J.M. Coetzee and the Failures of Reason

David Mullins

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

Victoria University of Wellington

2008
Introduction:

In a speech delivered in Stockholm in acceptance of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature, J.M. Coetzee told the story of Robinson Crusoe’s life as a wealthy but haunted writer following his return to English society. Entitled “He and his Man,” this brief narrative focuses on the absolute gap between the purportedly self-aware individual and the linguistic subject that stands behind the works of fiction set down on paper by this individual’s hand; the imaginary figure – perhaps corresponding to Daniel Defoe himself, creator of the original Robinson Crusoe – who travels about the countryside collecting fantastical stories even as the writer sits at his desk waiting for inspiration to come. Crusoe himself lives a quiet life that for the most part involves walking the seashore and writing, and wonders what relation he, a man with an eventful but narrow past, can have to this shadow self that is the source of his stories:

How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes... .

If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.

This last metaