship with otherness. This is because deconstruction is occupied with what Derrida describes as the problem of closure, that is, the circumstance of belonging to the metaphysical or logocentric tradition while at the same time pursuing a means of transcending or breaking free from it. Deconstruction pushes against and disrupts this limit dividing that which is inside the tradition from that which lies outside of it. A text can therefore contradict itself by questioning the very metaphysics it presupposes and is dependent on. But instead of being undone by this paradox, something curious happens: this movement points toward a way of thinking that is other than logocentric and

thus attempts to open itself to the other. The hinge of this double movement, this tension between metaphysics and its other, is called closure, and it is here that ethics shows up (Critchley 20–21). An ethical response to the other – the other of metaphysics, language, culture and so on – is thus possible only when this tension arises and is sustained, when a text acknowledges and begins exploring its own duplicity. That is not to say that one can ever arrive at an ethical, responsible response. In this context, responsibility is ateleological in that it cannot be measured in terms of its results and consequences, and the process never concludes.

As is the case with Levinas, Derrida expresses the relationship between the self and the other in terms of the latter's questioning of the former and its challenge to the dogmatism of their logic and reason (*Hospitality* 5). Once the self becomes aware of their locatedness in metaphysics and begins pushing against its boundaries, ethics are given room in the relationship. In their encounter with the other, the assumptions of the self are interrogated, and they have no choice but to re-evaluate the logic on which their metaphysical world has been constructed. For Derrida, the self embodies that which is familiar, known and accepted as absolute (that being *is*), while the other is that which is located outside of those assumptions (that non-being *is*) (7).

In further conceiving of the relationship between the self and the other, Derrida distinguishes between the foreigner, someone with a family name who carries the social status of a foreigner, and the absolute, unknown, anonymous other (25). While the former cannot speak the language of the host and is thus always somewhat defenceless against the law of the host, they have certain formal rights that the absolutely other does not have (15–19). This includes, for example, the right to hospitality, which is closely aligned with Immanuel Kant's following principle of universal hospitality:

Hospitality here signifies the right of a foreigner, in consequence of his arrival on the soil of another, not to be treated by him as an enemy. He may be expelled, if that can be done without his destruction; but so long as he keeps his place and conducts himself peacefully, he must not be treated in a hostile way. (19)

While Kant's hospitality appears to invite community across national borders, Derrida takes issue with it. Hospitality means to invite and welcome the stranger, both at a personal and socio-political level, yet, as the etymology of this word suggests, "hospitality" carries within itself its opposite. It derives from the Latin *hospes*, which

means “host”, “guest” or “stranger”. *Hospes*, again, comes from *hostis*, meaning “stranger” or “enemy”. The second part of the word, *potentia*, means “to have power”. It follows then that there is always a degree of hostility implied in hospitality because it refers to both the welcome extended to the guest and the power of the host as the one who is the master of the premises. For Derrida, “hospitality” is thus a paradox: a self-limiting invitation. A host is a person receiving the stranger, but in order to have the right to do so, they have to be the owner of a property – and thus be a master in some capacity (*Hospitality* 15, 23, 25 and Caputo 110–11). To welcome the stranger is thus to acknowledge both one’s generous invitation to them and one’s inherent authority in being able to make such an offer. By virtue of being able to welcome, the host belongs to and speaks from a place that does not offer equal belonging to the stranger. There is therefore no community, no in-group, without exclusion or, put differently, inclusion is conditioned by exclusion, and vice versa.

The question that follows is this: how can the self politely welcome the other without forfeiting their sovereignty as master of the house? The answer, for Derrida, is in the tension between the two seemingly contradictory meanings, the hostility inherent in hospitality. ‘True’ hospitality begins by acknowledging this paralysing tension: the idea that the possibility of hospitality is sustained by its impossibility. One can only show hospitality by being a host and thus acknowledging one’s authority and hostility toward the stranger. For Derrida, then, even though hospitality is impossible, one should persistently pursue it in one’s engagement with the other. John D. Caputo puts it as follows: “Hospitality really starts to happen when I push against this limit, this threshold, this paralysis, inviting hospitality to cross its own threshold and limit, its own self-limitation, to become a gift *beyond hospitality*” (111). It asks that one opens up one’s home not only to the foreigner but the absolutely other without as much as asking their name or expecting reciprocity (*Hospitality* 25). It is a continuous gesture of unconditional preparedness for anything or anyone who turns up (see 137–39). Indeed, the ethical relationship is one in which the self sacrifices their home, their being at home with themselves, for the sake of providing a home for the other. The home is the self’s gift to the other. And for a gift to be a true gift, it cannot be presented as a gift: no one consciously gives or receives anything, and thus nothing is expected in return (Caputo 143). A host therefore only gives a true gift, in this instance his home, when nothing is offered in exchange, when the gift does not enter the circular economy of perpetual giving

and receiving. A true, unconditional gift remains infinitely unreciprocated (see Derrida, *Given* 7, 12). Consequently, Derrida argues that “[t]he law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right” (*Hospitality* 25), since hospitality positions the self as the authority in the relationship, the one to whom the home belongs and who is familiar with the economy of the territory. Unconditional hospitality, in contrast, does not function on the premise of selfish ownership and agency. Rather, the self’s home, possessions and resources find their definitive meaning in being put in service of the other whose face, their looking and speaking, makes the self responsible (Peperzak 25). However, since unconditional hospitality is impossible, the self never arrives at its final state – because there is none. What is important is the tension between hospitality and unconditional hospitality, for it is here that the self might best attempt an ethical engagement with the other.

In thinking about how the self can do justice to the other by attempting to be responsible and ethical, it is necessary to be aware of the complexities of justice. Derrida explicates the concept of justice by juxtaposing it with the law and explaining how its possibility is sustained by its impossibility. The law is about following rules, about actions that are legal and properly authorised but that are, importantly, deconstructible. The statutes or laws of a country are deconstructible precisely because they are manufactured and thus open to amendment, that is, they can be improved or weakened. In contrast, justice is undeconstructible and beyond the law: it is the intended product of the process of deconstructing the law. But justice is not the antithesis of the law or the law made perfect, for ‘true’ justice is impossible because it is unforeseeable and always surprises. There is no way of identifying justice since it has no formula or pattern. Derrida argues that justice is unattainable because of its singularity, its absolute uniqueness. In other words, justice has no face – there is no way of knowing what it should look like or how it will arrive since each instance of it is wholly different. Therefore, the moment one defines an action or a person as “just”, justice is betrayed. This is also why Derrida deals with the idea of justice “obliquely” rather than directly, hoping to avoid its almost inevitable betrayal (“Force of Law” 10–23).

Justice also requires both a following of and breaking with the law, an idea Derrida describes using the figures of the acoluthon (“follower”) and anacoluthon (“not following”). Using his language, we might say that justice is a counter-signature of the law in that it confirms the law while also opposing it. It follows the law by considering

what is legal while departing from it every time a new 'rule' is formulated. Moreover, in order to follow the law authentically, there has to be a break from it, an interruption – justice. Without an interruption, there can be no following, there cannot exist adherence. If justice should be the objective, then both fidelity and betrayal are required. If the law is always followed and repeated accurately, the law is not only annulled (because if there is nothing but the law to follow, it loses its purpose and meaning) but it would also imply that justice can never be achieved because justice is always singular and non-repeatable (“Following Theory” 10–12 and “Force of Law” 23). The following is thus also an infinite waiting for the justice that never comes.

For Derrida, however, the abovementioned paradoxes of justice do not mean that no decision has to be made and that one should remain passive or be exempted from one's responsibility to act justly. A decision has to be made and acted upon even though it cannot be just, because “only a decision is just”. We are obliged to commit the inevitable violence of deciding the undecidable, for failing to act at all is an even greater transgression (“Force of Law” 24). There is thus a tension between, on the one hand, a demand for justice and, on the other, the impossibility thereof. This tension renders one infinitely responsible for justice. As elusive as it is, justice can only begin to surface when the tension between its possibility and impossibility is sustained, when the boundaries between what is possible and impossible are challenged. Just as responsibility and hospitality are ateleological, so justice is also: in this context, the function of justice is not the achievement of a result or endpoint but a perpetual awareness of the nexus between its possibility and impossibility. Moreover, where justice and the law meet, ethics becomes possible. Following the law is by default not ethical since it requires no responsibility – only application. If there were a perfect rule for every case, there would be no need for ethics. But since there is no such perfectly applicable standard, ethics is required to attempt the achievement of justice. Ethics begins when one has to decide the undecidable, when applying the rule will not suffice (see Derrida, “Following Theory” 31–32).

The ethical implication of all of this is that the limitations of our ability to do justice to the other and respond responsibly are acknowledged, which in turn causes us to act more justly and responsibly. Our efforts are never adequate, though, which motivates us to try harder, to do better, to wait a little longer for the unexpected and unknown. What is also implied is that justice and responsibility are never complete. We cannot act justly or responsibly and be on our way – justice and responsibility are an infinite, onerous

commitment that requires a constant assessment of the limits, a recalibration of the possible and impossible. Derrida summarises the relationship between ethics, the law (rule) and responsibility as follows:

There are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction, because there *is* no rule. There are ethics because I have to *invent* the rule; and there would be no responsibility if I knew the rule [...], if the injunction were simple. [...] If there was such a norm, there would be no responsibility. There is responsibility only because there are these aporetic structures in which I have to respond to two injunctions, different and incompatible. That's where responsibility starts, when I *don't* know what to do. If I knew what to do, well, I would apply the rule [...]. But would that be ethical? I'm not sure. I would consider this unethical. Ethics start when you don't know what to do [...]. ("Following Theory" 31–32)

Because unconditional hospitality and justice are both "aporetic structures", they become possible only when the self pushes against their boundaries and limitations, when they recognise, process, and find a way around their internal contradictions. These concepts, these means of thinking about, approaching and engaging with the other are impossible yet absolutely essential for an ethical relationship between the self and the other to be conceivable.

Coetzee and the Problem of "Representing" Otherness

The question of how otherness is to be approached without inevitably betraying it haunts not only philosophical but also literary texts, the novels of J.M. Coetzee being prime examples. As is the case with Levinas's and Derrida's writing, Coetzee's work seems to be occupied with the problem of how alterity can be "shown", be given any place at all, without being represented and, consequently, subsumed into the world of the self. How can the subject deal with the object outside of the former's own structures of knowledge? Is it possible to truly trace and identify alterity when it comes around, to give a "voice" or an appearance to alterity without reverting to some form of self-conceptualised representation and thereby foreclosing it?

This problem of representation in literature is raised by many, including Mike Marais who offers a possible solution. He suggests that, for a novel to position itself as non-logocentric as possible within the boundaries of the Western philosophical and literary

traditions, and in order to attempt not to foreclose on the alterity of the other through presentation and representation, a work of literature needs to follow a Derridean deconstructive methodology. For a novel to respond responsibly to the other, Marais suggests that it should:

[S]elf-reflexively expos[e] the inability of its representational procedures to contain or exclude exteriority, [thereby] conceivably locat[ing] itself at the limit of logocentric conceptuality and from this liminal position indicate, without attempting to represent, that which exceeds metaphysical and ontological closure. [...] And, as the paradox which underlies this tension indicates, this liminal position would be irreducibly ambivalent: that is, one in which the individual novel both acknowledges that it belongs to the novel tradition and opposes it, is neither completely determined by it, nor completely free of it. (“Introduction” 8–9)

Marais identifies some of Coetzee’s novels as examples of how this other-conscious mode of writing can be accomplished, suggesting that his fiction shows how a responsible response to the other can only be achieved when the novel’s “inevitable implication” is recognised, that is, its “ineluctable situatedness in the order of the same” (9–10). Marais further explains how, for Levinas, the indicative relation or paradoxical “unrelating relation” – rather than the expressive relation – is one which does not foreclose on but preserves radical difference. It is a relation not based on conceptual knowledge and the self’s judgement of the other but rather on the self’s ability to intuitively perceive the other and their expressions of themselves (“Introduction” 17). Simon Critchley offers the following explanation of the indicative relation:

The indicative relation is one of absolute difference, in which the Other enters into a relation with me in which he or she is absolved from the relation, one in which difference is maintained. My being affected by the Other establishes a relation to that which transcends me and which cannot be represented or thematized by self-consciousness. It is a relation of association in which the primary datum of sociality – the ethical relation – takes form. (175)

Levinas’s concept of an “unrelating relation” refers to a relationship of non-identification in which the self and other are freed from obligation, “absolved”, and in this way, their difference is maintained. Marais posits that Coetzee’s meta-representational strategy of showing-but-not-showing alterity constructs such an indicative relation with otherness. This indicative relation is established through intimation, that is, indications

and hints in his writing and its effect is that “the relation of Coetzee’s novels to otherness has the ‘form’ neither of presence nor representation” (“Introduction” 10). In this regard, Anton Leist and Peter Singer observe the following: “Coetzee’s typical style of literalness throws the unprepared reader into an uneasy feeling of having been given clues to important meanings but being unable to decipher them” (7). Coetzee thus manages to mitigate the seemingly inevitable betrayal of alterity by, first, acknowledging his writing’s position as a structure of the self and, second, by hinting at otherness rather than trying to define, describe, or express it.

One of the ways in which Coetzee acknowledges his writing as a structure of the self is by frequently choosing white, middle-class protagonists – social groups to which he himself belongs. In choosing to tell his stories from the perspective of this demographic, he demonstrates his awareness of the socio-political significance of belonging to these groups and the limited points of view they offer. The problem of “representing” otherness is thus foregrounded by his choice of central figures who, due to their privileged social identities, have authority over others who are of a different race and/or class. The reader has access only to the thoughts of the protagonists, and therefore even the experiences of the other are filtered through their consciousness. Consequently, the ideas that emerge from these figures are not reliable sources of information since they are mere fabrications of the self (see Attridge, *Ethics* 17).

A clear example of this is observed in *Age of Iron* where Mrs Curren tells her daughter not to trust her words and representations because of her situatedness in apartheid South Africa. She acknowledges that, because she is ineluctably “part” (164) of the historical context, she is necessarily contaminated by it, and therefore that her words need to be carefully scrutinised, not simply accepted as true. Mrs Curren, in her letter-writing, is the “writer-surrogate” in a similar way as – noted by Mike Marais – her daughter, the receiver, is the “reader-surrogate” in the novel (“Eyes Shut” 48–49), taking the place of the writing and reading subjects, that is, Coetzee and his readership. What Coetzee seems to be suggesting is that just as Mrs Curren’s words need to be searched for bias and prejudice due to her social status and identity as a white, middle-class woman in apartheid South Africa, so too the writer’s words need to be carefully considered because of their position in a particular context. Coetzee confesses to the limitations of his point of view, of the inevitability of relying on his own knowledge structures. He also draws attention to the treachery of storytelling and the inherent violence of representation, “provid[ing] his

reader with a *sense* of that which exceeds the novel's representational protocols, of that which is absolutely exterior and which cannot be represented without being violated" (Marais, "Eyes Shut" 49). In this context, Coetzee engages in a form of writing that points to its own limits and dangers and which invites an infinite number of future readings (Attridge, *Ethics* 8). Because he questions the authority of his protagonists and himself as the author, his readers are encouraged to decide for themselves what the texts mean.

David Attwell offers an example of Coetzee's 'hinting' strategy in his reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In the opening paragraph of the novel, he notes how Coetzee purposefully withholds the obvious referent of the word "sunglasses" by indicating and pointing to it rather than saying the name by which it is commonly known (239). Through this literary device, one might say Coetzee foregrounds his strategy of hinting at things rather than outrightly naming and describing them, and thus avoiding representation and thematisation. The effect of this strategy on his reader is that his narratives are alluring, yet notoriously difficult to follow (see Marais, *Secretary* xv).

With the abovementioned strategy in mind, Marais summarises Coetzee's approach to 'representing' otherness, in contrast to postcolonial writers and scholars, as follows:

Thus, while Coetzee's fiction does attempt to establish a relation to the "suppressed viewpoint", this relation is premised not on representation but on the assertion of irreconcilable difference – an altogether different enterprise to the post-colonial project of presenting the reader with an other that has been constructed in relation to the centre. ("Eyes Shut" 49)

The genius of Coetzee's fiction is precisely this aptitude for 'holding space' for the other or, as noted by Derek Attridge, what makes his novels "singularly powerful" is the way in which "otherness is engaged, staged, distanced, embraced, how it is manifested in the rupturing of narrative discourse, in the lasting uncertainties of reference, in the simultaneous exhibiting and doubting of the novelist's authority" (*Ethics* 30–31). Closely related to this is the idea that Coetzee's texts not only regard the alterity of the other, but also the alterity and singularity of the text itself. María J. López notes how Coetzee challenges the notion that the 'true' meaning of a text is to be found beneath the textual surface by endowing his work with "an ineradicable dimension of secrecy". For Coetzee, the hermeneutic penetration of a text, the drive to decipher and interpret it, is a violation of the text and of that which cannot, and is not meant to be, revealed (*Visitation* xvii). The secretive element to his fiction is, arguably, most evident in his textual silences and his

characters' frustration with not being able to interpret events and other characters, particularly those who are other in relation to the consciousness of the self (see *Visitation* xx).

But how exactly does Coetzee stage this relationship of “irreconcilable difference” with alterity in his novels? In a broad sense, his alliance with the modernist rather than the realist literary tradition gives him certain authorial liberties in terms of the representational strategies that his readership has come to expect. Heavily influenced by Samuel Beckett’s aesthetic and textuality, Coetzee is seen as “one of the main heirs of the Irish writer” (López, *Visitation* 31), a prominent literary figure in the twentieth century. Moreover, the modernist form with its disruption of traditional linguistic norms lends itself to an ethical engagement with alterity by making room, as it were, for the linguistic – and by extension human – other (see Attridge, *Ethics* 12). For Coetzee, form and content are interdependent, and thus the one influences and determines the other. His modernist form is thus a necessary means of exploring and engaging what an ethical relationship with alterity might be and of crafting his other-oriented content (see López, *Visitation* 32). More specifically, though, he proposes what these relationships with radical alterity should look like through the social and personal relationships his characters participate in. Rather than focusing on rights and values, however, Coetzee is interested in the social and psychological mechanisms that structure and play into these relationships. Through the subjectivity of his protagonists, his fiction explores the possibility of an ethical relationship with otherness in the context of social and political tyranny. The self is confronted with an other who fundamentally challenges their worldview as well as their position in the particular socio-political space. We might say that Coetzee’s enquiry is “phenomenological” in nature because of the way in which his novels open up rather than close in on meaning. Through the consciousness of his characters, the reader is made aware of the subjectivity of experience, and thus the open-endedness of meaning. His ethics of the other are “phenomenological” in that his figures of alterity (in this thesis the barbarian girl, Lucy, Cruso and Friday) constantly overflow the domain of the self, how they – and his writing in general – resist and overcome structural closure (see Critchley 68).

It is important to note, however, that while Coetzee’s fiction makes way for the other and accommodates “irreconcilable difference”, his novels refrain from prescribing for their readers what to think. Although they are concerned with ethics, they do not make

value judgements but rather require the reader to reflect on and make those difficult decisions themselves (Attridge, *Ethics* 7). Moreover, Coetzee's readers do not simply observe what responsibility toward the other looks like but experience the demand it makes on them personally (*Ethics* 31). This is also why we might say that Coetzee's fiction is more concerned with ethics than politics – his novels are a personal rather than a collective call to responsibility for the other. While the unequivocal political themes in his work might, at first consideration, give the impression of a political agenda, a careful reading of his oeuvre would reveal a preoccupation with how the ethical might mediate the political. In contrast to the political, which operates in the realm of generalisations, programmes and predictions, the ethical involves a responsiveness and responsibility to the singular other and the unknown future (Attridge, *Ethics* 105). Coetzee's narratives, particularly those discussed in this thesis, are consistently based on a protagonist who struggles to understand, navigate, and redefine their personal relationship with an other rather than attempting to bring their lofty political ideals to fruition. That is not to say that the writer disregards the political, however. For him, the ethical is perhaps the necessary starting point, the first step before a meaningful engagement at the political level can begin. In this regard, we might say that for Coetzee, as for Levinas, "Politics begins as ethics" (Critchley 225).

The relationships that this thesis will focus on are those between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, David Lurie and Lucy in *Disgrace* and Susan Barton, Cruso and Friday in *Foe*. In each of these novels, I shall explore the self's relation with the abovementioned others, paying specific attention to Levinas's theory on the alterity of the other and how it affects the self. In the course of my argument, I will draw on Derrida's concepts of hospitality and justice to describe how and why a responsible response is simultaneously possible and impossible. My aim is also to consider how Coetzee proposes to his reader what an ethical relation with alterity might look like, despite the complexities and ambiguities involved. I hope to show that Coetzee's understanding of an ethical relationship with alterity can be traced in the relationships that the "self"-characters have with the "other"-characters, and how this understanding is conveyed to the reader so as to ultimately affect how they read and engage with otherness.

My reading of Coetzee's novels comprises a combination of approaches. While I employ close-reading strategies to explore particularly insightful passages – with the hope of doing justice to the singularity of each work – I also draw on the historical relevance of

certain aspects and at times suggest possible allegorical interpretations. Sections of the thesis will engage with philosophical ideas like hospitality and justice, while others will focus on linguistic markers and what might be gleaned from the text itself.

CHAPTER 2: *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

At first consideration, J.M. Coetzee's third novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be described as a critique of Western imperialism and colonial power since it explores the social dynamics between a colony, known as the Empire, and the barbarians, the local inhabitants. While the people of the Empire have long settled on the frontier, the reader is frequently reminded that they are foreigners in an inhospitable land known for its extreme weather and scarcity of resources. The Empire deploys their secret service, the Third Bureau, to launch a series of attacks on the barbarians with the hope of containing the perceived threat to the colony. However, the situation is aggravated when, under the leadership of Colonel Joll and the pretence of seeking the "truth", innocent barbarians are captured and tortured, which results in increasing conflict between the protagonist, the Magistrate, and the officials of the Empire.

The more pertinent story, however, unfolds in the relationship between the Magistrate and one of the prisoners – a barbarian girl – and it is here that Levinas's ideas about the face-to-face encounter between the self and the other become relevant. Following his engagement with the prisoners and, more specifically, the girl, the Magistrate begins to feel uncomfortable within himself, the impact of which manifests in various ways. He invites the girl into his home, tends to her wounds and begins to question Colonel Joll's military tactics. Nevertheless, while he tries to show hospitality to the girl and, in his obscure way, make amends for the wrongs of the Empire, the relationship between them remains unequal. She not only belongs to a group that is considered inferior by the Empire, but, as a homeless person, she also has no social agency. Her position is further compromised by the fact that she is a guest in his house. Throughout most of the novel, the Magistrate remains ambivalent about the girl and their relationship but is ultimately transformed when he suffers the same fate as her and the other prisoners.

The Magistrate and the Barbarian Other

The Magistrate is a nameless, middle-aged man who describes himself as "a responsible official in the service of the Empire" (8) who had not, up to that point, experienced much conflict in the outpost where he lives. However, as the plot develops, he begins to question the Empire and his service to it as he witnesses how barbarians are captured and tortured

by the Third Bureau. He is aware of his uncertain position in wanting to oppose its practices while still being in its employment, comparing himself to a mother comforting a child following an abusive father's "spells of wrath" (8).

Before the rumours about the barbarian unrest begin circulating, the Magistrate is what Levinas would describe as a self who is at home with himself (*Totality* 59). When the captives are questioned and tortured, he regrets how the upheaval is affecting his life on the "lazy frontier" (*Barbarians* 9). His dismay is conveyed when he says, "I never wished to be drawn into this" and "I did not mean to get embroiled in this" (8), before qualifying that he does not deserve to be inconvenienced because he does what is asked of him. He further laments his fate as follows:

For the rest I watch the sun rise and set, eat and sleep and am content. [...] I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times. [...] So now it seems my easy years are coming to an end, when I could sleep with a tranquil heart knowing that with a nudge here and a touch there the world would stay steady on its course. (9–10)

From the above, it is evident that the Magistrate is disappointed by how the conflict between the Empire and the barbarians is disrupting his quiet existence and that he would have preferred the circumstances to have remained as they were before. The fact that he has the time to watch the sun rise and set suggests that his daily duties do not put much of a demand on him. His ability to sleep – signifying inner peace and contentment – emphasises this idea that his life is "easy" and more or less free of worry. However, he realises that the moral dilemma in which he now finds himself, that is, his implication in the torture of innocent people, will not be resolved with a simple "nudge here" and a "touch there" – it will require more serious intervention. It is ironic that he should think that asking for a "quiet life in quiet times" is not asking for much when, in fact, it is far more than most people, especially the tortured barbarians, can say. Nevertheless, unsettled and moved by the abuse of the prisoners, the Magistrate cannot help but investigate the matter further and, by doing so, involving himself at his own expense. In this regard, he reflects as follows:

[I]f I had done the wise thing, then perhaps I might now be able to return to my hunting and hawking and placid concupiscence while waiting for the provocations to cease and the tremors along the frontier to subside. But alas, I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noise coming from the

hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself. (*Barbarians* 10)

The Magistrate's wish to return to his "hunting and hawking and placid concupiscence" suggests that he is in a position to engage in such leisure activities fairly regularly. Later on, we learn that he spends his time in his "old recreations", which includes hunting once or twice a week (44). The reader is further informed that his strong sexual desires lead him to sleep with different women, but the fact that he describes even these urges as "placid" confirms the perception the reader has of the Magistrate's undisturbed life. He lives in such serenity that even his strongest impulses are tempered.

There is a sense that the Magistrate regrets his inquiry, even though he feels compelled to act. While he initially "stopped [his] ears to the noise" of the interrogations and torturing, he could no longer deny that he knew what was transpiring in the granary. Although he did not hear the screaming that others reported, he is "aware of what might be happening, and [his] ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain" (5). Eventually, though, he goes to see for himself, wanting to find concrete proof and perhaps hoping to find evidence against what he already knows. Since he would prefer the world – his world – to stay "steady on its course", we can surmise that he hopes to find nothing that would upset his comfortable existence. His hesitation also derives from the fact that his responsibility for the other is provoked against his will: although he does not want to care, he does.

When he can no longer stand to witness the harrowing circumstances to which the prisoners are subjected, he "flee[s] for refuge to the farthest corner of [his] apartment" (22), where he writes an angry letter to the Third Bureau. The Magistrate's encounter with the prisoners makes it impossible for him to ignore their maltreatment and the compulsion to respond responsibly to them. For Levinas, the self becomes aware of their egoism and arbitrary views once they encounter the other and are only then able to enter into an ethical relationship with the other (*Totality* 15). The novel draws our attention to the ways in which the self can – and perhaps *should* – be disrupted by the other and how this encounter interrogates the self's preoccupation with themselves. In this regard, the novel exemplifies what Levinas says about the other's effect on the self.

We can better understand the Magistrate's disgruntlement with the Third Bureau when considering what Levinas says about responsibility. One is responsible for the present and past circumstances, even when one did not have a part in causing them (see

Lingis xx). Although the Magistrate did not capture and torture the prisoners, he feels the pull of this infinite responsibility that goes beyond his own actions. Because he is a representative of the Empire, their actions are also his actions, and he feels accountable for their transgressions. As Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes in relation to the Magistrate's complicity: "Those who passively allow torture and oppression to take place are just as much Barbarians as the torturers" (285). We get the sense that this idea crosses his mind, weighs on his conscience and ultimately motivates him to act.

The Magistrate begins to demonstrate an other-oriented mode of thinking when he considers the Empire's invasion of a foreign land. He advises Colonel Joll to abandon his plan of launching another raid and taking more barbarians captive, saying: "You and I are strangers—you even more than I" (*Barbarians* 12). This request demonstrates the Magistrate's awareness of both the Empire's illegitimate presence on the frontier and their ignorance about how vulnerable they are. The barbarians are treated as the foreigners, the collective other, and yet they are the owners of the land that has been "raped" by the people of the Empire (125). In this regard, María J. López makes the point that the colonial influences in Coetzee's novels, in this instance the Empire, exert their power through penetration and visitation on a spatial, sexual, epistemological and verbal level. This idea is reflected in the Magistrate's awareness of how the Empire has "raped" the land, an image that points simultaneously to the forceful trespassing of a geographical boundary and the quest for mastery that is inherent in sexual penetration (*Visitation* xiv–xv). Furthermore, the identification of an enemy, the naming of the barbarians as outsiders, is a mechanism by which the community of the Empire affirms itself and feels at home even in a foreign place. Their vigorous – and undoubtedly violent – entry into the land is a symbol of having conquered and mastered the space, and thus its inhabitants. However, this also implies that the people of the Empire as the hosts and masters are dependent on a guest – even if it is an enemy – for their supposed sovereignty and legitimacy (see Derrida, *Hospitality* 15). Without the presence of the barbarians, their power would be rendered impotent and meaningless.

The Magistrate reflects on this ironic view of the barbarians as intruders and rapists when he wishes that they would "rise up and teach [the people of the Empire] a lesson, so that [they] would learn to respect them" (*Barbarians* 58). He continues:

We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire—our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients. (58)

For a moment, the Magistrate tries to view the circumstances from the perspective of the barbarians, empathising with their experience. He acknowledges that, while the Empire has long established themselves on the frontier, the local people still think of them as foreigners. Through his other-oriented mode of thinking, the Magistrate attempts to reason not from his own mind but from a point of view that is radically other than his (see Levinas, *Totality* 16). While seeing things from the perspective of another is a paradox and impossibility, the Magistrate's willingness to depart from his own perspective demonstrates how his engagement with the other is affecting him.

The Magistrate, as with many of Coetzee's characters, reluctantly finds himself caught between two opposing groups and in a historical situation marked by racism and violence. He experiences the situation as a frustrating confinement because it necessitates certain actions on his part, actions which he learns have far-reaching consequences (see Attwell 232). While some scholars have read the novel as an allegory of colonial South Africa, it is important to note that Coetzee is purposefully vague about the setting. While he has chosen to be elusive in this regard, he does this with good reason: that is, in Attridge's words, to place the characters and the readers in situations of "peculiar intensity", free of the historical references that at times distract more than contribute to the message he wishes to convey (*Ethics* 59). A focus on historical details would distinguish the novel as political, and even though it undoubtedly *is* political, it is not only political.

Another point to consider is that, if the setting were specified, it would mean that any endeavour to write about the barbarian other would invariably involve the self trying to understand the other in terms of their own history. In other words, had Coetzee identified the setting, he and his protagonist – acting as selves – would have positioned the barbarian other from within their history with its particular cultural context and its norms of understanding instead of being open to whatever or whoever turns up. This sentiment is self-reflexively voiced by the Magistrate when, toward the end, he contemplates his historical situatedness: "I think: 'I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its

lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them” (*Barbarians* 178). Therefore, as much as he desires to, the Magistrate cannot escape the history that is inflicted on him and of which he is intricately part (Leist 209). At the same time, Coetzee might be alluding to his own identity as a white South African man living in the apartheid era, a history he, too, would prefer to have lived outside of.

The Magistrate’s Encounter with the Barbarian Girl

When the Magistrate first notices and enquires about the barbarian girl, he is told that she was one of Colonel Joll’s prisoners who had remained behind after they were released (*Barbarians* 29). But when he talks to her and asks about her blindness, her response and opening words to him are noteworthy: “I can see”, and, after he instructs her to look at him, “I am looking. This is how I look” (30). Rather than a straightforward denial of her blindness, my contention is that her words point more to her awareness of what is happening than her physical ability to see. In stating that she can see, she asserts herself and makes her consciousness known. Although she is a physical prisoner of the Empire who begs on the streets, there is a limit to the extent to which she can be controlled. In her otherness, she is free with a mind apart from the violations she suffered. Levinas says of the other’s freedom: “But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, *even if I have him at my disposal*” (*Totality* 39; emphasis added). Although as a former prisoner and now beggar the girl is ‘at the disposal’ of the Magistrate and the Empire, there is a part of her that infinitely resists and refuses to yield: a dimension of her they can never access.

Yet her strange insistence on being able to see and look might also indicate her ability to see and acknowledge the countenance of the other – in this instance, the Magistrate. While the image of her face might be blanked out or blurred in his dreams, she has a clear vision of him in *his* absolute otherness (see López, *Visitation* 81–82). According to Levinas, alterity is not distinguished by a cognitive sensibility but by sensuality, a vulnerability to pleasure and pain (Lingis xxiv). Even though she is blind and can therefore not observe his otherness through her eyes, the barbarian girl could have another sort of sensibility and openness that allows her to recognise and receive the Magistrate’s alterity. Perhaps the fact that she is blind makes her more receptive to alterity because

there are no visual barriers that may result in prejudice on her part. Her looking away from or being blind to the Magistrate in his otherness may be a gesture of respect, of a non-totalising openness that welcomes exteriority (Marais, “Little Enough” 165).

Significantly, for Levinas, the impact of alterity is conceived as pain and one’s exposure to the other is equated with one’s exposure to being wounded (Lingis xxiv). If indeed the barbarian girl receives the Magistrate’s otherness, she makes herself vulnerable, even after being tortured. Should this be the case, her openness and willingness to “see” the Magistrate is a testament to her infinitising orientation toward the other, that is, her desire for that which is absolutely other, in contrast to the officials of the Empire who persecute those they perceive to be different from them.

The Magistrate’s conception of the barbarian girl as other and foreigner is alluded to when he visits another woman at the inn and reflects briefly on the former in his bed in a faraway room. He compares her to the woman he is currently with who feigns pleasure, causing him to lose himself in her “soft bird-like flurries” (*Barbarians* 48). While he knows that her expressions of fondness and desire are false, there is a familiarity and predictability to being with her, whereas the barbarian girl remains at a distance. His direct references to her “alien” body and, again, her face are not coincidental:

The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension. Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body. [...] [I]t occurs to me that I cannot even recall the other one’s face. “She is incomplete!” I say to myself. (48)

The assonance of the ‘O’ vowel in the phrase, “body of the other one, closed, ponderous” creates the sense of roundness, fullness, dullness, thereby emphasising the literal meaning of the word “ponderous”. In this respect, the imagery conveys the weight of responsibility that the Magistrate feels toward the girl. It is an uncomfortable sensation that profoundly inconveniences him – like having to carry the dead weight of a sleeper – and it contrasts sharply with the “suave pleasures” he experiences while with the woman at the inn. Furthermore, her body is “closed” to him not because he cannot physically penetrate her but because he does not understand why he does not desire to do so. All his life women have been open to him, at least sexually, yet the one over whom he has complete power is somehow impenetrable, hidden away in a “faraway room”: a room and bed that, although

they belong to him, are inaccessible. It is her radical alterity, I would argue, that allows her to escape his hold and shut him out.

It is curious that he should be thinking of the barbarian girl while intimate with another woman, especially because he claims not to desire her. I would suggest that he thinks of her because, while he does not desire her sexually, he is developing – reluctantly, unconsciously – an insatiable metaphysical desire for the absolutely other (*Totality* 33–44) or, differently put, he is inspired by the invisible and wishes to see it (Marais, *Secretary* 29). As Marais describes it: “Unable to ignore the Other, the subject finds him/herself in relation to an absolutely singular Other whom s/he can neither include in nor exclude from his/her psyche” (“Little Enough” 166). Just as he could not overlook the evidence of the prisoners being tortured, the Magistrate cannot ignore the girl even if he wanted to. He can neither include in nor exclude her from his mind and, in this way, she ‘enters’ and influences him.

In this context, it is helpful to consider what Levinas maintains about the power that the other holds over the self. Because the other profoundly questions the self and provokes their shame, the self unexpectedly finds themselves in a position of submission and having to answer to the other (see *Totality* 84). Importantly, however, this authority is devoid of power since it is dependent on the self relinquishing it to the other. The power that the barbarian girl has over the Magistrate, this power to penetrate his consciousness against his will, the power to captivate him in spite of himself, epitomises this powerless power that Levinas talks about. Even though she clearly has this power, she is not able to wield it. It is a passive, ever-dormant, power since it starts with and depends on the self (see Levinas, *Totality* 39–40).

When the Magistrate says to himself, “She is incomplete!”, he gives voice to his frustration with not being able to conceptualise the barbarian girl. The image he has of her is fragmented. But, in addition to being incomplete in his mind, she is also incomplete on a textual level. Despite saying these words to himself, his exclamation draws attention to the writer’s strategy of not representing the other. In this self-reflexive moment, Coetzee shows the impenetrability and inaccessibility of the other to the Magistrate, to him as a writer and to the reader (see Lopez, *Visitation* 82). Just as the Magistrate cannot complete the image of the girl in his mind, so too the writer is unable to coherently depict the other due to their radical otherness and the fact that their alterity constantly exceeds the idea that

the writer has of them. As a result, the reader is also left with a fragmented, “incomplete” concept of the character.

In trying to make sense of his obscure interest in the barbarian girl, the Magistrate considers the following:

There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her. All this erotic behaviour of mine is indirect: I prowls about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so. [...] But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!
(*Barbarians* 49)

Evidently, he is quite perplexed by his involvement with the girl and his strange rituals of rubbing and oiling, particularly because – unlike his engagements with other women – there seems to be no sexual urge driving these acts. And if there is an unrecognisable sexual desire, it is not to physically enter her. Nevertheless, he seeks a different kind of entry into the “interior” of the girl. He yearns to understand and place her in the realm that is known to him, that is, the world he constructs with his intentional acts of consciousness. But as much as he tries to assimilate and deliberately make sense of her, the girl resists being known. Robert Pippin makes a noteworthy observation in this regard. While the Magistrate is confused by his interest in the girl and wishes to access her “interior”, he makes no effort to learn her language or to communicate with her as an equal (36). He keeps at a distance and maintains the order in which he is her superior, despite his desire to get through to her. While her otherness will forever transcend his understanding of her, he unknowingly contributes to her aloofness by refusing to let go of the perspective that he is the master and she the servant. Through his refusal to learn her language and thereby make her feel at home, he perpetuates the unequal power dynamic between them.

The Magistrate further compares his encounter with the girl to the experience her torturers must have had when they tried to get information from her, also verbalising his likeness to them when he says: “The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder” (32). His intimate touching and prodding of her, while not physically painful, is an intrusion, abuse of a different kind. In this way, he is not much different from the torturers he condemns. Even though she does not stop him from

touching her, he uses his authority as the Magistrate to enforce his will. The hierarchical nature of their relationship is such that it leaves her no choice but to yield to his obscure passions (63). Although he does not “hack” and “tear” his way into her, he uses his influence to colonise her body in another way. As a woman, a barbarian, and a beggar in the colonial context, she has a significant social disadvantage, with barely any agency. López notes how the Magistrate also resembles the torturers in his desire to ‘extract’ the truth from her. While Colonel Joll claims to seek the truth of the barbarians’ alleged plans to attack the Empire, the Magistrate wants her to disclose the details of her experience in the torture chamber – also a form of interrogation. By drawing a parallel between sexual intimacy and torture, the novel reminds us how both actions are an invasion of the body and an intrusion on the privacy of another (*Visitation* 87–89).

As invasive as his caressing is, however, one gets the sense that it emerges from his curiosity about her – a curiosity he himself does not understand. In referring to the “secret body of the other”, he acknowledges the alterity and perhaps even sanctity of the barbarian other. Even though he makes himself guilty of trying to possess and conceptualise the barbarian girl, there seems to be a part of him that wants to act responsibly. Nevertheless, he is ambivalent about whether she is to be respected or used as an object, a state of mind he reveals when he reflects on her as follows: “[T]his body in my bed, for which I am responsible, or so it seems, otherwise why do I keep it?” (*Barbarians* 49). His sense of responsibility toward the other is alluded to in these words, and the form of responsibility at stake, as in Levinasian ethics, is one that goes beyond just meeting her most basic needs. Yet he frequently alternates between guilt and responsibility, and his objectification of and callousness around her. Moreover, his reference to her body as an “it” relates to his observation later on that she is “no longer fully human” after having been tortured (94).

Irving Howe notes the following about the Magistrate’s ambivalence toward the barbarian girl:

He wants to shield and nurse her, but also perhaps to dominate her. The girl yields silently, but the Magistrate, his mind disarranged by the brutality of the Third Bureau, does not simply take her. Instead, he uses her by tending her wounds, washing her broken feet and legs, rubbing her body with almond oil. It is, seemingly, an improvised ritual of domineering guilt, the confused gesture of a confused man. (1982)

In his confusion, however, the Magistrate fails to acknowledge the extent to which he contributes to the barbarian girl's misfortune. Although he understands that his employment by the Empire makes him indirectly complicit in the torture of the barbarians, he seems to be somewhat indifferent about how their unusual relationship is impacting her. And when her unhappiness is brought to his attention, he offers a justification for his actions and it seems as though the task of changing is simply too monumental for him to take on. His preoccupation with her wounds and scars directly and regularly confronts him with the realities of torture, and this seems to intrigue him to the point of obsession. Yet despite all the washing and oiling and healing he hopes to do, he hurts her by his contradictory words and actions, and he confirms her fear that he would not "want someone like [her]" (*Barbarians* 31) by sleeping with other women even when she makes herself available.

Their confrontation in this regard proceeds as follows:

"You visit other girls," she whispers. "You think I do not know?" I make a peremptory gesture for her to be quiet. "Do you also treat them like this?" she whispers, and starts to sob. Though my heart goes out to her, there is nothing I can do. Yet what humiliation for her! She cannot even leave the apartment without tottering and fumbling while she dresses. She is as much a prisoner now as ever before. I pat her hand and sink deeper into gloom. (62–63)

While the reader is never told how the girl feels about the Magistrate, the fact that she cries about his sexual relations with other women at the very least tells us that it hurts her pride. It pains her to think that, even after sharing numerous intimate moments – moments which she must interpret as sexual interest on his part – he still chooses to have sex with other women at the inn. Considering her new set of disabilities and, consequently, insecurities about her body and value as a woman, the Magistrate's choices are cruel. Yet he does not seem to comprehend why he should "tiptoe like an erring husband" upon his return to his apartment. He considers the matter as follows: "What does it matter to a beggar, a fatherless child, whether I sleep by myself or not?" (63). His patronising gestures of shushing and patting her hand reveal that, at this moment, he does see her as a "beggar" and "child" rather than a woman. He treats her like "a person of no account" (84). But while he patronises her, he simultaneously acknowledges how he is toying with her emotions and keeping her hostage by doing so. His ambivalence in this respect is expressed as follows: "Though my heart goes out to her, there is nothing I can do" (63).

This, of course, is his attempt at avoiding responsibility. Claiming that there is nothing that can be done is more convenient than stopping his sexual relationships with other women, which we can surmise he does not want to do. Later, the Magistrate is reminded of the impact that his confusing actions have on the girl when Mai, her friend, says to him: “You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?” (176).

It seems that the Magistrate’s conflicting attitude and failure to treat the girl justly also surface in his unconscious. He has a recurring dream about children playing in the snow and building castles, and there is one particular figure, a hooded girl, he keeps encountering. While he recognises her as the barbarian girl, she is always turned away from him or her face is somehow hidden. The first time he has this dream, he tries to imagine what her face looks like but cannot (11). Later on, he has the same dream but when he peers under her hood, the face is blank and featureless (42). Moreover, in trying to recall when he might have first seen the girl among the other nomads that were captured, he is frustrated at his inability to remember everything and everyone but her. Although he knows that he must have seen her, he has no memory of it (38).

The reference to an empty face may suggest an allegory for the Magistrate’s inability to respond responsibly to the barbarian girl. For Levinas, the face of the other, their questioning glance, is what seeks a meaningful response (*Totality* 14), but since the Magistrate cannot see her face, he cannot access what she asks of him – there is no countenance to respond to. He considers the possibility that he is unconsciously trying to remove the girl from his memory, “burying her in oblivion” (*Barbarians* 100):

I begin to face the truth of what I’m trying to do: to obliterate the girl. I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless? [...] How ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly. (53)

It is possible that he tries to mentally eradicate her because of her ‘fragmented’ state. Not only is she physically incomplete – due to the damage done to her eyes and feet – but he also perceives her as emotionally and socially defective because she does not confide in him. Moreover, his failure to successfully incorporate her into his world makes him perceive her as ugly – a defence mechanism against his inability to assimilate her. The repetition of the word “ugly” in the last three lines emphasises the power that language has to construct reality: the fact that it does not merely reflect reality but creates it. By

stressing that she is ugly, it is as if the Magistrate speaks her ugliness into being. It is also easier to accept that she is ugly than it is to accept that she is infinitely inaccessible. As an other, however, she cannot be anything but incomplete in his mind because, as referred to earlier, she will always exceed that which he thinks she is. In addition to exceeding the image he has of her, the girl also necessarily transcends Coetzee's perception of her. Therefore, despite being a literary construct, she seems to be respected as a figure of otherness that should not – cannot – be fully depicted and contained within the boundaries of literary representation.

When he has the same dream again, it is a different experience. This time he tries to speak to the girl, but no sound comes from his mouth. Thus, what happens next contrasts sharply to his previous dreams. The girl responds as if she heard him, and for the first time, he sees her face clearly. He expects her face to be empty, ugly, to be “like an internal organ not meant to live in the light”, but instead sees her as herself, in a way he has never seen her before: ““So this is what it is to see?’ I say to myself” (60).

These words are particularly meaningful considering my earlier argument about the Magistrate failing to see the girl in her otherness while she seems to see him immediately upon first meeting. In this dream, he finally wakes up to her alterity: he sees her face, which enables him to respond responsibly. Although he sees her, the reader is not privy to what he sees and can thus not share in the effect that the engagement has on him. This emphasises the idea that the self's encounter with the other can never be a collective experience – it is a deeply private, unique event. Because one cannot see what another sees, there is no possibility of repeating or replicating such an encounter or for the experience to be transmitted. It is worth noting that, soon after he has the dream, the Magistrate decides to take her back to her people. Now that he has beheld her, he begins to feel the weight of a phenomenon Levinas refers to as substitution. In recognising her exteriority, he becomes responsible for her, placing himself, as it were, in her position (see Lingis xxviii–xxix). When he does this, he gets a clearer sense of her experience and begins to feel persecuted by her and burdened by her presence (see Marais, “Eyes Shut” 56). In returning her to her people, then, he hopes to escape this burden and once again “sleep with a tranquil heart” (*Barbarians* 9–10).

Marais makes a noteworthy observation about the Magistrate's dream. In contrast to his conscious reality in which he cannot access her and she remains at a distance, the dream-state allows him to see her vividly. Therefore, it is only once he relaxes his intentional

consciousness and when he least expects her that she ‘presents’ herself. She arrives, therefore, when he is unprepared and cannot approach her with his preconceived knowledge – when he cannot measure her by the codes of the Empire (*Secretary* 26–28). In the dream, and in her alterity, she thus shows up as disturbance and transcendence, while he expected to see her in the realm that is present to him (see Lingis xxxix).

In this regard, it is important to consider why the barbarian girl is revealed in a dream and why, more importantly, the Magistrate only truly sees her in this form. Up to this point, he had tried to access and welcome the girl through his intentional acts of consciousness. Despite his intrusive physical relationship with her, he initially attempts to extend hospitality to her by offering her food and shelter. That is, he demonstrates hospitality in the general sense of the word by inviting her in and seeing to her wounds. But, according to Derrida’s thought, this form of hospitality is inevitably conditional, and thus not hospitality at all. While the Magistrate graciously invites her in, he does so from a position of authority and ownership. He is not only the Magistrate of the town but the owner and/or keeper of his residence. The very act of demonstrating hospitality by inviting a stranger – the barbarian girl – into his home is self-contradictory since it simultaneously points to his kindness as host and his authoritative position in the relationship (see Derrida, *Hospitality* 15, 23, 25 and Caputo 110–11). Therefore, when the Magistrate offers the barbarian girl hospitality, she rejects it. It is only when he can show unconditional hospitality – when he sleeps and cannot welcome her as his guest and thus affirm their hierarchical relationship – that her otherness is revealed. In the dream, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl finally see each other face-to-face and enter a relation from which each is absolved and their difference is thus maintained (see Critchley 175). This is due to the nature of dreams and “their refusal to succumb completely to the interpretive drive” (Attridge, *Ethics* 47). The dreams become a home, a neutral ground on which the self and other can meet.

Toward the end of the novel, the Magistrate dreams of the girl once again, but instead of a castle, she is building an oven. He notices how lovely she looks with her gold-embroidered cap, braided hair and jet-black eyes. She smiles at him and offers him a steaming loaf of bread (*Barbarians* 126). Two things are worth noticing in this regard. First, he now describes her as “beautiful” and “dressed in [her] best”. Her face is no longer a formless shape, but he can clearly distinguish her eyes, teeth, the gold details in her hair. In his mind, she has transformed from someone disfigured to a complete person. While his

position and involvement in the Empire have previously precluded him from truly seeing the girl, he now sees her as she is outside of the Empire's history and ideology. His former perception of her as "ugly" is thus revealed as a construction of the Empire, a discursive strategy to present barbarians as deformed and monstrous in the imaginations of the people. One could also argue that this transformation is an allegory for his process of accepting responsibility for the other. That, once he has seen her and begins interrogating his own motives and actions, he is drawn to her singularity as manifested in her face. Through his face-to-face encounter with the other, the Magistrate is made aware of and confronted with the shortcomings of his ego, and slowly starts seeking and pursuing an ethical, responsible relationship with the other. The second aspect to consider is the fact that she offers him bread as a symbol of giving oneself sacrificially for another. The barbarian girl acknowledges the "imperative force" of the Magistrate and puts herself in his place. As a self, she answers to his need as an other by providing for him with her own substance. It is, as Levinas says, "to give to the other the bread from one's own mouth" (Lingis xxviii).

The Barbarian Girl's Response to the Magistrate

Throughout most of the novel, the barbarian girl is closed off and detached in her relationship with the Magistrate. When he first invites her to work for him, partly as an act of expiation and penance (see Pippin 35) and partly to satisfy his sexual urges, she rejects the offer by saying that he would not "want someone like [her]" (*Barbarians* 31). The following day, he again invites her to come indoors with him, but she declines. However, he proceeds to help her to her feet from where she was sitting in the square, guiding her to his rooms. Once inside, the Magistrate assures her that his invitation for her to work for him is not what she thinks, but her body language seems to betray her thoughts: "Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences" (31). It is important to ask, however, whether these thoughts truly belong to the girl. Attridge observes that, in this instance, the Magistrate imagines himself from a woman's perspective and that his hesitation stems from being "sick at himself" for making excuses – "This is not what you think it is" (*Barbarians* 31) – and for the obscure desires they attempt to conceal (*Ethics* 44). The inherent claim that he knows her thoughts is, of course, false since the mind of another, the other, remains entirely inaccessible.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that she ‘wants nothing’ from him. She shrugs and does not respond when he asks her whether the torturers caused her loss of sight and she does not laugh at his attempt at a joke (*Barbarians* 33, 39). After the pair complete their “most collaborative act”, in which he caresses and brings her to a climax, he is disappointed at how unresponsive she remains, even after such intimacy: “It brings me no closer to her and seems to affect her as little. I search her face the next morning: it is blank”. He is “disquieted” by her seeming lack of emotion, wondering what he might do to “move” her (50).

Regardless of whether or not the Magistrate’s assumptions about the girl’s attitude toward him are correct, her closed-off responses serve to empower her. As previously discussed, his failure to understand her results in her gaining a form of mastery over him. The fact that her presence questions and challenges him effects a reversal of power in which he becomes her servant and infinitely responsible for her. Her silence and detachment from him are the way in which this power-devoid-of-power strengthens and comes to affect him substantially. Through her emotional distance, the ethical response that her alterity demands emerges more urgently. For this reason, her attitude toward the Magistrate plays an important role in the novel’s treatment of the notion of an ethical response to alterity.

But rather than considering her alterity and the effect it has on him, the Magistrate interprets her perfunctory manner of communication as follows:

In the makeshift language we share there are no nuances. She has a fondness for facts, I note, for pragmatic dicta; she dislikes fancy, questions, speculations; we are an ill-matched couple. Perhaps that is how barbarian children are brought up: to live by rote, by the wisdom of the fathers as handed down. (45–46)

This passage illustrates the egocentric errors commonly made by the self. By assuming that he understands the reasons for her silence and unresponsiveness, the Magistrate reveals a tendency to reduce otherness to sameness, thereby constructing a “plastic image” of her based on his frame of reference (see Levinas, *Totality* 13, 51). He considers the idea that perhaps she – a barbarian – is primitive, practical and acts out of habit rather than using her ability as a human to think critically. This manner of thinking reveals what Levinas refers to as a totalising mindset, which organises men and things into power systems and aims to maintain the self’s dominance in their relationship with others

(*Totality* 17). One might say that the Magistrate prefers to think about and see her as someone who is unsophisticated and “dislikes fancy” because it affirms what he would like to believe about himself, that is, that he is ‘cultured’. Later on, he speculates that, having witnessed and experienced torture, the girl must have become somewhat desensitised to violence and indecency. He says of her: “Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her” and that he, too, might eventually be “turned into a creature that believes in nothing” (*Barbarians* 94). The Magistrate’s mindset about the girl is ambivalent, however: on the one hand he thinks of her as mysterious and impenetrable, but on the other, he makes claims that suggest she is wholly knowable – just another barbarian (see Attridge, *Ethics* 89). This ambivalence also affects the reader’s perception of her. Because his perspective is the only one available to the reader, his misinterpretation of her means that the reader’s view of her is also distorted. We read doubtfully – never sure what is and is not true about the girl.

For Levinas, an appropriate response to the other involves precisely not attempting to construct an image of and interpret or illuminate them, but rather to let them shine forth with their own light and speak for themselves (*Totality* 14). Nevertheless, such an approach to the other is impossible. Regardless of the Magistrate’s intentions, his humanity would not allow for him to see her as she is: by default, we desire to grasp and categorise others. In our engagement with them, we are yet again confronted with a double bind. The possibility of letting the other be in their own eternity is sustained by its impossibility, and vice versa. We can never achieve this ideal, though we must attempt it.

The Magistrate’s theories about why she is quiet and detached are proven wrong when, on their journey back to her people, she becomes more confident and outspoken around the men who accompany them. As he notes: “The banter goes on in the pidgin of the frontier, and she is at no loss for words. I am surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession. I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man’s slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman!” (*Barbarians* 71–72). Her unexpected spontaneity reveals that, contrary to his beliefs about her barbarian upbringing, she is a human being and a woman just like any other, yet also an absolute other who exceeds and overflows the idea he has of her (Levinas, *Totality* 50). The thoughts the Magistrate has about the girl in this scenario contradict what he had previously believed and assumed about her. Her participation in the “banter” shows that she has a sense of humour and playfulness that never surfaced in her relationship with him. While she was mostly quiet and reserved in

his company, she is now “at no loss for words”, also suggesting that the language barrier the Magistrate supposed and the claim that they shared a “makeshift language”, were exaggerated. Her “fluency” and “quickness” confirm the idea that he underestimated her intellect and proficiency in the language of the Empire and question his description of her as silent and withdrawn. At the same time, the Magistrate’s deep-rooted colonial mindset is exposed in his feeling ‘proud’ of her – as if she, the barbarian, was refined and educated by him, the Westerner. As if the “attractive young woman” is a product of his influence.

The Problem of Justice for the Barbarians

In the second part of the novel, after the Magistrate returns from his excursion to the barbarians, he begins to contemplate the problem of justice. As he and the three men approach the outpost, they are met with officials of the Third Bureau who escort them to the courthouse where the Magistrate is questioned and charged with “treasonously consorting” with the enemy (*Barbarians* 90). After a period of solitary confinement in inhumane conditions, he becomes increasingly introspective and somewhat delusional, considering things such as the “oppression of freedom” and “liberation of confinement”, but he also thinks about the barbarian girl, the nature of their relationship, and his desire to “do what [is] right” (94).

What is noteworthy about the Magistrate’s deteriorating mental state is that it happens as he becomes more aware of and acknowledges the need for responsibility and justice. Once he returns to the outpost, he begins to reflect on his simultaneous association with and disassociation from the Empire. In this regard, what happens to the Magistrate is what Derrida describes as the madness that results from being caught between two conflicting injunctions: as a citizen, he is subject to the laws of the Empire, yet he is deeply affected by the call to do what is ethical. He is polarised by his position as the magistrate and his desire to treat the barbarians as fellow human beings, as men (see 123–24). Derrida describes this double bind as follows:

Perhaps we start thinking, start promising, start being responsible, *by being mad*; taking responsibility or making a decision is madness because you do so only when there are two competing, conflicting injunctions and that is the definition of madness. [...] [A] double bind generates madness, for when you are confronted with two incompatible injunctions you start being mad. [...] If

the double bind is the condition for responsibility, or ethics, then ethics are mad. (“Following Theory” 35–36)

What Derrida seems to be suggesting is that responsibility is not a consequence of rationality and calculation but a by-product of “madness”, of being caught between two opposing injunctions. It is as though this double bind is a prerequisite of responsible and ethical behaviour for, without an impossible decision, there cannot be true responsibility. Until one is confronted with a decision in which the stakes are this high, one has perhaps not experienced the weight of what the alterity of the other demands.

The Magistrate vociferously demonstrates his grievance against the treatment of the barbarian prisoners when, in a moment of “madness” and a state of humiliation and delusion, he publicly confronts Colonel Joll who makes a spectacle of torture (*Barbarians* 122–24). Apart from shouting “No!” multiple times, he pleads with Joll not to use the hammer as a weapon of torture because “from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself” (123). Considering his experience with the barbarian girl, having personally tended to her wounds and having witnessed how she ‘totters’ and ‘fumbles’ when she has no help (see 63), we can surmise that the Magistrate has her in mind when he makes this urgent request. He has first-hand experience of how torture of this kind affects not only the body but the mind – how it deprives a person of their dignity and freedom to do the most basic of things. It is in this scene that we witness most vividly how the ethical spills over into the realm of the political. Having recognised the alterity of the girl – at least to some extent – and having become responsible for her and the crimes committed against her, the Magistrate is compelled to respond not only privately but publicly. To this end, he confronts Colonel Joll, the primary culprit in the abuse suffered by the girl and the other barbarians. By addressing the ethical, then, the political is also affected, whether directly – as in this instance – or indirectly. Ethics bears on politics, and vice versa. Critchley makes this point as follows:

The passage from ethics to politics is synonymous with the move from responsibility to questioning, from the proximity of the one-for-the-other to a relation with all the others whereby I feel myself to be an other like the others and where the question of justice can be raised. (220)

In the introduction to this study, I suggested that Coetzee seems to view the ethical relationship with alterity as an important precondition of meaningful political action – that

perhaps one's political motivation is significantly affected by the face-to-face engagement with an other who calls the self and their systems of knowledge into question. This hypothesis is corroborated by the Magistrate's public outburst following months of internal turmoil as he tries to navigate his complex relationship with the barbarian girl. Once he returns from the mountains, his ethical compulsion reaches a climax and he has no choice but to translate what he has learned and who he has become into his political life, which, of course, involves confronting the tyrannical Colonel Joll, the practices of the Third Bureau and the Empire in general. As we will see from a subsequent passage, the Magistrate's responsibility for the girl literally turns into a series of questions he wants to direct at Joll – questions that raise the issue of justice.

What is also significant in this scene, however, is that the Magistrate struggles to articulate the point he tries to make. After shouting at Colonel Joll and being struck over the head and across the face, he cannot remember what he wants to say and the thought “eludes [him] like a wisp of smoke” (*Barbarians* 124). It is, as if, in this moment of wanting to speak up for the sake of justice, he becomes disorientated. I would suggest that the Magistrate fails to make a heroic speech about justice precisely because it is such an elusive phenomenon. In this context, the novel seems to align with Derrida's understanding of justice as a paradox: the idea that justice is impossible because each occurrence of it is entirely unique and thus unidentifiable. The implication of this is that generic articulations of justice are futile and therefore not just. True justice – undeconstructible justice – always arrives unexpectedly and anonymously, causing the word, the container of “justice”, to become empty and meaningless (“Force of Law” 17, 23). Whenever we, like the Magistrate, attempt to speak about justice, it escapes us. By forgetting what he wants to say about justice for the barbarians, the novel reminds us of its ever-evasive ‘nature’.

The other problem with the Magistrate's sudden fervour for justice, of course, is his complicity and his “questionable motives” with the barbarian girl (*Barbarians* 94). While it is easy for him to make a scene in the name of justice now that he has lost his position and all respectability, the fact remains that he, too, is guilty not only in his alliance with the Empire but also in his treatment of other people – especially women. In this regard, Attridge makes an important point about what he calls the “self-deceptions of the liberal conscience” (*Ethics* 43). While the Magistrate condemns the actions of the Third Bureau and, in this instance, the torture scene, he cannot stop watching – his erotic interest in the

body is inseparable from his fascination with torture. At some point, he turns away from the site for fear of being “contaminated” and “poisoned” by the atrocities, but he soon returns and pushes to the front of the crowd where he has a clear view of the “exemplary spectacle” (*Barbarians* 120). López argues that the Magistrate assumes a position of power as he watches how the barbarians are being treated, which necessarily associates him with the role of the torturers (*Visitation* 84). He is thus deceived about his own humanitarian consciousness and liberality.

After he is beaten down following his momentary attempt at an intervention, he reflects on what he wanted to say and his misguided desire for justice as follows:

What would I have said if they had let me go on? That it is worse to beat a man's feet to pulp than to kill him in combat? That it brings shame on everyone when a girl is permitted to flog a man? That spectacles of cruelty corrupt the hearts of the innocent? The words they stopped me from uttering may have been very paltry indeed, hardly words to rouse the rabble. What, after all, do I stand for besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes [...]. Would I have dared to face the crowd to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? *Justice*: once that word is uttered, where will it all end? [...] Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?

(*Barbarians* 124–25).

The fact that the Magistrate questions what he might have said if he had had the opportunity to speak suggests that he did not prepare for what he wanted to say. His reaction to the public torture was an impulse, an involuntary response to what he saw happening. The manner in which the scene of his public outburst is recounted is something like an out-of-body experience or being consumed by an emotion, and the Magistrate himself describes being “intoxicated” by the events (123). One might say that he experiences a moment of *ekstasis*, of standing outside of himself. After he cries “No!” for the first time, we read that he “hear[s] the first word from [his] throat” (122) as if his mouth and body are doing something his mind is unaware of. The way that he proceeds to relate his actions – “I am in the arena holding up my hands” (122) and “My arm points at him like a gun” (123) – creates the illusion that the Magistrate is watching his own movements, waiting for what he might do next, surprised by each new action just as the reader is. We can therefore assume that he did not plan on confronting Colonel Joll and

had not rehearsed his plea. This again confirms the idea that responsibility for the other is not a consequence of rational thinking: it is an unconditional, involuntary awareness that happens in spite of the self and their ego.

By asking a rhetorical question about whether one evil is worse than another, the Magistrate verbalises the novel's preoccupation with the complexity of ethics and morality. The question that emerges is: who is to say that torture is worse than killing someone in combat, especially if the outcomes are similar? The Magistrate wonders what justification he might offer for making this kind of statement, particularly in the context of addressing someone who seems to have lost all sense of morality. What concrete grounds are there to make such a judgement? While I do not think the novel implies that the two crimes in question are equally disgraceful, it does seem to question the impact of an appeal to ethical and moral behaviour when the people, the crowd, the public, have seemingly abandoned all ethics: when their consciences are seared, when sympathies have died, when certain movements of the heart are no longer possible, when they believe in nothing (see 94). The point of the Magistrate's questions seems to be that ethics and morality are meaningless when they are not culturally normative and collectively upheld and that moral codes generalise that which is absolutely singular and cannot be generalised. His questions thus point to yet another paradox: although there is a need for moral codes to guide society, these codes cannot guarantee ethical behaviour since ethics are only possible when one does not know what to do – when there are no rules (see Derrida, "Following Theory" 31–32).

In this regard, it is also helpful to think about the distinction Derrida makes between the law and justice. Considering that Colonel Joll and his officers torture the nomads privately as well as publicly, the reader can draw one of three conclusions about the lawfulness of this practice. First, that it is permitted by the law of the Empire and therefore what they are doing is lawful. Second, that torture is prohibited and thus the members of the Third Bureau are committing a crime. And third, that the law does not make provision for the act of torture and thus Colonel Joll and his men are acting neither legally nor illegally – they are outside of the law. If the first possibility were true, there would be little disagreement about the fact that there is a weak relationship between their laws and justice. The law is one thing and justice another. Of course, this disparity raises the question of whether a law devoid of justice is a law at all. By most standards, these laws would be considered inhumane and unjust. The second scenario is less likely since the torturers would have

been more covert about their crimes and the public spectacle would not have happened. Colonel Joll might have been thwarted by the fear of exposure and punishment. In this context, the law might be just, but Colonel Joll and his men would be neither lawful nor just. The third scenario, which in my view is the most probable, is more complicated, since the question has to be asked whether justice is possible in the absence of the law. If there is no formal rule against torture, on what grounds may the practice be deemed unjust? Without the law, which authority has the final say about whether an act is just or not? The point I wish to make is that the issue of justice is problematic in the absence of law: the law is required for justice to be relevant. That is not to say that justice should not consistently be pursued, even in the absence of the law, but simply that, in accordance with Derrida, justice is dependent on the law, even if only to disagree and depart from it. Justice is possible only when the law is deconstructed, but without the law, there is nothing to deconstruct, and thus justice is not possible. Caputo expresses this idea as follows: “There is a necessary, structural gap or distance between the law and justice, and deconstruction situates itself there, in that space or interval, in that abyss or *khôra*, watching out for the flowers of justice that grow in the cracks of the law” (132).

It is ironic that the Magistrate should describe the things he wanted to say as “very paltry” when, in fact, they are life-and-death humanitarian matters. In my view, he does not believe them to be trivial as much as he begins reflecting on his own unrighteousness and thus reconsiders his address. He admits that he does not stand for much more than respectable behaviour toward prisoners, a fact we can recognise in, for example, his having sex with “flower-like soft-petalled children” while considering himself “old” (*Barbarians* 112). In light of this, it is also ironic that he wants future people to say of him that he was the only man in the outpost who “in his heart was not a barbarian” (120).

The Magistrate’s considerations of justice also seem to be suggesting that he is aware that, should he demand justice and it materialises, he too deserves to be punished. His question, “[W]here will it all end?” (124) points to his acknowledgement that, if justice was to be seriously pursued, most – if not all – people would be implicated and punished to some extent. Perhaps he recognises his hypocrisy in wanting to demand justice for the barbarians when he has committed countless wrongs himself. Moreover, this question also reveals his own doubt concerning the consequences of justice. While he desires justice, he also fears it, for what might happen if the people of the Empire opened the gates for the barbarians to come in, to live as equals among them? Since the people of the Empire have

“raped” their land, are the barbarians not entitled to retribution? And if so, what might that look like? What will become of him?

Furthermore, the novel raises the question of who is permitted to speak about and address the issue of justice. If the Magistrate is indeed a hypocrite, who might qualify for the role of spokesperson for justice? Who is worthy, blameless enough, to question the motives and actions of others? While my argument is that the Magistrate’s own moral failures prevent him from speaking up and making his point, the novel does not necessarily judge and condemn him in the way that he seems to judge and condemn himself. Perhaps the message we can take from the novel is that anyone and everyone should make the matter of justice their business, regardless of their shortcomings, unjust actions and even their complicity.

Through the Magistrate’s considerations of justice, the novel shows us not that seeking justice is futile but that it has far-reaching consequences. I would argue that it conveys a message about the importance for people to take personal responsibility and that, while it is easy to point fingers at institutions, individuals must first take a closer look at their own lives and the way they deal with others. This brings us back to the idea that ethics should precede and inform politics. An ethical relationship with others, with an other in the context of a face-to-face encounter, is what will ultimately change things at a political, and thus institutional, level. For social justice to become a possibility, the pursuit of an ethical relationship with alterity is the necessary first step.

CHAPTER 3: *DISGRACE*

Unlike several other J.M. Coetzee novels, including *Waiting for the Barbarians*, colonialism and racial oppression are not central themes in *Disgrace*. Rather, set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel explores the social complexities involved in the new democracy and the concomitant challenges facing its people. The novel follows the story of David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old college professor, who is accused and found guilty of sexually assaulting one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. In this respect, there are similarities between him and the Magistrate who also pursues an intimate relationship with someone of unequal social standing. The barbarian girl not only belongs to an ethnic group that is considered inferior by the Empire, but her status as a woman and a person with a disability exacerbates her social vulnerability. While in the context of the newly democratic South Africa Melanie no longer belongs to an oppressed racial group, the remnant of apartheid still means that there is an inherent hierarchal disparity between her and David, a white man. In addition to being a coloured woman, the age difference between her and him as well as his position of authority means that she has limited agency.

Although the ignominy of the sexual assault charge seems to affect him little at the start of the novel, he becomes more introspective when his daughter Lucy is gang-raped during his visit to her on her smallholding. This incident not only confronts him with himself and his beliefs about sex and desire, but it also causes estrangement and conflict in the father-daughter relationship. As is the case with the Magistrate and his encounter with the barbarian girl, David's exposure to and engagement with Lucy are the catalysts to his transformation. Described by him as a "product of history", Lucy is different to her father in many ways (61). Yet it is only after the attack that he begins to perceive how radically other she is, especially in terms of how she processes the event and chooses to orientate herself toward the future. While her thought processes and arguments frustrate him, we begin to perceive how his behaviour changes, particularly as it pertains to his new relation with people and animals. David's development is less evident than the Magistrate's, however, and it could be argued that he is unaware of the ethical shift in his behaviour.

In considering the self's pursuit of justice for the other, there are marked differences between the Magistrate and David. The former's personal responsibility for the girl spills over into the public sphere when he openly confronts Colonel Joll about his treatment

of the barbarians. His face-to-face encounter with the girl seems to evoke in him an ethical imperative to address the moral transgressions of the Empire. The fact that he returns the girl to her people and the frontier is restored to stability when the soldiers of the Third Bureau depart, suggests that there is some justice for the girl and for the barbarians who, we can surmise, will no longer be persecuted. While the Magistrate's pursuit of justice produces concrete results, David's does not deliver the outcomes he hopes for. Because Lucy refuses to report the rape, the perpetrators are never arrested and punished. But, although David cannot employ the law to achieve what he believes would be a just outcome, justice is deducible in the change that he as former womaniser and sex offender undergoes. The novel seems to suggest that it is he, as much as Lucy's rapists, who needs to be held accountable for his actions and repent from the desire that consumes him.

David Lurie: A Selfish Self

In the previous chapter, I have argued that the Magistrate embodies Levinas's conception of the human self in that he is at home with himself at the opening of the novel. I suggested that his engagement with the barbarian other unsettles and ultimately causes him to separate himself from the ideology of the Empire, enabling him to attempt an ethical relation to the other. While, at the beginning of *Disgrace*, David too seems to be comfortable within himself and his worldview, it is his selfishness that relates most strongly to Levinas's self. For Levinas, the human self is egocentric by nature: the "I", the knowing subject, takes priority over other people, and they are perceived either as extensions of the self or objects to be manipulated for personal gain (*Totality* 12). As I will show, David is engrossed in his selfish desires that frequently lead him to exploit those whom he believes can contribute to its fulfilment.

His egocentrism, particularly in his relationships with women, is evident from the start. The first pages describe his engagement with Soraya, a sex worker he visits in Green Point on Thursday afternoons. From these meetings, the reader gets a sense of his distorted view of women, sex and love. In addition to judging women almost exclusively on their outward appearance, he considers himself a "womanizer" and entertains fantasies about their fondness for him, imagining that they are more enamoured with him than they are (*Disgrace* 7). David believes that his feelings for Soraya are reciprocated, yet there is little evidence to support such a belief (2). On the contrary, her "quiet and docile" demeanour

and the fact that she shares nothing of her personal life suggest a lack of romantic interest and that she views their meetings as strictly professional (1, 3).

David's thoughts also reveal his patronising attitude toward women, particularly the ones he sleeps with. He refers to Soraya as a "ready", "compliant" learner and inwardly corrects her grammar: "*Demand*. She means *command*" (5, 10). We witness his excessively critical point of view when, for example, he observes Melanie's "silly", "tasteless" and "absurd" slippers (24–25). This criticism seems inappropriate considering that she, a twenty-year-old, is "[n]o more than a child" (20). And, similar to what he did with Soraya, he corrects her pronunciation of words, thereby assuming a position of authority in the relationship (13). There is thus a contradiction in his pursuit of women younger and less educated than himself: he is attracted to them, yet he readily criticises the behaviours that mark their youth. He wants them to be lovers, equals, and yet he enjoys the patriarchal role he thinks his gender, the age difference and his position as professor permit him to play.

The fact that David readily categorises people according to his systems of classification is, for Levinas, typical of the nature of the self (see *Totality* 13). From early on we sense his exaggerated focus on appearances, for example, and how he evaluates women according to their weight and perceived attractiveness. It is also evident that he is attached to these systems of classification, which, since he is a white middle-class man, are grounded in structures of power and control (see *Totality* 16–17). What is curious is that his systems of classification seem to be informed simultaneously by Romanticism and rationality – an incongruence I will elaborate on in the ensuing discussion.

His ideas about himself seem to be as misconceived as his opinions of women, however. Regarding his potential for change and personal growth, we are told: "His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body" (*Disgrace* 2). During his disciplinary hearing, he tells the committee that he is "not receptive to being counselled" because he is "beyond the reach of counselling" (49). Later, when he considers his reasons for disliking Lucy's friend Bev Shaw, we read that his "mind has become a refuge for old thoughts" that he ought to "sweep out" but does not care enough to (72). There is no question, then, that David is comfortable with himself and has not felt a strong enough need to change his habits, to rid his mind of antiquated attitudes and ideas. It may be that his habits and vices have become such an integral part of his life and

worldview that he cannot imagine how he could ever change. It might, of course, also be that he simply does not want to change and therefore claims that he is unable to. What is noteworthy in this regard is that, even though the assertions about the stubbornness of the temperament belong to a third-person narrator, the point of view is still clearly David's. The reader also becomes aware that the statements about his inflexibility might simply be a means of justifying his behaviour, an idea that is confirmed when he does end up changing. Through the use of irony, the novel draws our attention to the problematic arguments often made about human nature and the idea that we should accept the fact that we are driven by our instincts. In David's case, the contention that one is biologically resistant to change turns out to be an excuse and a means of avoiding personal responsibility.

In addition to his prejudice, sexism and stubbornness, David believes that he is intellectually superior to others. He teaches Communication as a subject, but questions the content he is required to teach, viewing parts of it as "preposterous" (3) even though his own supposedly high-culture academic endeavours, including three published books, have not "caused a stir or even a ripple" (4). He is "surprised" by his students' "ignorance", contemplating how this "postliterate" generation "might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday" (32), and finds it curious that he and Lucy's mother – both "intellectuals" – could have produced someone who is so practical and down to earth (61).

Through his sarcasm and judgement of those who are different from him, it is evident that David thinks himself more sophisticated than most, including Lucy and her "simple" way of life (61). He does not 'take to' her friends Bev and Bill Shaw, whom he condescendingly refers to as "animal-welfare people" and whose charity and emotional attachment to animals he finds off-putting (73). Listening as he ridicules the Shaws, Lucy tells him that he probably wants her to involve herself with "more important things" such as "painting still lives or teaching [her]self Russian" rather than spending time with people and things that will not lead her to a "higher life" (74). Coming from his daughter, such a statement confirms that he believes that living the life of the mind is more valuable than one seemingly in pursuit of simplicity and goodness.

But perhaps the most disturbing of David's characteristics is his sexually inappropriate behaviour, arguably fuelled by his admiration (and misuse) of the Romantic poets – particularly Byron and Wordsworth (see Beard 62). When he begins pursuing Melanie, he acknowledges his "desiring gaze" and admits to his frequent infatuation with one or more

of his female students. He is also self-consciously aware of the seductive ritual he is playing out when he invites her to his house, offers her wine and puts on music. Yet he continues the performance despite contemplating their thirty-year age difference (*Disgrace* 12). During their early conversations, David suggestively talks about things such as “falling in love”, “love affairs” and “passions”, to which Melanie responds awkwardly with silence or by changing the topic (13, 15). What is notable about his ironic reference to “falling in love” is that the reader is left wondering what “love” means to a man who is clearly otherwise motivated. We can assume what his intentions are by his predatory gaze and his head-to-toe descriptions of Melanie’s appearance. He refers to her “small and thin” frame (11), “slim” hips (19) and her “perfect little breasts” (23), which suggest that love is not necessarily what he has in mind. Claire Heaney observes that David idealises romantic encounters to such an extent that he overlooks the individuality of the women he engages with, and that his “blindness” in this regard is a testament to the “falsifying power of [his] aesthetic discourse” (145). Instead of experiencing and responding to Melanie as she truly is, he views her and the circumstances around their ‘lovemaking’ through the lenses of Romantic poetry. These filters of experience, Heaney argues, makes him selfish and allows him to disregard the signs that reveal the women’s aversion to his advances (144–145).

In addition to signalling his regard for Romantic ideals, his references to “falling in love” also suggest that he believes that this is something that might *happen* to the two of them, or perhaps that he hopes that ‘Eros’ might ‘enter’ and possess Melanie in the way that erotic love has already possessed him (*Disgrace* 52). The term “falling in love” also indicates that love occurs accidentally or involuntary, that one can become entangled “in the grip of something” without preparing or planning for it (18). If this is one’s conception of “falling in love”, it follows that one is exempted from responsibility and cannot be held accountable for any actions taken in this state. When one is engulfed in love, surely everything is permissible – for who can resist its force? Of course, such an understanding of love is problematic for various reasons, particularly in this instance. It denies the possibility of exercising willpower and resisting temptation, and as pointed out, it absolves one from responsibility. This perception of love also privileges David’s imaginative experience at the cost of the women, like Melanie, whom he objectifies in this manner (Heaney 144) and is a convenient excuse for someone accustomed to yielding to their impulses. It is also ironic that David refers to falling in love when he is aware of the

romantic scene he is purposefully setting when he first invites Melanie to his house: there is no accident in this arrangement, only calculation. The paradoxical premise is that one can easily fall in love if the context is right, when the ambience is created with this result in mind. Through the professor's distorted notions of falling in love, the novel sheds light on how such ideas can be used to conceal and justify misplaced, socially unacceptable desires. Claiming to be in love is more acceptable than "mak[ing] do" with "whores" or "what comes [one's] way" (*Disgrace* 16).

We are again reminded of David's perverted perspective on love when he considers how Lucy has "let[] herself go" as a result of "withdraw[ing] from the field of love" (65), which emphasises his habit of covering what in reality is sexual desire with the euphemism of "love". What he really means, of course, is that by putting on weight, she must be less attractive to potential romantic partners and thus miss out on opportunities for sex. By bizarrely interpreting the dimensions of her body as a departure from something as abstract as love, David exposes his sexism and superficial interest in and view of women. It also shows his adherence to Western standards of beauty, that is, that being small and slim is more attractive than being "ample" (59).

Another alarming aspect of David's engagement with women is his insistence that, "[A] woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). What he is suggesting is that a woman is responsible for 'giving' her beauty to whomever desires it, even if she does not want to. The implication is that she has no agency over her body, that the desiring gaze of another compels her to share it. His statement also implies that the fulfilment of sexual desire and aesthetic enjoyment take precedence over the rights that women have over their bodies. In this context, a woman's appearance – and the very fact of being a woman – makes her vulnerable to sexual assault. Should she be victimised as such, she would have no grounds on which to lay a complaint or make a case, for it is the perpetrator's 'right' to take from her what they want. By telling Melanie that she 'ought' to share of herself, David also tries to persuade her that he is somehow entitled to enjoy her womanhood and, therefore, that any accusation of inappropriate conduct on his part would be unwarranted. He possibly knows that he is acting unethically, therefore pre-empting the charge that is eventually made against him.

During one of his subsequent visits to Melanie's residence, he forces himself on her. Despite her objections, he embraces her so that her limbs "crumple like a marionette's"

(24) and proceeds to carry her to the bedroom where he undresses her. Her body language reveals her response to his unwelcome visit: she “averts” herself, turns her back on him and goes limp, “d[ying] within herself for the duration” (25). What is disturbing about this scene is his acknowledgement of her aversion, yet his determination to proceed. As if anticipating the reader’s thoughts, the narrator tells us that what had just happened is “[n]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). Proceeding as it does from David’s point of view, the description of the not-quite-rape incident is ironic since, by law, rape is exactly what it is. One could argue that the mere thought of having raped Melanie signifies David’s guilt and that rape had indeed taken place. His perspective on the event is also quite typical of what one might expect from sexual predators – it is fraught with denial and justification. The fact that David is dejected by the time he reaches his car and admits to having made “a huge mistake” (25) confirms that he knows that he has committed a crime or at the very least an ethical offence.

When Melanie seeks refuge at his house a week after the above incident, he is concerned about her presence there and the “trailing complications behind her” (27). For reasons that remain unknown to us, she asks if she can stay there for a while, but he responds with the question, “Would that be a good idea?” (27) His concern about this arrangement is incongruous for two reasons. First, if he were truly concerned about whether such a decision was a good idea or not, he would never have made the countless wrong decisions in the process of pursuing and sleeping with her. It was a bad idea from start to finish and thus he seems to approve of bad ideas when it suits him. While he might be somewhat bothered about what it might look like if someone had to find out, it is likely just an inconvenience to him to have her around for extended periods. Indeed, earlier in the novel, we learn that he avoids sleepovers with women because he knows that he will be “cold, surly, impatient to be alone” (2) the morning after. His concern about the possible complications of her stay also reveals his reversion to rationality. Claire Heaney argues that, despite David’s claims to the ‘rights of desire’ and other Romantic ideals, he is an “icon of rational discourse” rather than a “creature of passion” (148). This is revealed, for example, in his appeal to Lucy not to “lose perspective” when she explains why she and Bev are invested in the welfare of animals (*Disgrace* 74). It could be argued, then, that his Romantic rhetoric is nothing but a façade and excuse for inappropriate behaviour.

The second reason why his hesitation is inconsistent relates to the rape scene I have just discussed. During this invasion, he violated not only Melanie's privacy by acquiring her personal details illicitly from the university but also her body. He did not care that his presence was inconvenient and unwelcome, and that he would have put her in an impossibly awkward position had her cousin returned while he was there. Thus, when Melanie arrives at his house and asks whether she can stay for a while, she is not being nearly as inappropriate as he had been a few days before.

David's and Melanie's entry into one another's homes demonstrates Coetzee's preoccupation with the dynamics of hospitality (see Lopez, "Friends" 926). As I have previously explained, Derrida conceives of hospitality as simultaneously friendly and hostile. The host demonstrates generosity by inviting the guest into their home, but also exerts their authority and ownership by being able to welcome the guest (*Hospitality* 15, 23, 25 and Caputo 110–11). In contrast, unconditional hospitality involves a continuous, unconditional preparedness for anything or anyone that may arrive (*Hospitality* 137–39). This gesture is one in which the host sacrifices their home and their being at home with themselves for the sake of providing a home for the stranger. The home of the host thus becomes a gift to the guest – one that asks nothing in return and is infinitely unreciprocated (Caputo 143; Derrida, *Given* 7, 12). When David arrives at Melanie's apartment, forces his way into her home and sexually assaults her, he enters her space and body without invitation or consent. It seems, then, that she offers him unconditional hospitality, that is, she invites him in despite herself and the consequences. He undermines her authority as the owner or host – of the house and her body – by ignoring and violating her right to refuse entry. We read that he "has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her" (*Disgrace* 24). But, when she arrives at his house unexpectedly, and therefore surprisingly, there seem to be conditions for her stay. We notice, for example, that her growing boldness irks him. After he reluctantly agrees for her to live there temporarily, the reader senses irritability in the observation that "[s]he seems thoroughly at home" (27) and does not wash the dishes she uses (28). It is clear, then, that the hospitality David offers is conditional: she must be discreet, not stay too long, and acknowledge her position as temporary guest by cleaning up after herself.

Just when it seems that Melanie is getting more comfortable with her relationship with David, even participating in what turns out to be their last sexual encounter (29), her boyfriend arrives on the scene and confronts the latter. The same night, his car is

vandalised, but he does not report the incident. After these events, Melanie does not return to his house but instead shows up in class, accompanied by her boyfriend, looking “thin and exhausted” (32). Not long thereafter, Melanie lodges a formal complaint of sexual assault against him.

From the novel’s ironic portrayal of David’s character, beliefs and behaviour, the reader gains a clear understanding of his relations to others. Because everything we read is mediated by his consciousness, we are not privy to anything other than what he perceives, and it is from this position that we come to understand just how flawed he is. Apart from the sexual assault case, his social transgressions are relatively covert, so being inside his mind, as it were, gives us access to his thoughts and makes us sceptical of him. We learn, for example, that he sees himself as entirely autonomous from other beings, and he uses this perceived freedom to his benefit – often at the expense of others (Marais, “Imagination” 76). But, intelligent and well-educated, he is not your common criminal: he is a middle-class man whose privilege has always served him well and has allowed him to get away with unethical behaviour. The characterisation of David thus plays a crucial role in the unfolding of the plot and helps us view the events following the attack in a critical light. It also allows us to track his transformation as a character and how his engagement with Lucy changes him.

Lucy Lurie: Other than David

Judgemental, patriarchal, stubborn, sexist: these are a few of the words I have used to describe David’s character as exhibited in the first half of the novel. In many ways, Lucy – though his flesh and blood – is other than him. This is interesting because, unlike the postcolonial other whose alterity is culturally and socially inscribed, Lucy is David’s daughter and thus likely from a similar background. Her role as other in the novel is thus unexpected, aligning with Levinas’s conception of otherness, which is based on the interiority of individuals rather than social opposition (see Levinas, *Totality* 53–54).

The narrator expresses David’s awareness of Lucy’s surprising otherness as follows: “Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share” (*Disgrace* 61). The reference to her as a “throwback” points to David’s impression of her as belonging to a former era, of having returned to

subsistence farming and living off the land as their ancestors had done. He personifies history by describing it as a direct living influence on his daughter, one of such significance that it overshadows genetic inheritance. It is as if history itself is presented as other – other than biology and certainly other than David. By considering that his daughter was produced by history rather than her parents, David somehow denies his parental role, offering what might be interpreted as an excuse for why she is so different from him. If she was fathered by history, then he is not responsible for the person she is and her choices. In this context, Lucy's rape-related pregnancy also means that she will eventually give birth to this same history that has produced her. History is thus perpetuated biologically and socially.

When contemplating how his daughter has changed and distinguished herself from her parents since childhood, David observes the following:

Now, in her middle twenties, she has begun to separate. The dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognises a statement of independence, considered, purposeful. The turn away from men too. Making her own life. Coming out of his shadow. (*Disgrace* 89)

While these observations show how Lucy differs from David, we must keep in mind that she is described to us from his point of view. And as an obviously flawed character, the reader is encouraged to examine and question his observations of people and events. Although his perception of her is often critical – particularly because of his focus on outward appearance – the reader sees her differently precisely because they doubt his judgement and perspective. It is as if, through his explicit flaws, her otherness is emphasised.

Lucy is other than David in many overt ways. First, she is not as preoccupied with appearances as her father is. From his perspective, as I have already noted, she has gained too much weight and Helen, her former love interest, is described as “a large, sad-looking woman with a deep voice and a bad skin” (60). Moreover, according to him, Lucy keeps company with unattractive people such as the Shaws, a couple whose cluttered house smells of cat urine and Jeyes Fluid and whom he is utterly repelled by (see 72–73). While these judgements come from David, the fact that she befriends them likely means that, in contrast to her father, she refrains from judging people and things based on what they look like.

Second, Lucy pursues a different lifestyle from David. While he is interested in literature, art and music, she occupies herself with things like baking and making jam. From his standpoint, she is a “solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*” (60), complete with flowered dress and dirty fingernails. Contrary to her father who has pursued an academic career, she lives from the money she makes with the kennels and from selling freshly cut flowers and vegetables at the Saturday market. She reminds him not to waste water and contaminate the septic tank – more evidence of just how pragmatic she is compared to him (61). He values the intellect and philosophical engagements above all else, whereas she works with her hands, lives close to the earth and depends on it for her sustenance. While he exists in relative isolation in a big city, she is involved with the community around her, supporting charitable organisations and trying to “share some of [her] human privilege with the beasts” (74).

But David and Lucy also differ in terms of their sexuality. He is a heteronormative, heterosexual man who – in an “anxious flurry of promiscuity” (7) – sleeps with almost anyone willing. Lucy, on the other hand, is a lesbian who has had very few relationships in her life. Apart from Helen, there is no mention of other romantic or sexual engagements, and, in a conversation with David, she admits to being inclined to the view that sexual desire is a burden that society might be better off without (90). Although he does not outrightly disapprove of Lucy’s sexual orientation, he does feel that she is “lost to men”, which emphasises his belief that women’s bodies should first and foremost be a source of pleasure to men (76). The idea of her body being “lost to men” suggests that women naturally belong to the heterosexual realm where men are entitled to derive pleasure from them – that is until a woman is “stolen” or lured away by other women. Moreover, when he thinks of Lucy’s intimate relationship with Helen, he is uncomfortable with the idea: “The truth is, he does not like to think of his daughter in the throes of passion with another woman, and a plain one at that” (86). This not only tells us that David is uneasy about his daughter’s sexual orientation but again confirms the value he places on physical attractiveness. Had Helen not been a “plain” woman, perhaps Lucy’s interest in her would have been more acceptable.

Interestingly, though, David admits to knowing nothing about intimate relationships between women: “But what does he know about what women do together? [...]. And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen?” (86). The dynamics of lesbian love is a domain that he knows little about, first, because he is a man and second

because, as far as we know, he has only ever been in heterosexual relationships. He has relied on his intellect to solve problems all his life, yet he cannot employ it to make sense of Lucy's sexuality, which is something he might have known more about had they been in a closer relationship. In thinking about Lucy and Helen, he quickly reverts to his habit of patronising women:

Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood – sisters more than lovers. Sharing a bed, sharing a bath, baking gingerbread cookies, trying on each other's clothes. Sapphic love: an excuse for putting on weight. (86)

Because David is uncomfortable with Lucy's sexual orientation, he prefers to think of her relationship with Helen as a platonic, sisterly one. But by doing so, he ignores its legitimacy as a sexual relationship between two adults. His patriarchal, heteronormative mindset prevents him from recognising anything other than heterosexual relationships as valid, and thus he dismisses the experiences of people of other sexual and gender identities. In his mind, he reduces Lucy's relationship with Helen to a childlike one, ultimately denying the reality of lesbianism and refusing to fully accept his daughter's identity. By imagining that their relationship is endearing – baking and bathing together – rather than sexual, he is reminded of the authority he once had as the father of a little girl. Thus, through her lesbianism, Lucy departs from her father's patriarchal values and challenges his sexist views of what women's bodies are 'intended' for.

The Rape and Its Aftermath

While David and Lucy do not have a close bond, they are on friendly – though somewhat impersonal – terms until the attack. We sense the distance in their relationship in, for example, her calling him by his first name and the fact that he did not know that she and Helen had ended their relationship (*Disgrace* 61). Moreover, rather than hearing about her father's "troubles" directly from him, she learns about his sexual assault case from Rosalind, his ex-wife (63). Nevertheless, Lucy welcomes him on the farm with a hug and kiss, and the two live harmoniously for a while. After being raped, however, she becomes resentful and distant toward him, and although it is never directly stated, her anger likely stems from the fact that her father's sexual misconduct has now become personal to her.

Right before the incident, the two have a conversation about the charges made against him, and when Lucy asks what had transpired between himself and Melanie, he wants to tell her that he was “*a servant of eros*” and that “[i]t was a God who acted through [him]” (89). This thought reveals that he is tempted to justify his behaviour by appealing to the realm of mythology and poetry that is far removed from reality and the consequences of his actions. In this context, he does not have to admit to the ethical offence he has committed, since the realms of myths and poems are not typically concerned with what is ethically right or wrong (see Heaney 145). But we learn that he does not really believe this, even though he feels that there “was something generous that was doing its best to flower” in the situation (89). Like Lord Byron, David has an oddly Romantic view of his moral failures, although, of course, he does not yet perceive his behaviour as such (see López, *Visitation* 162). Instead of confessing that he had sexually assaulted Melanie, he excuses himself, blaming his behaviour on the Greek god of love and the “something generous” that was operating through him. His idealism in this regard is a façade for the crime of rape and a means by which he avoids taking personal responsibility for his behaviour. Lucy Graham proposes that, through David’s considerations of Byron’s sexual exploits (*Disgrace* 160), the novel draws attention to the problem with the Western artistic tradition, that is, that it has historically been more concerned with ideas such as beauty and the sublime than with ethical responsibility (Graham 441).

We might say that he is ambivalent about what he believes: on the one hand, he knows that he acted wrongfully and therefore pleads guilty during the hearing and admits to having made a mistake after ‘nearly’ raping Melanie (*Disgrace* 48, 25), but on the other, he refuses to acknowledge that it was entirely his fault. This ambivalence is likely also grounded in the conflict between his Romantic ideals and his inclination toward rational thought.

Therefore, instead of saying that he was “*a servant of eros*” (89), he reminds Lucy about their neighbour’s dog when they lived in Kenilworth long ago. He tries to make his point by comparing himself to a dog whose instinct is to mate and breed and who is then chastised for doing so. He explains that, because it was consistently punished for getting unruly when females were around, the dog started hating its nature and, in a way, punishing itself even before it could be beaten by the owners (90). The implication is that he too would start rejecting and punishing himself if the condemnation persisted, in which case it would be better for him – and the dog in the story – to be dead.

As Lucy listens and tries to gather the moral of David's story, she asks him: "So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked?" (90). This is a critical moment in the context of Lucy's imminent rape and in the father-daughter relationship. Lucy is, of course, not talking about the dog but wants to determine whether her father condones not only his sexual misconduct but also that of every man who abuses his power in this manner. What she too is asking is whether he believes that the "rights of desire" (89) are more important than the victim's rights over their own body. Unaware of the events that are soon to follow, David answers her question as follows: "No, that is not the moral. What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself" (90). It is noteworthy that Lucy asks the question with potential victims in mind, while David's answer comes from the perspective of the perpetrator. By focusing only on how the dog (or the male) is negatively affected by being punished for and denying its instincts, he again exposes his selfishness and his problematic approach to sex.

What is clear from this conversation is that, before Lucy's rape, David has an all-or-nothing approach to sex and desire. It seems that, for him, a life devoid of unbridled sexual expression might not be worth living. His perspective on the importance of sexual freedom is so unequivocal that he cannot imagine an existence in which it should be governed by societal norms. When telling the story about their neighbour's dog, he says that he too might have chosen execution. But, as pragmatic as she is, Lucy immediately suggests that the dog could have been 'fixed', which, applied to David, would mean castration. He responds as follows:

[B]ut at the deepest level I think it might have preferred being shot. It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly. (90)

What David means by this is that being domesticated and 'neutered' by society is a disgrace, that to sacrifice one's natural desires and yield to social expectations is perhaps the most shameful fate of all.

David's values and beliefs thus contradict themselves in some way. While he is drawn to culture and all it entails, he also claims to believe in the authority of the natural world and carnality. What is also clear is that he is disgusted by the consequences of

surrendering to societal norms: the “padding about”, “sighing”, “sniffing” and “getting portly” speak of a life characterised by resignation and boredom. Once a man has been ‘castrated’ by society, he no longer has the compulsion to seek out opportunities for sex. He no longer has the instincts that mark his masculinity and motivate him to participate in the “ritual that men and women play out with each other” (12). A man whose ‘nature’ has been taken away from him has no reason to make an effort with his appearance and thus gaining weight and becoming “portly” are inevitable. His ambivalence about sex is confirmed when Lucy asks him whether he has always felt that he would sooner be dead than have his sexual desires inhibited. He responds as follows: “No, not always. Sometimes I have felt just the opposite. That desire is a burden we could well do without” (90). By describing desire as a burden, David alludes to the frustration experienced by the one who desires. Unsatisfied desire can lead to frustration and perhaps even obsession, causing a person to become consumed by it. In this state, a person might be willing to compromise too much – in his case, a reputation and career – for momentary pleasure.

From this conversation, it is evident that David had seldom – if ever – considered the burden that desire places on the desired. Soraya and Melanie undoubtedly experience the weight of his desire, not just physically but emotionally. He intrudes on Soraya’s personal life by paying a detective agency to track her down and acquire her personal details and, as my discussion has shown, his impulses negatively impact Melanie’s. His failure to mention how the person who is at the receiving end of what he claims to be uncontrollable desire may be affected is significant, especially in the context of Lucy’s approaching rape. Since the reader is not privy to Soraya’s and Melanie’s points of view, their sides of the story are never heard. From David’s perspective, what transpired between him and Melanie was an intoxicating experience in which desire determined his thoughts and actions. But for both women, their time with David is likely associated with intimidation and fear. We know this not only from the charges Melanie makes against him and Soraya’s angry insistence that he never contact her again but also from how the women respond to his advances.

The fact that Lucy’s rape interrupts her conversation with David about desire is important. It is as if Lucy’s rape makes him aware of how he has wronged Melanie and Soraya who are absent and unable to voice how their experience with him had affected them. The incident forces him to identify emotionally – not merely intellectually – with the victims of violence and, in some way, to subject himself to their experience (Heaney

147–48). Before the rape, he still thinks of Melanie and Soraya in strictly sexual terms, experiencing a “shudder of voluptuousness” at the thought of Melanie (*Disgrace* 78), and imagining how charming a polyamorous relationship between him, Melanie and Soraya might be (88), but after the rape he seems to become more reflective. When he is locked up in the bathroom during the attack, he is suddenly aware of the victim’s experience and concerned for Lucy’s safety. He cries out to her but gets no response and is troubled by a vision of her being held down, struggling against the men. What is notable about David’s distress in this instance is that he has done to Melanie what he is now worried is being done to Lucy. Moreover, locked up as he is, he is forced to learn what it feels like to be defenceless – the victim of another’s power and desire. In this respect, David undergoes what Melanie has and what Lucy is now undergoing, albeit not to the same extremity. The below passage shows how David’s forceful sex with Melanie is mirrored in his daughter’s rape, at least from his point of view:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette’s. [...] “No, not now!” she says, struggling. [...] But nothing will stop him. (24–25)

Injured and physically constrained, there is nothing he can do to protect Lucy against the three intruders and the thought of what might be happening to her alarms him. He calls her until “he can hear an edge of craziness in his voice” (97). While it is probable that the reader will draw a parallel between Melanie’s and Lucy’s rapes, the narrator does not. We are not told whether the thought ever occurs to David, but the fact that the same word – “intruder” – is used to describe both him and the three men encourages the reader to consider the similarities (see Lopez, *Visitation* 161).

When Lucy opens the bathroom door to release David after their assailants have left, her demeanour toward him is different. Contrary to what one might expect, she does not tell him anything about what had happened to her. For the most part, she ignores him as she tends to the injured and slaughtered dogs (*Disgrace* 97). For him, it is unfortunate that mere hours before, he had made a case for desire and had tried to convince his daughter that sexual passion excuses a person from doing things that might be considered inappropriate or criminal by others. By doing this, he had unknowingly revoked his right to say anything about her rape since he had already justified and condoned the very crime

of which his daughter was now a victim. In Lucy's eyes, we may justifiably assume, David now embodies the perpetrator – that is, the men who rape women. When he tries to embrace her and, ironically, exclaims “My dearest child!”, she wriggles loose “decisively” (97). At this moment, we are reminded of David's earlier admission that Melanie is “[n]o more than a child” (20). Melanie is someone's child, just as Lucy is David's. In this role reversal, he experiences first-hand what Mr Isaacs, Melanie's father, must have felt when he confronted David about sexually assaulting his daughter. When he tries to embrace Lucy a second time, she is “stiff as a pole, yielding nothing” (99).

López has noted how Lucy's refusal to talk to David about the attack might be an attempt to protect her story, and thus her inner space from also being violated (*Visitation* 164–65). He is desperate not only to find out what exactly had happened but also for her to report the rape. This prying, this search for her inner secret, could be interpreted as another form of violation and a means of gaining access to her last remaining sense of privacy or ownership. It is notable that, during his hearing, David is questioned in a manner similar to the way in which he is now questioning Lucy. When the committee interrogates him, he evades their questions and refuses to confess, possibly also trying to protect his inner space from being intruded (see *Visitation* 163–65).

But Lucy's silence in the novel might also be the consequence of Coetzee's choice not to attempt representing her. As is the case with the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Lucy's unwillingness to share her thoughts and explain herself fully to the protagonist and focaliser – in this case David – means that the reader too is left with more questions than answers in their reading of her. Although we pity her, we cannot truly empathise with her since, like her father, we do not understand her unconventional reasoning. We as readers are thus also confronted with her otherness. Mike Marais proposes that, because David continues to misread Lucy, the reader is left with the task – the responsibility – of finding the true Lucy and determining the unsaid from the said. This, Marais continues to argue, is an impossibility because the singularity of the other infinitely exceeds any attempt at conceptualisation (“Imagination” 84–87). Still, the gesture of trying to understand Lucy is arguably the most ethical position we as readers can assume.

It could be contended that Lucy's disengagement and bitterness toward David reflect what we might reasonably assume to also be Soraya's and Melanie's feelings toward him. Because he did not empathise with their experiences, he never knew – or was willing to

hear – how his actions affected them. Lucy, however, is in a position that allows her to express her resentment and, perhaps for the first time, he is confronted with the victim's reactions and emotions. Marais describes David's experience as follows: "Lurie, who knows what it is like to be a rapist, does not know what it is like to be a rape victim. This is what he has to discover in the course of the novel—despite his conviction that he is too old and set in his ways to learn anything new" ("Imagination" 76).

It is also conceivable that Lucy's trauma affects him only because she is his child, and he is caught in a situation from which he cannot escape, though it is worth mentioning that David also thinks of Melanie as a child when she arrives at his house and sleeps in Lucy's bedroom. The morning after her arrival, he comforts her when she sobs in his arms. He says to her: "There, there...[.] Tell me what is wrong" – almost, "Tell Daddy what is wrong" (*Disgrace* 26). Nevertheless, it is Lucy, not Melanie, who brings him closer to self-awareness and possibly even repentance.

Justice and Grace

As I have indicated above, there is a clear link between Melanie's and Lucy's rapes. However, when David sexually assaults Melanie, he fails to show remorse and seeks to justify and mask his transgressions by claiming that he had been 'possessed' by a mythological power greater than himself. His interest in the work and lives of Romantic poets is therefore the lens through which he conveniently chooses to view the incident and his involvement in it. But when Lucy is raped, his earlier justifications for rape collapse as he adopts a different attitude that has nothing to do with mythology and poetry but everything to do with law and order.

Therefore, if *Waiting for the Barbarians* problematises the pursuit of justice when the self is implicated in the suffering of the other, *Disgrace* explores the possibility of justice for the other when the self has committed the same offence for which they now, in a different context, demand justice. The Magistrate never directly participates in the torture of the barbarians although his alliance with and position in the Empire's government means that he is complicit in their crimes, regardless of whether he agrees with their practices or not. It seems, then, that his pursuit of justice is somewhat more legitimate and less hypocritical than David Lurie's. The latter not only infringes the Criminal Law that prohibits rape and indecent assault, but also violates the university's code of conduct. But

apart from committing a legal offence, his relationship with Melanie is also an ethical betrayal as he refuses to take responsibility for and acknowledge her as an embodied human being (Graham 438). Despite inherently condoning rape by justifying his coercive sexual relationship with Melanie, however, he appeals to and wants the law to be applied to Lucy's case.

When Melanie's boyfriend Ryan confronts him long after the attack, David still seems to overlook the obvious similarities between what had happened to Lucy and what he had done to Melanie. López has observed how, while he views his daughter's assailants in animalistic terms, he thinks about his physical relationship with Melanie as reciprocal (*Visitation*, 166–167). David is convinced that Lucy's rapists are driven by their testicles "bulging with seed" (*Disgrace* 199), whereas, in his encounters with Melanie, he considers himself motivated by "the force that drives the utmost strangers into each other's arms" (194). When he thinks about his sexual relationship with Melanie, he romanticises the idea of procreation, contemplating the seed that "bring[s] the future into being", but in the context of Lucy's rapists, it is the seed of hatred and chaos (194, 199). David's hypocrisy is further emphasised when he is infuriated by Ryan's warning that he should, "Stay with [his] own kind" (194). In this scenario, he considers the "force" that brings people together, regardless of their race or age, yet he does not apply the same principle to his daughter's rape. Since she is white and her attackers black, there is an additional layer of offence in David's mind. Undoubtedly still influenced by the apartheid ideology he was raised in, he views the rape of a white woman by black men as a 'soiling', as a marking "like a dog's urine" (199). Yet, as a white man, he does not think about his sexual relations with coloured women such as Soraya and Melanie in the same manner. According to him, he was acting as a "*servant of Eros*" (89) when he had sex with Melanie whereas what happened to Lucy is a crime that deserves to be punished (see Attridge, *Ethics* 171). In questioning her unwillingness to report the rape, David tells his daughter: "Lucy, my dearest, why don't you want to tell? It was a *crime*. There is no shame in being the object of a *crime*. You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party" (*Disgrace* 111; emphasis added). He is unequivocal in his consideration of Lucy's rape as a "crime" but fails to see his violation of Melanie as such.

It is these circumstances that complicate David's pursuit of justice for Lucy. The very reason he visits the farm is to seek refuge from the scandal his sexual exploitation of Melanie has produced. This presents a dilemma for him not only because he has been

accused of a similar offence but also because of his conversation with Lucy in which he made a case for the “rights of desire” (*Disgrace* 89). Now that he has admitted to his daughter that he would rather be dead than live a life of sexual restraint (89–90), one would expect him to proceed cautiously when it comes to demanding justice for the sexual transgression of another. It is curious, then, that David is unwavering in trying to persuade Lucy to report the rape, thereby hoping to achieve something like justice.

Claire Heaney notes how, following Lucy’s rape, David’s detached philosophical standpoint is reversed. Whereas he formerly expressed Romantic views on sex and desire, he has now become a “vigorous advocate of legal authority”, throwing into sharp relief the problems with his earlier attitudes (148–149). But, in addition to his Romanticism, his reliance on reason is also problematised:

Disgrace opposes abstract (or disembodied) modes of thought with the pragmatic, affective change in circumstance that Lurie is forced to undergo, grounding cognitive knowledge in the concrete circumstances of the individual life. Only from this emotionally engaged perspective can grace be achieved. As Elleke Boehmer argues, ‘In both this novel and *The Lives of Animals*, intellectual distance is the first safeguard of a self-regarding vanity; it must be sacrificed for true abnegation to be experienced.’ (Heaney 149)

Therefore, in addition to exchanging his misconceived philosophy of desire with an adamant demand for law and justice, David is forced to reconsider the utility of rationality and abstract thought. He must learn that it is not necessarily law and reason that bring about justice, but pragmatism and emotional engagement. Thus, in seeking justice for Lucy, his intellectual ability is of little value. It is precisely empathy and a practical approach to problem-solving that Lucy models as she takes care of the dogs and works on the farm. When they talk about her refusal to report the rape, he asks whether she is hoping for “private salvation” in keeping quiet. She responds by saying that things such as guilt and salvation are “abstractions” and that she does not “act in terms of abstractions” (*Disgrace* 112). She makes it clear that, as far as she is concerned, the realm of philosophical ideas has little relevance in “the concrete circumstances” of her situation.

The novel thus draws our attention to David’s and Lucy’s contrasting approaches to the rape. As the victim of the crime, one would expect the latter to demand justice for the trauma she has endured, and yet we see the opposite. While David seeks the protection of the law, Lucy considers her rape as a “purely private matter” that belongs to neither the

realm of ideas nor the sphere of the law (*Disgrace* 112). Michelle Kelly points out that the only right Lucy claims is the right not to have to justify herself and be put on trial (164).

According to Levinas's thought, we might say that, concerning Lucy's rape, David exerts the characteristics of the totaliser who seeks power, control and order (Levinas, *Totality* 17). Alphonso Lingis describes Levinas's problem with a totalising manner of thinking as follows:

Systematic thinking, no doubt, has its place. It is required for the establishment of those power structures which satisfy necessary needs. But when absolutized in this way and applied to free men, it constitutes violence... [.] Slavery is the dominance of the neutral and impersonal over the active and personal. [...] We do not *need* to know the other person (or thing) as he is in himself, and we shall never know him apart from acting with him. But unless we *desire* this, and go on trying, we shall never escape from the subjectivism of our systems and the objects that they bring before us to categorize and manipulate. (*Totality* 18)

David wants to resolve the matter systematically, according to the law, but from Lucy's perspective, this is the wrong course of action, one that might perpetuate violence and that is, in itself, a form of violence inflicted on her as a free person. In this instance, he believes that the law, which is neutral and impersonal, will be more effective and is of greater value than Lucy's personal approach and the case that she makes in the here and now. Even though, as an other, she is infinitely unknowable to him, he will continue to be confronted with the limitations of his understanding and systems of classification unless he develops a desire to know her. If he is to pursue an ethical engagement with his daughter, he must adopt the approach of the infinitiser, that is, by acquiring an attitude of openness and a readiness to receive and learn.

Two assumptions emerge from David's insistence on leaving the matter of Lucy's rape up to the law. First, as Michelle Kelly notes, he seems to equate the law with justice. He believes that, if the rape were reported and entrusted to the procedures of the law, there would be justice for Lucy. If this were not so, he would not have bothered to appeal to its authority. But, as I have previously discussed, for Derrida, it is erroneous to conflate the two concepts because of the singularity – the uniqueness – of every case (164). The law comprises a set of standardised rules that can be applied but cannot establish justice, for justice requires a new 'rule' tailored to the individuality of each case. Yet justice is impossible because it is unforeseeable and always surprises. There is no way of

identifying justice since it has no formula or pattern. In other words, there is no way of knowing what it should look like or how it will arrive since each case is different (“Force of Law” 10–23). Therefore, it is my contention that, even if Lucy agreed to report the rape and allowed the law to run its course, justice would still not have been achieved. This is not to say that there is no justice for her. On the contrary: I believe justice arrives, though not in the manner that either of the two could have anticipated or are consciously aware of.

Second, David’s preoccupation with the law also suggests that he trusts – perhaps naively – in its ability to bring about the desired outcome. He believes that the law is a transcendental presence that can resolve the dispute objectively and independently – outside the realm of human relationships (Kelly 164). This again reveals his focus on “abstractions” rather than the practical workings of society and the lived experiences of people. The point the novel seems to make is not that South Africa is a lawless place, but that the law is not a uniform, neutral entity (167).

While David wants Lucy’s rapists to be punished by the law, it is unclear whether he realises that he too deserves punishment. Although he never admits to violating Melanie just as Lucy’s rapists had violated her, there is evidence to suggest that, in the second part of the novel, personal transformation takes place. At the start of the novel, while he is still in Cape Town, he is subjected to a hearing and public shame, yet it seems that these external forms of discipline or the pressure to conform to societal norms do not contribute to the change we begin to perceive after his arrival on the farm. Indeed, when his conduct is brought under scrutiny, he mocks and dismisses the authority that admonishes him. Claire Heaney has noted the following about his attitude toward the university’s investigation: “Lurie’s resistance to the procedural norms of the inquiry signals not only his resistance to institutionalized standards of justice [...] but also his wider refusal to recognize that his affair with Melanie has public as well as private ramifications” (145). It is thus clear that, before Lucy’s rape, David disregards the authority that questions his sexual conduct. His callous attitude is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that a few members of the investigating committee seem to sympathise with him rather than Melanie, and thus their inquiry comes across as tentative, and ultimately fails to elicit self-awareness and remorse on his part.

In contrast to his stubbornness toward the committee, once he leaves Cape Town and settles into his new life on the farm, we begin to perceive a shift in his attitudes. Although Lucy’s rape undoubtedly escalates certain aspects of David’s development, her lifestyle

and worldview begin influencing him almost as soon as he arrives on the farm. We notice how he changes in, for example, the “obscure empathy” he has for Katy, the abandoned bulldog in Lucy’s care. We can assume that he had little to do with animals in the city, so his observation of Lucy’s values, particularly the welfare she extends to animals, unexpectedly softens him (see Attridge, *Ethics* 175–76). Later, we again witness his change of heart when he reflects on the inexplicable “bond” that develops between himself and the two sheep Petrus plans to slaughter for the celebration of his acquisition of land. David realises that “suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (*Disgrace* 126).

David is thus surprised by his transformation, proving that he had no intention of changing. He did not arrive on the farm looking to change, and yet this is what happens. In the context of his new relation to animals, Attridge notes how David “finds himself relinquishing intellectual control in obedience to a dimly perceived demand that comes from somewhere other than the moral norms he has grown up with” (*Ethics* 176). As is the case with many of Coetzee’s protagonists, David’s transformation suggests that, at least on some level, he has encountered the limitations of living the life of the mind, that is, that it does not help one navigate the complexities of life and establish meaningful relationships with other beings (Leist and Singer 226). His new relationship with animals signals an attitude of humility, which prepares him to begin acknowledging his morally corrupt state (Heaney 149).

Earlier in the novel, David claims that he is “not receptive to being counselled” (*Disgrace* 49), yet we see even this aspect of him developing. He shares his concerns with Bev, a woman he had previously ridiculed, and even lets her counsel him (140). She tells him that he cannot watch over Lucy forever and assures him that she is safe with Petrus – advice he ends up taking. Alice Cray has observed how, after the attack, David’s physical and emotional vulnerability makes him open to social gestures of warmth that he otherwise would have ridiculed. When Bev tends to his wounds, he expresses appreciation for her soothing touch and the peacefulness this brings about, no longer focused on her appearance or primitive care methods (Leist and Singer 259). Regarding his subsequent sexual relationship with Bev, Graham points out how this, too, signals a change that David undergoes in the course the novel. While his earlier encounters are marked by unreciprocated desire, exploitation and irresponsibility, his sexual relations with Bev are consensual and responsible (443).

Toward the end of the novel, David not only accepts Lucy's decision to marry Petrus and keep the baby but also expresses a hope to be a better grandfather than a father. He has, therefore, already accepted Lucy's unborn child as part of their family, putting the past behind him and moving forward in a new way (*Disgrace* 217–18). It is also noteworthy that, in terms of being a grandfather, he admits that "There may be things to learn" (218). This attitude of openness contrasts sharply with the former David whose temperament, we were told, was "not going to change" (2). The fact that he is willing to assume his role as grandfather to a child born of rape also demonstrates how his thinking has shifted since the attack.

Even though his personal development as a character is minimal, it is my contention that David's engagement with Lucy as an other is what brings about this change, what disturbs him from being at home with himself (see Levinas, *Totality* 39). Lucy seemingly has no intention of changing her father or persuading him of the legitimacy of her way of life, and therefore we seldom see her outrightly correcting him or challenging his ideas. She often simply asks questions. Yet, the more he engages with her, the more his mindset shifts. In this context, the novel seems to be suggesting that personal transformation is not brought on by institutional forms of discipline and punishment but rather by an individual's relationship with others – one's confrontation with the alterity of an other. Alphonso Lingis describes Levinas's understanding of the encounter with alterity as follows: "[I]t is especially as pain that Levinas conceives the impact of alterity. It is being shaken in the complacency and pleasure of contentment. Being exposed to the other is being exposed to being wounded and outraged" (xxiv). David's encounter with Lucy produces psychological/emotional discomfort, if not pain.

Crary has noted how, after the attack, David's "manner of interacting in the world begins to change and he starts to catch a glimpse, however limited, of the kind of effort that might allow him to surmount his cognitive shortcomings". She goes on to argue that, although he makes "little progress in overcoming the limitations of his emotional repertoire", he starts to "position himself to discern" toward the end of the novel (Leist and Singer 257–58). Marais seems to agree with Crary in proposing that David develops a "sympathetic imagination", however "faltering", following the assault on him and Lucy, and eventually manages to see the rape from her perspective ("Imagination" 77).

But apart from Lucy's lifestyle and worldview, it is also the degree to which she extends *grace* to her attackers that changes David. Derek Attridge points out how the idea

of grace (also, of course, present in the word “disgrace”) has a ghostly presence in the novel (*Ethics*, 178). Lucy’s unwillingness to press rape charges, confront Petrus and Pollux, and give up on the farm is reminiscent of Derrida’s philosophy of forgiveness. For him, forgiveness is ‘pure’ only when it is wholly disruptive: “Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality” (*Cosmopolitanism*, 32). Lucy’s unwillingness to report the rape is both disruptive and extraordinary, suggesting perhaps that her forgiveness is unadulterated. It deeply unsettles David and is contrary to what anyone might have expected from the victim of rape. Her decision not to inform the police is also an interruption of how such incidents had historically been dealt with. During the apartheid regime and perhaps some time after, the rape of a white woman by black men would likely have been front page news, and thus Lucy possibly wishes to avoid media coverage that is likely to reduce her story to one that perpetuates the racist stereotype that black men are out to rape white women.

Therefore, rather than viewing Lucy’s refusal to report her assailants as an act of grace, Graham suggests that her decision to do so signals her unwillingness to participate in a history of gender and racial oppression. The novel alludes to the problem of women being viewed as property who can be protected only in the context of belonging to a man. Thus, being a lesbian, she is considered ‘unowned’ and a target for attack (439). Perhaps Lucy’s refusal to speak about – and thus arguably perpetuate the rape narrative – may be read as her understanding of the domination and possession that rape implies. By keeping quiet, she resists being seen as a victim, as something that can be owned and penetrated. It seems that she is more concerned about putting an end to the stereotype of violence associated with South African society than with retribution or preventing her perpetrators from getting away with their crimes. As Lopez contends:

Coetzee’s novel [...] suggests that radical and unconditional acts of friendship and hospitality are needed in order to transform the unfair structures of power that have characterized South African society for so long, and it asks: Will we dare to invite to our home those we have always regarded as intrusive visitors? Can we be friends now, here, “in this place, at this time [...] this place being South Africa” (112)? (*Visitation* 172)

In this context, Lucy displays an extreme form of selflessness that is also starting to surface – however slightly – in David. In my view, it is especially her apparent radical

willingness to forgive that alters him. After living with Lucy for a while, witnessing her trauma, and being frustrated with what he views as passivity on her part, something other than desire begins to take hold of him. Attridge alludes to this when he notes how “*something* leads him in his ‘state of disgrace’ to undertake a life of toil in the service of others” (*Ethics* 181; emphasis added). This new selfless motivation of his, Attridge goes on to argue, is not about achieving an outcome such as bettering the world but about an “openness to experience and to the future” (182). What David seems to be undergoing is what Levinas would describe as the consequence of an encounter with alterity: he is being contested and questioned by Lucy’s otherness, which prepares him to begin listening to and receiving from her.

While these developments in David do not improve Lucy’s position or ensure a better future for her, they might be related to the issue of justice in the novel. Her refusal to report the rape means that her perpetrators are left unpunished, yet justice arrives in the form of the change we perceive in David. Although there is limited justice for Melanie as far as her rape is concerned and arguably no tangible justice for Lucy, it could be argued that David’s development suggests that the people and beings around him will be better off. Now that he is no longer controlled by his sexual desires and his Romantic conceptions of love have to some extent been eroded, the women he encounters, including Lucy, will no longer have to bear the burden of his perversion and selfishness.

CHAPTER 4: *FOE*

In the preceding two chapters, I focused on the relationships between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and David and Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*. As I have pointed out, there are similarities between the above protagonists: both are well-educated, middle-aged men whose complicated relationships with younger women confront them with a moral dilemma. I have argued that both navigate their predicament by adopting a different mindset and, consequently, a more ethical, responsible approach to the characters by whose otherness they are challenged. The self-figures, that is, the Magistrate and David, become increasingly self-aware and responsible in their engagement with these women who challenge their ideologies and structures of knowledge. I am thus of the opinion that, if justice were indeed possible, it is perceived in the personal transformation of the selves in question. After the Magistrate sees the barbarian girl in a dream, he perceives her alterity and returns her to her people. He also confronts Colonel Joll publicly and pleads for mercy and justice for the barbarians. David Lurie's exposure to Lucy softens him, making him kinder to people and animals and more open to a future that he could not previously conceive of.

In contrast to the above two novels, the protagonist and narrator in *Foe* is a woman, Susan Barton, who is stranded on an island where she encounters two male characters – Cruso and his African manservant Friday. As I hope to show, they confront her, in different ways, with the problem of logocentrism, which, as I referred to in the introduction, is the Western metaphysical tradition and its problematic assumptions. Unlike the other two protagonists discussed in this thesis, she fails to respond ethically to Cruso's and Friday's otherness and instead attempts to bring them into conformity with her Western worldview, particularly as it pertains to her belief in the preeminence of Western culture and language. The result of this is that, despite her intentions and attempts to advocate for them, she does not manage to 'save' Cruso and teach Friday to communicate. Nevertheless, as I shall argue, Friday's silence means that he is his own advocate, and the ending of the novel points us away from logocentrism in the way that the concluding chapter proves uninterpretable, and the logical storyline disintegrates. What starts as a travel memoir ends in a dream-like vision by an unknown narrator – one that resists any attempt at a definitive reading. As I will show, the novel's open ending and resistance to determinate interpretation provides a semblance of justice for Friday in that it

points to his transcendence of cultural conformity. Moreover, in the final chapter, Friday ends up having the last ‘say’ when the narrator considers how his body is its ‘own sign’ and the text becomes, like him, wholly inaccessible.

Derrida, Signification and the Infinitude of Language

Before I discuss *Foe*, it might be useful to briefly explain the relevance of Derrida’s deconstruction to my reading of the novel. Signification is a central concept in deconstruction and will be used to consider the differences, in *Foe*, between the various characters’ assumptions about language and culture in the Western world.

Writing and language form an ‘economy of signs’, and in Derridean thought, a sign always points to an infinite number of other signs, never only to itself (see Attridge, *Acts* 79). For Derrida, this continuous referral is applicable to writing and reading: words (signs) do not consistently point to things in our external reality (referents), but rather signs are engaged in an endless process of non-linear back and forth signification among themselves, an interplay neither author nor reader, sender nor receiver, has command over (Butler xii). This constant exchange is expressed through *différance*, which refers to the circumstance of a sign deriving meaning from what it is not (how it differs from other signs) and to its state of constant deferral – the idea that a sign has no self-presence and that its ‘meaning’ is never fully present. This deferral may also be described as a sign’s refusal to place itself in the present, and thus to be manifest (Van Niekerk, 3; 20–21). Paradoxically, a sign resists presenting itself in the present by ‘showing’ the thing while simultaneously pointing to the absence of the thing it is meant to represent. *Différance*, then, occupies the space between presence and absence and describes the ‘the condition of being according to which “there is no experience of pure presence, but only chains of differential marks”’ (Watkin, 18). What deconstruction aims to do is to interrupt that moment where signs are supposedly pinned down and given a definitive meaning. Grounded in this idea that a sign does not have a self-present meaning, deconstruction views language as a sovereign entity that is independent of the one who speaks, writes or thinks. What the sender means to convey in the present is not consistently relevant because of the *iterability* of the linguistic expression (Derrida, “Signature” 7). Because all linguistic phrases are repeatable, they can be used in any future context – or have been used in the past – in which they could have meant something different. The linguistic

expression therefore cannot have a coherent meaning because the context in which it is used always introduces a unique, unknown set of signs which affect the way in which any one particular sign is interpreted (2–3). This state of infinite, unpredictable signification then invariably has a bearing on our engagement with language.

As far as the written word is concerned, Derrida argues that the very composition of a text is at odds with itself because the markers of language (signs) do not point to agreed-upon external referents, but always to multiple other signs, and therefore extrapolating a single meaning is impossible (“Signature” 2–12). The idea of presence in a literary text often emerges in the form of meaning: scholars and critics in the Western tradition tend to elevate the meaning of a text (which could also take the form of a political system or ideology) above all other elements, including form, which implies that a ‘truth’, a unifying logic, about the text is available somewhere and that it is possible to access this logic. Derrida’s claim that ‘there is no outside-text’ does not suggest that there is no meaning, but that there is no transcendental signified outside of the text which gives it additional or superior meaning. It is only among the endless chain of substituting signs within a text that we may find some meaning, albeit unstable and by no means fully present (Van Niekerk 24).

As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, in Coetzee’s novel, Susan’s belief in the absolute meaning of signs and, more broadly, the stability of language, cause her to fundamentally misunderstand Cruso and Friday who, as I shall argue, are respectively other than the West and other than language.

Susan Barton: A Story of the Self

The first chapter of *Foe* describes Susan’s account of the island. Written in the form of a letter to Mr Foe, the author she solicits to write their story, she relays her experiences, describing in detail the moment that Friday discovers her washed out on the shore until they are found and taken back to England. It soon becomes apparent, however, that she might not be the most reliable of narrators. Her assumptions about Friday, for example, expose her colonial mindset. She considers the possibility that, because he is a Negro, he might be a cannibal who is plotting her demise. This premature identification of him as a cannibal is what Mike Marais suggests is the result of “projective intentionality”. Marais describes this construction as follows: “[I]n intending Friday in this way, Barton

consolidates herself, shields herself against his alterity. By containing his otherness, she is able to *recognize* Friday and thereby affirm herself and the community of which she is a part” (*Secretary* 76). Her classification of him as a predatory man-eater (and likely herself as a sophisticated woman of the modern world) is a totalising gesture that eliminates the possibility of meaningful engagement with him. She thus makes herself unavailable to receive him and the effect that his otherness might have on her, which could be interpreted as an attempt to maintain control over herself and her environment. By labelling Friday in this manner, she feels more secure in herself and her social background.

Moreover, when she talks about the diversity of life on the island, she says: “So if the company of brutes had been enough for me, I might have lived most happily on *my* island” (*Foe* 8; emphasis added). Her reference to *her* island reveals her colonial background and the drive for possession that it involves. But what is curious is that she claims this even after she is discovered – and saved – by someone who was evidently there before her. For her, the fact that Friday is a Negro and a “child” (39) disqualifies him as the owner of the island, and thus she disrupts the host-guest relationship when she refers to the place as her property. He shows her hospitality by leading her to Crusoe’s encampment where she is given water, food and shelter. The very act of being able to welcome her and invite her into their home confirms his position as host and hers as guest, yet she disregards this.

However, upon meeting Crusoe and seeing that he is a European (8), she is quite happy to accept that he, rather than she, is the rightful owner of the island. She now refers to “his island” and to herself as his “subject” (11), establishing that he is the host and she the guest. Her willingness to relinquish her ‘ownership’ of the island to Crusoe, a European man, and to refer to him rather than Friday as her “saviour” (13), is telling of her patriarchal, paternalistic cultural orientation.

Despite wanting to claim the island, Susan does not like what she finds there: the weather is unpleasant and the lifestyle too primitive. She thinks back fondly of England and is desperate to return because, for her, the Western world is familiar and comfortable. She articulates her idealisation of the West when she says, “The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Crusoe’s island” (26). The ‘firmness of the earth’ is her expression of trust in Western culture, while she conceives of the island as perilous and uncivilised. She also finds that the people on the island are lacking in language and conversation. She writes to Mr Foe as follows: “But who, accustomed to the fullness of

human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?" (8). Susan seems to dislike the natural world and its noises: "cawing", "screeching" and "barking" are negative descriptions associated with the experience of sound. From her perspective, these sounds are empty compared to the "fullness" of language. This also signals her logocentric understanding of language as being fully present, that is, that meaning is transcendent and stable.

In addition to her preoccupation with language and speech, we also sense her allegiance to Western values when she begins enquiring why Crusoe has not recorded his time on the island. He tells her that, instead of keeping a journal, he would leave behind his terraces and walls (18). She declares her disapproval as follows:

Let it not by any means come to pass that Crusoe is saved, I reflected to myself; for the world expects stories from its adventurers, better stories than tallies of how many stones they moved in fifteen years, and from where, and to where; Crusoe rescued will be a deep disappointment to the world; the idea of a Crusoe on his island is a better thing than the true Crusoe tight-lipped and sullen in an alien England. (34–35)

Susan thinks that Crusoe has a responsibility to share his story with those who "expect" it from travellers. Adventure stories must be told, despite the reservations of those who have lived through these adventures. She suggests that perhaps he should not be saved, for his unwillingness to tell his story will be a "disappointment", in which case the thought of him and the possibility of adventure are more exciting – even if only to the imagination. The "idea" of Crusoe suggests that Susan believes in the existence of a transcendental signified. According to her logocentric philosophy of language, the stories that might be told comprise signs that accurately point to the signified – the concept or mental image of Crusoe on his island. This vision of Crusoe as well as her assumptions about the transcendental signified are so deeply entrenched in her Western culture and consciousness that it overshadows reality, the "true Crusoe". Consequently, she thinks that perhaps people should not experience Crusoe as he really is but rather be left with the idea of him, for it will be less 'disappointing', more exciting.

When Susan, Crusoe and Friday are aboard the ship back to England, she again expresses her preference for excitement and adventure, perhaps at the cost of truthfulness:

[I]f we were nearer the heavens there, why was it that so little of the island could be called extraordinary? Why were there no strange fruits, no serpents, no lions? Why did the cannibals never come? What will we tell folk in England when they ask us to divert them? (43)

These questions testify to Susan's engrossment in the Western world's fascination with exaggerated travel narratives and a preoccupation with "remak[ing] Crusoe into a more saleable narrative commodity" (MacLeod 5). While she initially insists that their story should be based only on "truth", she begins exploring the possibility of changing it into a more entertaining tale when Mr Foe disappears and her desperation deepens. She writes: "How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances [...]" (*Foe* 67). She thus considers twisting the facts of the island to make her story more sensational and, by doing so, not disappointing the English and ensuring that she is "free[d] of Crusoe and Friday" (66). Marais argues that the discrepancy between Susan's experience of the island, that is, that it is dull, and her expectations of excitement and adventure that travel tales ought to evoke, alerts the reader to the mediated nature of her encounter with the island and the characters she finds there (*Secretary* 65). In other words, because she seems to be more concerned about producing a saleable story than giving an accurate account of the island, readers are aware that she might exaggerate – or worse still – tell lies in service of her agenda, despite claiming that she wants to tell the truth.

In addition to her Eurocentric worldview and obsession with adventure stories, Susan is overconfident in her interpretations of things. She displays limited openness to alternative ideas but instead filters everything she observes through her eighteenth-century English background, giving the contemporary reader the impression that she is ignorant and naïve. She does not believe Crusoe when he offers his reason for staying on the island, saying: "In truth it was not fear of pirates or cannibals that held him from making bonfires or dancing about on the hilltop waving his hat, but indifference to salvation, and habit, and the stubbornness of old age" (*Foe* 14). This is a radical statement to make considering that she knows so little about him. It is as if she wants to configure Crusoe and the story into the versions of her choosing, using phrases such as "in truth" (14) and the "simple truth" (27) to make her point of view seem credible. When she talks about the incessant wind on the island, she says that it does not bother the Patagonians because they are unaware that there are places in the world where the wind does not constantly blow, but it bothers her

because “[she] know[s] better” (15). Marais notes the following about her overconfident, Western perspective:

By means of his management of point of view, Coetzee from the first thus indicates Barton’s implication in culture, therefore exposing both the unreliability of her interpretations and her inability to respond hospitably to difference. What is staged in the novel by way of this representational strategy is the routine nature with which identifying thought subsumes the particularity of things within an already formed conceptual framework. Given its linguistic and discursive separation from the world, the subject is unable to accommodate strangeness [...]. Barton’s representations always involve a return to self, the same, ‘home’. (*Secretary* 66–67)

Here, Marais refers to how Susan’s cultural situatedness obscures her interpretation of Cruso and Friday, preventing her from responding ethically to their otherness. She evaluates them, finds their lifestyle and worldviews wanting, and attempts to subsume their difference into her conceptual framework to ultimately terminate it. Considered in this context, Susan is everything but a victim of oppression: in fact, her wanting to absorb the people around her into her world is closer to the thoughts and actions of a totaliser and oppressor. In explaining why she is not – as several scholars have claimed – a victim of hegemonic masculinity, Lewis MacLeod suggests that she is somewhat of an authoritarian who readily subjects others to narrative manipulation so long as she is the one doing the manipulating (5). But, as I have just argued, she wishes to control not only the story but also the people around her. She views Cruso – and especially Friday – as alien objects that are to be manoeuvred for her benefit and in service of her narrative (see *Totality* 12–13).

Susan’s boldness is further revealed in her obsession with her story and the confidence with which she initially tells it. Shortly after meeting Cruso, she says to him, “Let me tell you my story [...] for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I come to be here” (*Foe* 10). She assumes that he is interested in her and wants to know how she came to the island, but there is no evidence to suggest that this is true. Throughout the novel, she alludes to the larger story she is busy telling by saying, for example, “But let me return to my relation” (12). This creates the impression that the substories are not part of the ‘real’ story or the story that she wants to tell, drawing attention to its subjective, constructed nature. Stories, we are reminded, are not to be confused with reality.

But, despite Susan’s early certitude about her story, the reader also, at times, gets the sense that she is aware of her role as a character in a travel narrative. When she roams

around on the beach, she looks for passing ships but self-reflexively comments that “it seemed early yet for rescue to come” (20). She recognises herself as a character in a castaway story and knows that the rescue she refers to typically happens much later when the adventure has run its course. However, as the novel progresses and she loses control over her story and its characters, her “authoritarian stance and ontological certainty” diminishes (López, *Visitation* 189–190). Her manipulative inclination and overconfidence are thus increasingly replaced by confusion, vulnerability and a sense of dispossession. Therefore, towards the end of the novel, she seems to have lost the optimism she once had about the accuracy and credibility of her story.

Nevertheless, Susan’s interest in storytelling extends beyond just herself. After explaining how she ended up on the island, she informs Mr Foe that she would “gladly [...] recount [...] the history of this singular Cruso” if only his stories were not so “various” and incoherent (*Foe* 11). She claims to have heard his story firsthand but considers it invalid because “age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew what was truth, what fancy” (12). Her reservations about the truthfulness of his account remind us to question her version of events as well. Just as Cruso is the narrator of his stories, so too is she the narrator of the story we are reading, and Coetzee the creator of the story of which she is part. López describes the multidimensional quality of the novel as follows: “*Foe* constitutes a continuous metafictional reflection on the nature, function, and interpretation of narrative, and on the relation between storytellers and their stories” (*Visitation* 190). Through such self-referential strategies, Coetzee draws our attention to the problem of storytelling, and thus also the question of the authority of the author.

It seems that Susan’s longing to document her story is grounded in her fear of forgetting and being forgotten. Therefore, in trying to mitigate that fear, she urges Cruso to do the same. Keeping a record of his stay on the island would not only mean that he will not forget what he experienced but also that his story would endure, giving him a form of immortality. This is confirmed when, regarding the story she hopes Mr Foe will write, she tells Friday: “Is writing not a fine thing, Friday? Are you not filled with joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner?” (*Foe* 58). The urgency to capture Cruso’s story is even greater now that she, too, is stranded on the island and his fate is likely also hers. It appears that at the heart of Susan’s obsession is the desire for their time on the island to have meaning. Lonely, frustrated and heavily inconvenienced by the

rudimentary way of life, she hopes that their ordeal will not simply end with their deaths but somehow transcend the physical realm and live on through those who read about it. She confronts Cruso as follows:

Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some record of your years of shipwreck, so that what you have passed through shall not die from memory? And if we are never saved, but perish one by one, as may happen, would you not wish for a memorial to be left behind, so that the next voyagers to make landfall here, whoever they may be, may read and learn about us, and perhaps shed a tear? (17)

The fact that Susan considers telling Cruso's story – and presumably doing it justice – also suggests that she is oblivious not only to the subjectivity of stories but also to the problems involved in telling someone else's. By assuming that she would be able to give an accurate account of what had happened to Cruso, she reveals her mistaken belief in the credibility of stories and their relation to truth. When she and Cruso speculate about why Friday's tongue was cut out, he says to her:

Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment. *How will we ever know the truth?* (23; emphasis added)

Here, Cruso verbalises Coetzee's preoccupation with the unreliability of stories and challenges Susan's tendency to conflate fact and fiction (see *Visitation* 202). Her response to his question confirms her mistaken assumptions: "It's a terrible story [...]. Where is the justice in it? First a slave and now a castaway too. Robbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence. Was Providence sleeping?" (*Foe* 23) Cruso is cautious to make claims, using the word "perhaps" to signify his hesitation, while Susan ignores these cues and responds as if he had relayed the facts of Friday's life. Despite reiterating that what she had just heard is a story – as opposed to a real event – her language is dramatic and emotive. It seems out of place, then, that she would refer to such things as justice and providence when she has been told that the truth of the story is infinitely uncertain. Her reaction in this scene emphasises the extent to which she believes that stories reflect truth and language conveys meaning consistently.

Later, when Susan returns to England, her obsession with finding and soliciting the help of Mr Foe underscores her erroneous understanding of truth as well as the preeminence of authorial voice. She believes that, because Mr Foe is an acclaimed author, only he can accurately convey the truth of Cruso's story. This assumption exposes two mistaken beliefs on her part: first, that an author has legitimacy beyond anyone else and that, therefore, their words are trustworthy. And second, that the 'truth' of their story is somehow accessible – that it is a discernible, concrete fact that transcends the subjectivity of people (see Bishop 54–55). In her letter to Mr Foe, Susan appeals to him as follows:

When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. [...] Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth [...]. To tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through [...]. I have none of these, while you have all. (*Foe* 51–52)

It is ironic that she should describe herself as 'only' a witness considering that hers is likely the most accurate account there is since Friday is mute and Cruso, at this point, dead. Yet she believes that Mr Foe, who has neither been to the island nor knows the people he is asked to write about, will be able to give "substance" to their story. Her claim that, in order to "tell the truth in all its substance", one needs a quiet space makes her convictions about the authority of the writer seem even more absurd. The above excerpt also parodies the stereotype of the writer as one who has transcendent knowledge that the everyday person, like Susan, does not. Her ironic understanding of authorial authority makes precisely the opposite point, that is, that writers do not have special access to 'truth' and thus more credibility than anyone else.

Cruso: Other than the West

As previously mentioned, Cruso, like Susan, is a European, and therefore the first person to whom she expresses her urgency about storytelling. She assumes that, because he is of a similar social background as she, he must attribute the same value to the written and spoken word and therefore care equally as much about sharing their experience with others in the West. Much to her disappointment, she learns that this is not the case.

Since Susan introduces us to Cruso and hers is the only perspective we have, what we know about him remains limited throughout. Considering that she is the primary narrator and focaliser, readers are privy to her thoughts and thus they quickly get to know her. In contrast, Cruso seems always at a distance and outside of the readers' grasp. His mysterious presence is emphasised by her references to him as "singular" (11) and "stranger" (8), descriptions which echo Levinas's conceptions of alterity. Cruso, as is the case with Lucy in *Disgrace*, is not a postcolonial other (and cannot be read as such) since his otherness is not grounded in social and cultural differences. On the contrary, as a European man, he is akin to Susan in many ways. Unlike Friday who is a servant, Cruso is a free agent over whom she has no political or other power (see *Totality* 38–43).

Due to his limited representation and her perception of him as esoteric, Cruso remains inaccessible to the reader for the most part. But he also remains 'strange' because of her unreliability as a narrator. Since the reader cannot trust her observations, they must question the information that she provides about him. For her, he is other because his behaviour and reasoning differ from what she is accustomed to, but he is other to the reader because it is impossible for us to establish a sense of 'truth' about him. In this context, we might say that her unreliability amplifies his alterity and the lingering distance between him and her, and him and the reader. In my view, Cruso's separation from both Susan and the reader is a deliberate construct: Coetzee avoids representing otherness and thereby foreclosing it.

Susan first becomes frustrated with Cruso's otherness when she learns that, unlike her, he has no desire to leave the island. When she asks him why he has never made a boat with which to escape, he replies, "And where should I escape to?" while "smiling to himself as though no answer were possible" (*Foe* 13). She suggests that he might sail to Brazil, reestablishing himself in what she considers to be civilisation, yet his answer about where to escape to challenges her thinking by subverting the binary thinking typical of Western thought, that is, that the world is organised in terms of polarities such as civilisation and barbarism. For him, there might not be a need to escape because he perhaps does not believe he is lost and stranded in the first place. The utopian vision of returning to culture and civilisation, as if that were ideal, is put in question. Because the desire to be saved "burns in [her] night and day" (36), Susan is perplexed by his reasoning: "So I early began to see it was a waste of breath to urge Cruso so save himself. Growing old on his island kingdom with no one to say nay had so narrowed his horizon

[...] that he had come to be persuaded he knew all there was to know about the world” (13).

In my understanding, what she perceives as his failure to save himself is perhaps an indication of his openness to otherness and an alternative manner of existence. It is not that he wishes to perish alone on the island but rather that he thinks differently about life, what it means to be saved and lost, and perhaps even the meaning of life and death. His non-Western perspective on existence is accentuated when he says to Susan: “I ask you to remember, not every man who bears the mark of the castaway is a castaway at heart” (33). The point Crusoe is trying to make is that everything is not as it appears on the surface and, more broadly, that the distinctions between things are not definite. Susan thinks of salvation in strictly Eurocentric terms, that is, that being rescued and conveyed back to England should be the objective, whereas Crusoe is open to a life that differs from the norms of the West.

Therefore, if Susan is displeased with the fate that has “befallen” her (35), Crusoe seems to be content with the way things are. His terraces are “more than enough” (18), and so is his existence on the island. We learn about his meditative retreats to the Bluff where he stares out into the ocean, “losing himself in the contemplation of the wastes of water and sky”, while she “had not the temperament to love such emptiness” (37–38). Crusoe’s orientation toward the island is not one in which he wants to assert his autonomy and independence but rather one in which he ‘loses’ himself. In contrast to Susan, he appreciates the unspoiled beauty of the island, and his relationship to the ‘emptiness’ can be interpreted as his “‘yielding up of himself’ to the environment” (Marais, *Secretary* 71). His attitude toward and perspective on the land and the space he inhabits differs significantly from Susan’s. As I have already pointed out, she views the island as something to be possessed whereas he ‘yields himself’ to the environment without wanting to assume ownership. Her possessive inclination toward land is reiterated when, back in England, she explains to Friday how the people there indicate the limits of their property with “neatly marked out” gardens (*Foe* 60). She also teaches him how to cut hedges. Her preoccupation with landscaping thus reveals that she thinks of the natural world as something that needs to be ‘tidied up’ and subjected to human intervention. For her, the island represents disorder because it cannot be contained, and she experiences its vastness as ‘empty’. In this context, the island too is an other that she fails to absorb and make sense of since it is too infinite for her to conceptualise (see Marais, *Secretary* 73).

Susan's and Cruso's contrasting experiences of the island emphasise her restrictive outlook, that is, that the developed, 'civilized' world is aesthetically and otherwise superior. When she suggests that Friday dives down to the shipwreck to scavenge for tools or anything useful, Cruso dismisses the idea saying: "We have a roof over our heads, made without saw or axe. We sleep, we eat, we live. We have no need of tools" (*Foe* 32). From the wreck, Susan hopes to find something – a piece of technology from the Western world – that might help them escape the island, thus highlighting her reliance on the technology and industry associated with the West. Cruso, on the other hand, though "produced by merchant capitalism", refuses to be its "agent" (Spivak 7). In this regard, Marais suggests that

Cruso's indifference to the wreck [...] signifies his refusal, perhaps even inability, to transform the island, both technologically and conceptually. [...] In his encounter with it, Cruso does not violate the otherness of the island by integrating it into the cultural totality of 'home'. Instead, he respects the island's autonomy. (*Secretary* 73)

Susan's contrasting view of the wreck and, more broadly, Western technology is accentuated when, having returned to Europe, she introduces Friday to a tool, saying: "Feel the spade. Is it not a fine, sharp tool? It is an English spade, made in an English smithy" (*Foe* 59). Her fascination with "English" tools confirms her belief in the preeminence of Western culture, according to which she hopes to "educate [Friday] out of darkness and silence" (60).

In addition to their perspectives on being 'saved', one of the most prominent points of difference between Susan and Cruso, as I have already indicated, is their interest in stories and recording experiences. If she represents the storyteller and their drive to document and relay events, Cruso is certainly the other of that. As previously noted, when she arrives on the island, she wants to tell her story in more detail, but it seems that he is not interested in hearing it:

I would have told him more about myself too, about my quest for my stolen daughter, about the mutiny. But he asked nothing, gazing out instead into the setting sun, nodding to himself as though a voice spoke privately inside him that he was listening to. (13)

By not asking her anything about her story, Cruso reveals his lack of interest in what she shares. The fact that he stares at the sunset instead of engaging with her suggests that his mind is elsewhere, and, in the context of my earlier argument, it is likely that he is yet again ‘losing’ himself in the openness of his surroundings and listening instead to the ‘voice’ of the island. Much to her exasperation, she also finds no evidence that he is documenting his days on the island (16). She writes the following to Mr Foe:

What I chiefly hoped to find was not there. Cruso kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely, I now believe, because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it. I searched the poles that supported the roof, and the legs of the bed, but found no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon. (16)

Later, she confronts Cruso about the matter:

Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some record of your years of shipwreck, so that what you have passed through shall not die from memory? And if we are never saved, but perish one by one, as may happen, would you not wish for a memorial to be left behind, so that the next voyagers to make landfall here, whoever they may be, may read and learn about us, and perhaps shed a tear? (17)

Susan wants the “memorial” they leave behind to be a written record of their time on the island, but Cruso seems to have something more practical in mind. He tells her that the terraces and walls he builds will be “more than enough”, yet she does not believe that they will be worth crossing the ocean for (18). She wants their story to be heard while he is more interested in preparing the land for future people to cultivate. When she asks him what he will plant on the terraces he replies: “The planting is not for us [...]. The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them” (33). This future-oriented manner of thinking not only demonstrates his selflessness but also suggests an openness to whoever or whatever turns up. Cruso has no guarantee that someone will come, yet he prepares the land for them, enabling them to plant and have a better chance at survival. Rather than conceiving of the future as an extension of the present and thus the preservation thereof, he seems to accept the future as future. Susan fails to grasp this, however, deeming his building of the terraces a “stupid labour” (35).

In some sense, therefore, Crusoe's terraces undermine Susan's writing. As I have indicated, he has no interest in recording his experiences and thereby leaving behind a written memorial. But in addition to his disregard for the written word, he also seems to challenge the importance of the spoken word. One evening, as they prepare food, Susan asks him how many words Friday knows. He responds by saying, "As many as he needs [...]. This is not England, we have no need for a great stock of words" (21). When she enquires whether "the pleasures of conversation" might not have relieved his solitude and whether he did not think of introducing Friday to "the blessings of civilization", making him a "better man" (22), Crusoe ignores the question and instead instructs Friday to sing for her. But what she hears instead of words and a melody is a low-pitched hum, to which Crusoe responds, "The voice of a man" (22). Whereas Susan expects to hear language and derive meaning from the song, Crusoe is satisfied with what he hears and declares his servant a "man" despite his wordless song. It seems that, for Crusoe, language is not a prerequisite for communication or what defines a person as a human being. Susan's question about making Friday "better" by teaching him to speak, on the other hand, reveals the high value she places on language and speech.

Besides Crusoe's indifference to writing and speaking, he demonstrates no interest in any other form of communication (see Peterson 868). This is evident in what Susan considers to be his failure to teach Friday to communicate through, for example, sign language or arranging pebbles. She expresses her astonishment as follows:

Crusoe would not teach him because, he said, Friday had no need of words. But Crusoe erred. Life on the island, before my coming, would have been less tedious had he taught Friday to understand his meanings, as for example by gesturing with his hands or by setting out pebbles in shapes standing for words. Then Crusoe could have spoken to Friday after his manner, and Friday responded after his, and many an empty hour been whiled away. (*Foe* 56)

Even after his death, Susan still cannot grasp why Crusoe never attempted to establish a system of communication between himself and Friday. She believes that life on the island was "tedious" and that the hours were "empty", but, as I have aimed to show, this was not Crusoe's experience. For him, teaching Friday to communicate might have constituted an act of domination. Because the former is a European and the latter a 'Negro', Susan assumes that the relationship between them should necessarily be one of dominance and subservience. In this regard, Marais argues that Susan has fundamentally misunderstood

the relationship between Cruso and Friday and that the lack of conflict between them suggests that they acknowledge each other's right to exist and have managed to establish an "ethical community" (*Secretary* 70).

Friday: Other than Language

Contrary to Cruso whose alterity is not predicated on cultural and social difference, Friday can and has been regarded as a postcolonial other. This is not only because he is an African who has, as far as we know, been enslaved most of his life, but also because he is Cruso's mute servant with seemingly no autonomy or means of expressing himself. Consequently, many scholars have read the novel in strictly postcolonial terms, viewing Friday, like Caliban in *The Tempest*, as an archetypal figure of colonial oppression (see Attridge, *Ethics* 70). Although my argument touches on the postcolonial dimension of *Foe*, it is Friday's continued silence as well as Susan's obsession with eradicating it that the following two subsections are concerned with.

As previously discussed, Susan's perception of Friday is formulated as soon as she is introduced to him. She recognises that he is "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool", a "flat face" and "dull eyes" (*Foe* 5–6). After he escorts her safely to Cruso's encampment, she pays little attention to him but becomes interested in his story when she hears his strange song. When he pauses for a moment, she asks Cruso: "Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?" (22). This reaction reveals that, for her, the ability to use language is directly related to intellectual ability. She assumes that, because he does not speak or use words in his song, he must be an "imbecile". The reply Cruso offers is that his tongue had been cut out by slavers, suggesting that perhaps the Moors had cut it out and eaten it as a "delicacy" or because they could no longer endure his "wails of grief". Susan soon regrets learning about Friday's ordeal, saying:

Hitherto I had found Friday a shadowy creature and paid him little more attention than I would have given any house-slave in Brazil. But now I began to look on him – I could not help myself – with the horror we reserve for the mutilated. It was no comfort that his mutilation was secret [...]. Indeed, it was the very secretness of his loss that caused me to shrink from him. I could not speak, while he was about, without being aware how lively were the movements of the tongue in my own mouth. [...] I covertly observed him as he ate, and with distaste heard the tiny coughs he gave now and then to clear his throat, saw how he did his chewing between his front teeth, like a fish. I

caught myself flinching when he came near, or holding my breath so as not to have to smell him. Behind his back I wiped the utensils his hands had touched. I was ashamed to behave thus [...]. Sorely I regretted that Cruso had ever told me the story. (24)

Before learning the reason for Friday's silence, Susan's impression of him is informed exclusively by her colonial belief system, that is, that he is just 'any' Negro slave. It is not surprising then that she only mentions him peripherally up to this point. But after hearing his story, she begins paying attention to him, despite herself and her sudden abhorrence at the thought of him. Therefore, in addition to being a Negro who is unable to speak and participate in conversation, Friday's tortured, mutilated body evokes for Susan horror as much as a sense of curiosity. In this context, Susan is comparable to the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who views the barbarian girl as "no longer fully human" following her torture and mutilation (94). But while the Magistrate has moments of empathy for the girl, it seems that Susan has othered Friday to the point of monstrosity. She compares him to a fish, suddenly notices his supposedly offensive smell and considers him filthy – wiping things he has touched. Therefore, while Susan disassociates with Cruso because of his non-Western views, she completely rejects Friday based on his tortured body, which also happens to render him incapable of speech. Christopher Peterson describes Susan's assumptions about the preeminence of language and the spoken word as follows: "According to Susan, language is essentially human; hence, to be bereft of speech is to dwell within an alienating silence that renders one less than human" (860).

It is perhaps for the above reason that Susan justifies her paternalistic approach to Friday. Not only is he a black slave, but he is also a 'less-than-human imbecile'. What is noteworthy, though, is that her derogatory behaviour and controlling tendencies do not seem to affect him at all. While he does what she asks of him, there is no indication that he is unsettled or offended by her patronising attitude, and thus he is, in some way, still free. Levinas describes the freedom of the other as follows: "Over [the other] I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal" (*Totality* 39). Therefore, although Friday is, in Susan's understanding, a servant and thus clearly at her 'disposal', he 'escapes her grasp' and seems to be indifferent to her words and actions. Scott Bishop attributes his freedom to his language 'deficiency', describing his impenetrability in this regard as follows: "Friday's freedom is completely entrenched

in his inability to use language, and he is impotent against any language. [...] We know nothing about his past or of his thoughts. He is an unmediated being, and his story is an unmediated story” (56). Bishop goes on to argue that, while Friday becomes the subject of interpretation both for other characters and readers, he remains resistant to any form of analysis. This, he proposes, is the result of Coetzee’s understanding of language as a tool of oppression. By creating a character who is unable to participate in the powerplay of language, the writer liberates him from the laws of that engagement.

Susan and Friday, therefore, differ in important ways. While she is preoccupied with communication and telling stories, he cannot (or perhaps would not) participate in any expression of language. Consequently, the one’s concerns and problems are wholly unrelatable to the other. She is adamant to take narrative control over her story, while his muteness and inability to use language make him a “non-narrator”. However, Lewis MacLeod suggests that there might be a benefit to his silence in that his story cannot be hijacked or mediated by someone else who will invariably obscure the ‘truth’ of it (6). It seems, then, that Susan runs a risk that Friday does not. MacLeod puts it as follows:

Friday’s silence prevents him from becoming the raw materials of someone else’s narrative. Given the proper amount of source material, Foe overwhelms Susan and takes over her story, but Friday’s silence is finally impenetrable, and, at the end of the novel, no one has “spoken the unspoken” (141) because no one can locate Friday well enough to manipulate him. Thus, he avoids becoming source material, or, worse still, “native informant”. (6)

While Friday’s silence protects his story from being told ‘incorrectly’ or by the wrong person, Susan’s obsession to share her island experience makes her story vulnerable to being ‘hijacked’. And this, we later learn, is precisely what happens when Mr Foe wants to turn it into the version of his choosing. Through this juxtaposition of Susan’s and Friday’s relationship with language (or, in Friday’s case, the lack thereof), Coetzee illustrates the limitations of language and its potential for ensnaring those who participate in it. What Susan hopes will empower her, that is, her written story, turns out to disempower her, while Friday’s silence means that he retains some dignity and, to some extent, resists subjugation (MacLeod 7). MacLeod argues that perhaps Friday is not tongueless but merely chooses not to speak. Since there is no evidence that what Crusoe says is true – and since Susan refuses to look into his mouth – there is no way of knowing

whether his mutilation is a fact. In light of this possibility, MacLeod describes the power of Friday's silence as follows:

[I]t becomes possible to read Friday's silence as an epic gesture of defiance, a gesture that dwarfs his unconventional writing and his erasing of the slate in terms of his unwillingness to communicate. If we imagine, at least provisionally, that Friday *does* have a tongue then his silence becomes a kind of heroic restraint, a triumph of individual agency against insistent demands that he participate in some kind of master narrative and the discourse it posits. (11–12)

If indeed Friday is silent by choice, some of the postcolonial commentaries on *Foe* are too reductive and determinate. In the context of Susan's loss of narrative control and her becoming increasingly disillusioned, it could be argued that Friday is the most resourceful and intelligent of the characters in the novel. Perhaps he is aware – as Coetzee seems to be – of the consequences of participating in the world of language: for example, the risk one runs of misunderstanding and being misunderstood or entrusting one's story to another who might decide to do something undesirable with it. This ties into Coetzee's broader argument about the inability of language and stories to capture the reality of lived experience – the story of Friday's tongue being a case in point. The characters in *Foe* assume that Friday has no tongue, as do many readers and critics. It is not that they have evidence to support this belief, but that the story of his mutilation has gained sufficient momentum, as it were, to be accepted as truth. Coetzee's problematisation of storytelling reminds us to be suspicious of language and aware of its inherent political power (see MacLeod 8–12).

Death, Alienation and the Possibility of Justice

About a year after Susan's arrival on the island and her learning about Friday's tongue, a merchant ship comes to her rescue. She and Cruso are taken aboard while Friday flees to the north shore when he sees the ship approaching. Because Cruso is ill with a fever at the time, he is carried aboard without his consent but, once he realises this, he tries to escape. He is too weak to resist the men holding him down, however, and is thus forced to leave the island against his will.

In my preceding discussion, I have argued that Cruso has no desire to be ‘saved’ and returned to Europe, and therefore it is no surprise that he dies not long after their departure. Yet Susan, despite knowing that he has no intention of leaving, insists on taking him along. If his fondness for the island was not adequately verbalised before, his devastation is made explicit when – though too ill to talk much – Susan sees him weeping on two occasions (*Foe* 43, 44). Because she is the only one who can communicate clearly by the time her rescue arrives, she decides his fate, namely that he should return to Europe. I therefore agree with MacLeod who suggests that, rather than struggling to make herself heard against the ‘patriarchal’ figure of Cruso, Susan reveals her tendency to want to dominate him when she effectively “kidnaps” him. In contrast to what some scholars have argued, MacLeod interprets Cruso as a rather helpless figure who is eventually overwhelmed “by a power greater than himself, a power wielded by Susan” (4–5). She not only kidnaps him but also instructs the men to find Friday to bring him aboard. We can assume that, because he attempts to hide, he does not want to be rescued either, yet Susan insists that he is a “slave and a child” who needs to be taken care of and not abandoned “to a solitude worse than death” (*Foe* 39).

The novel’s preoccupation with the violence of narration and storytelling is emphasised in Susan’s forcing of her two companions to return to England with her. Just as she gets the merchantmen to physically constrain them, so too she confines them on a textual level by imprisoning them in her story. Her obsession with salvation and producing a sensational travel narrative consumes her to such an extent that she is willing to violate their autonomy. In this context, what Susan is doing is colonising them, bringing them back to ‘civilisation’ and the Western world because, according to her, “life in England is better than life ever was on the island” (41). Up to this point, Susan’s ignorance and self-pity have prevented her from empathising with Cruso, but we see a glimmer of insight when she writes:

On the island I believe Cruso might yet have shaken off the fever, as he had done so often before. For though not a young man, he was vigorous. But now he was dying of woe, the extremest woe. With every passing day he was conveyed farther from the kingdom he pined for, to which he would never find his way again. *He was a prisoner, and I, despite myself, his gaoler.* (43; emphasis added)

She acknowledges that Cruso's deterioration is her doing and that, had he remained on the island, he might have survived the fever because he was content with life in his "kingdom". But now, on the journey back to the Western world, he is dying, and she knows that he will not find his way back. Despite her good intentions to convey Cruso to a "better" life (41), it turns out not to be better for him, making her responsible for his imprisonment on the ship and in what would have been his new home in England. Only once he is on the brink of death does she believe what he has been telling her all along: that his terraces, their tools, their life on the island had been "enough".

Susan's colonising, authoritarian stance in this regard is a reversal of the host and guest relationship. She was the guest on the island but has now become the forceful host. After she lets Cruso 'have his desire' with her, she considers the nature of their new relationship, contemplating the matter as follows: "Would it have been better had we continued to live as brother and sister, or host and guest, or master and servant or whatever it was we had been?" (30). She thus recognises her status as guest, but now, on board the ship that takes them back to civilisation, it is she who is the host. For her, subjecting Cruso and Friday to what she believes to be a better life is showing hospitality to them. She invites them into her world – one that is familiar to her – but by doing so, she exerts her power as the one to whom the civilised world 'belongs'. What is implied in her perceived membership of civilisation and her position in being able to invite Cruso and Friday in, is that the place to which they are welcomed does not offer equal belonging to them. There is no 'civilised' without 'uncivilised' and thus, although they are now included (by invitation), they are necessarily excluded at the same time (see *Hospitality* 15, 23, 25 and Caputo 110–11). Thus, while Cruso dies on the journey, Friday arrives in England but never fits in. At best, he remains a guest: at worst, a prisoner and a slave, despite Susan's intentions. She notes how he "grows old before his time" (*Foe* 55) and acknowledges that his meagre existence in England, helping her with odd chores, is a "terrible fall" from his life on the island where he had the freedom to hunt and roam around as he pleased.

On the surface, then, it seems there is no justice for Cruso and Friday. However, it is my contention that justice is possible in that the novel portrays language as an unreliable framework for knowledge and an inadequate measure of being. The novel accomplishes this through Susan's failure to communicate with Friday and his sustained silence, her discovery that language cannot express meaning consistently and, finally, through the

interpretive impenetrability of the final chapter. My argument is that these narrative and textual strategies fundamentally challenge the colonial, Eurocentric mentality displayed by Susan at the start of the novel and that, therefore, *Foe* opens itself up to otherness, attempting – as far as possible – an ethical relation to alterity.

Upon arriving in England, Susan endeavours to restore language to Friday by setting out to teach him basic instructions such as “watch”, “do”, and “dig” and reading to him (56, 59). She hopes that, if she “make[s] the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn in him” (59). Later, she draws sketches and presents them to him, expecting that he would point to the picture that reveals the ‘truth’ about his mutilation. However, he stares back at her vacantly, not revealing anything (67–69). Friday’s absent gaze emphasises his otherness and the distance between them, causing discomfort on her part. This is because she cannot determine what the emptiness and strangeness of his silence might conceal, and thus it unsettles her (see Wild 13). Consequently, she attempts to manage and suspend his alterity, hoping to eradicate the discomfort produced by his questioning countenance (see *Totality* 38). By seeking to teach him language, Susan wants to subsume Friday into her world, that is, the world of language, to ultimately exercise control over him. In this context, her ‘home’ is the English-speaking world in which she is the host and he the guest. Her invitation of him into the realm of language is simultaneously an act of generosity and an exertion of power. Marais argues that Susan’s efforts to ‘make sense’ of Friday (by, as I have suggested, situating him in the world of language) reflect the reader’s attempts to ‘make sense’ of the novel. The reader is thus comparable to Susan and the text to Friday. Readers inevitably seek to ‘understand’ the novel and extrapolate meaning, yet it remains infinitely unknowable. The secrets of *Foe* as well as the secrets hidden in Friday’s silence are never disclosed, or are perhaps, undisclosable. Reading is thus portrayed as a ‘colonial’ act of imposition and domination, yet the text resists this violence by remaining open to interpretation (“Authoritarianism” 12).

When Friday refuses to respond to Susan’s emotional story of having “wasted” her life, she draws the following conclusion: “I have no doubt that amongst Africans the human sympathies move as readily as amongst us. But the unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso had deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious, like an animal wrapt entirely in itself” (*Foe* 70). What she hoped for was a gesture of empathy, but instead he “stood like a

statue” (70). She declares her misery about his relentless silence and unresponsiveness as follows:

Oh, Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered! It is like our desire, when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us. [...] I am trying to bring it home to you, who have never, for all I know, spoken a word in your life, and certainly never will, what it is to speak into a void, day after day, without answer. And I use a similitude: I say that the desire for answering speech is like the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being. (79–80)

Nevertheless, despite her yearning to be responded to, Susan seems to become increasingly aware of the treacherous nature of language and her inability to know her experience in language (Marais, *Secretary* 78). Paradoxically, though, she still believes that some – such as Mr Foe – have the capacity to use language in such a manner that meaning is always definite and fully present. Her following reflection reveals this assumption:

Alas, my stories seem always to have more applications than I intend, so that I must go back and laboriously extract the right application and apologize for the wrong ones and efface them. Some people are born storytellers; I, it would seem, am not. (*Foe* 81)

Susan’s discovery that her stories can be applied and interpreted in various ways is an acknowledgement that she has no control over the meaning that others extrapolate from her tales. The message she intends to send is likely not the one that will be received, proving that words are open-ended signs that simply point to more, similarly indeterminate, signs. The ‘truth’ or ‘essence’ of her stories might reside in her imagination but is an impossibility in the realm of communication. She is mistaken in her assumption that there is a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ application for her stories since such value judgements overlook the indeterminacy of meaning. There is also no way of determining whether a reader or listener has understood her story ‘correctly’.

When Susan fails to communicate with Friday through language, she attempts to interact and establish a connection with him by playing the flute, which is, as far as she can tell, a communicative device he is familiar with. However, this effort also falls short (96–98). His refusal to respond, albeit in a form of transmission that perhaps he is

comfortable with, suggests an unwillingness to participate in an economy premised on power and subordination – even if it means the position of authority is his. If music, in particular the flute, is ‘his’ language, then answering to Susan would mean that he invites her into his realm of communication, which would then position him as the host and her as the guest.

Similarly, his trance-like dancing frustrates and confounds Susan because she cannot make sense of it. It is a form of expression that seems to be entirely foreign to her, and thus she cannot participate or even begin interpreting what it means. She expresses her exclusion from the dancing as follows: “In the grip of dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach. I call his name and am ignored” (92). She laments the situation as follows:

So now I knew that all the time I had stood there playing to Friday’s dancing, thinking he and I made a consort, he had been insensible to me. And indeed, when I stepped forward in some pique and grasped at him to halt the infernal spinning, he seemed to feel my touch no more than if it had been a fly’s; from which I concluded that he was in a trance of possession, and his soul more in African than in Newington. Tears came to my eyes, I am ashamed to say; all the elation of my discovery that through the medium of music I might at last converse with Friday was dashed, and bitterly I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me. (98)

Thus, utterly vexed, she decides to write a deed granting him his freedom (99). But even the written words of his manumission, which are meant to denote his freedom, fail to achieve what they set out to when she realises that he will be sold into slavery yet again (110). The words on the paper are empty signs that do not – cannot – assure his liberty because the idea of it is a transcendental signified, which does not exist.

Susan’s belief in the stability of language is further refuted and subverted in the final chapter of the novel. The elusive, dream-like nature of this chapter can be interpreted as Coetzee’s understanding of the unpredictability of the written word. Marco Caracciolo notes how Chapter IV “confounds the reader by distorting that [fictional] world into a dreamlike situation riddled with contradictions and indeterminacies” (90), and then elaborates as follows:

This explains why readers are left with a feeling that there is a mystery to be solved here. But if this is a mystery, it is one that, clearly, cannot be solved outside the rhetoric of interpretation; being constantly replayed every time a reader tries to make sense of these pages, the mystery admits no solution, but only hypotheses, conjectures, speculations. (90–91)

The point the novel's ending seems to illustrate is that language is infinitely open to interpretation. Chapter IV is an enactment of this argument as it resists interpretation, and it "continually parodies and thwarts critics' attempts to make sense of its textual signals" (López, *Visitation* 190). In this context, the novel fundamentally contradicts itself – but not unconsciously. While it challenges logocentric assumptions, in this case, the premise that language is a stable system that conveys meaning consistently, the self-reflexive moments alert us to the fact that *Foe*, as is the case with all texts, is invariably part of the logocentric tradition. Simon Critchley explains this contradiction, or the problem of closure, as follows:

A deconstructive reading shows both how a text is dependent upon the presuppositions of a metaphysics of presence or logocentrism – that is, for Derrida, any text which identifies truth with presence or *logos*, occurring in the voice and entailing the debasement of writing and all forms of exteriority (*G* 11–12/*OG* 3) – which that text might attempt to dissimulate, and how the text radically questions the metaphysics it presupposes, thereby entering into contradiction with itself and pointing the way towards a thinking that would be other than logocentrism. Closure is the hinge that articulates the double movement between logocentrism, or metaphysics, and its other. Ethics signifies in the articulation of this hinge. (20–21)

In *Foe*, Coetzee accepts that his writing is a work of logocentrism, for it is impossible not to be. Yet he manages to question metaphysics through not only the engagements between Susan, Crusoe and Friday but also the structure of the text. The self-questioning techniques and the deliberate intertextual references to canonical works such as *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* are an acknowledgement of the novel's membership to the logocentric tradition (see Attridge, *Ethics* 69–70). But through this acknowledgement and the refusal to represent otherness – such as established in Friday's silence – the novel points to the other of Western metaphysics and thus opens itself to alterity. This tension or conflict is precisely where Coetzee's ethics can be discerned.

In the final chapter, the narrator finds himself underwater at the site of the shipwreck just off the island. Friday is there but, as is the case with the Magistrate when he

encounters the barbarian girl in a dream (*Barbarians* 60), the narrator tries to speak but fails. The latter makes the following observation: “But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (*Foe* 157). Friday thus eventually responds, but on his terms and outside the parameters of language. As Peterson notes:

Coetzee’s depiction of a body that signs in and for itself thus implies a pure materiality absolutely liberated from the representational domains of speech and writing for which Susan has doggedly sought Friday’s inclusion, as if Friday finally responds to Susan’s demand for answering speech by mouthing ‘I have no need for speech or writing, thank you very much’. (865)

The fact that Friday’s body ‘answers’ to someone other than Susan – who constantly attempts to elicit a response from him – is significant. It is his body that is its own sign, that speaks for itself, rather than the language which she hoped to instil in him. The home of Friday is not a “place of words” and is, therefore, outside the restrictions of language and the power play that it involves. Friday is radically other in that he infinitely exceeds the image that Susan or the reader might have of him. Like the text of which he is a part, he cannot be contained and is infinitely open to interpretation. As John Wild notes about Levinas’s other:

[The other] does not merely present me with lifeless signs into which I am free to read meanings of my own. His expressions bear *his* meanings, and he is himself present to bring them out and defend them. There is no difference between the active expression and what is expressed. The two coincide. The other is not an object that must be interpreted and illumined by my alien light. He shines forth with his own light, and speaks for himself. (14)

Despite her efforts, Susan fails to interpret Friday and extract a self-imposed meaning from him. Instead, he reveals himself on his terms, in the present, without having someone else mediate his otherness and thereby foreclosing it.

Through Cruso’s and Friday’s refusal to conform to Susan’s values, her belief in the preeminence of Western culture and language collapses as she realises that she cannot save the former and teach the latter to communicate. Empathising with Cruso and Friday, the novel draws our attention to the flaws of Western culture and the problems associated with the understanding that language is a total, stable system.

CONCLUSION

Waiting for the Barbarians, *Disgrace* and *Foe* introduce readers to self-characters who, I have argued, exhibit thoughts and behaviours that are typical of Emmanuel Levinas's formulations of the human self. The most obvious of these characteristics are their egocentrism and sense of at-homeness with themselves. The Magistrate's, David Lurie's and Susan Barton's Western worldviews are deeply entrenched and, prior to their engagement with other-characters, they seem to be oblivious to the limitations of their points of view. Except for Susan who is washed up on an island, the protagonists are mostly content with themselves and the way things are: the Magistrate wishes his life on the "lazy frontier" could continue undisturbed (*Barbarians* 9) and David has successfully "solved the problem of sex", his preferred pastime at the start of the novel (*Disgrace* 1). And, had it not been for her companions' lack of speech, Susan too "might have lived most happily on [her] island" (*Foe* 8).

Considering that the Magistrate, David and Susan are the focalisers, readers quickly become aware of the problems inherent in their perspectives. Because they are white, middle-class people of European descent, they necessarily judge people, events and circumstances from this privileged position and often use their perceived superiority to manipulate and, at times, exploit others. Likely triggered by his guilty conscience, the Magistrate invites the barbarian girl into his home where he tends to her torture-inflicted wounds. His relationship with her is ambivalent, however: while he wants to take care of her, he also begins abusing his authority in the relationship by exploring her body sexually. David sleeps with prostitutes and pursues a student of his, Melanie Isaacs. But because of his status as a professor and much older white male, the power dynamics between him and the younger coloured, women he has sex with are complicated by the history of apartheid. He eventually rapes Melanie and is charged with sexual assault. Similarly, Susan tries to impose her English culture on Cruso and Friday because she believes that these values will lead them to a 'better' life. She forces them to return to England with her, but Cruso dies on the journey and Friday becomes alienated and is reduced to a house slave.

In the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, the turning points in the novels are initiated when the Magistrate 'sees' the barbarian girl in a dream and David goes to live with his daughter Lucy on her smallholding where he is exposed to her alternative

way of life. I have argued that, in the face-to-face encounter with the girl in his dream state, the Magistrate perceives her otherness and his responsibility for her is awakened. With regard to David in *Disgrace*, I have suggested that the change we perceive in him is the result of his exposure to Lucy, who, although from the same social background as he, is radically other in her beliefs and thought processes. While such a turning point is not evident in *Foe*, I have contended that Susan's encounters with Cruso and Friday challenge her belief in the preeminence of Western culture and language, and although their non-logocentric orientations do not bring about radical personal development in her, the novel seems to confirm and support their scepticism about – or rather, their unwillingness to buy into and participate in – logocentrism and the powerplay it involves. In all three novels, therefore, we get the sense that Coetzee's empathy lies with the other-characters rather than with the selves. However, the author refrains from attempting to represent the other or their perspectives, and therefore we can only surmise their points of view from their engagement with the selves and that which is *not* said.

After encountering the other-characters, perceiving their otherness and being affected by it despite themselves, the Magistrate, David and Susan become occupied with the pursuit of justice for them. The Magistrate returns the girl to her people and publicly confronts the Third Bureau about torturing the barbarians and, following his daughter's gang-rape, David is adamant about reporting the incident, hoping that the law will bring about justice for Lucy. Because Susan believes that the primitive, speech-deprived existence on the island is no way for anyone to live, she seeks to convey Cruso and Friday to a better life in England where she imagines their island story will be written and published, ensuring their economic freedom.

However, in each of these novels, the self's pursuit of justice for the other is complicated by their complicity in the suffering of the other. I have argued that the Magistrate's position in the Empire means that he is responsible for the crimes committed against the barbarians, even though he does not participate in the practice of torture. Moreover, while he becomes increasingly responsible for the girl, he remains ambivalent toward her: at times, he pities her and attempts to do what is right, but at other times he is repulsed by her tortured body and rejects her sexually. This, we later learn, causes her great pain and exacerbates her already fragile state. While David is not directly responsible for what happens to Lucy, the fact that he too is guilty of rape makes him complicit in the crime. Immediately preceding the attack, he makes a case for the 'rights

of desire', suggesting that people should be free to act upon their sexual urges despite the consequence for the victim. But now that his daughter is on the receiving end of such violence, David instantly changes his views on the matter, demanding that her perpetrators be persecuted and punished. Susan is convinced that she is 'saving' – and thus serving justice to – Cruso and Friday when she takes them to England, but, as I have discussed, Cruso dies and Friday loses his freedom to roam around, becoming a recluse in Susan's care.

Nevertheless, despite the self-characters' failure to bring about justice for the other, justice is perceivable on some level in each of these novels. The Magistrate's deteriorating mental state, his increasing 'madness', is, in Derrida's understanding of this condition, the consequence of his becoming ethical. He is caught between two conflicting injunctions, namely his position in the Empire and his desire to do what is right, and it is only from this position of conflict that he can start behaving ethically. Ethics are possible only when one does not know what to do – when there is no rule to follow. The change we perceive in him is therefore a testament to his becoming responsible for the other. Similarly, David's development in the novel suggests a turn to ethics. Although he is unconscious of the change he undergoes, his new relation to people and animals evinces positive development and a turn away from the selfish desire that once consumed him. Whereas justice in *Foe* does not arrive in the form of Susan's improved treatment of Cruso and Friday, justice is discernible in the novel's 'siding' with them rather than with her. Her belief in the superiority and stability of Western culture and language is fundamentally challenged by Friday's sustained silence and the interpretive resistance of the novel's ending.

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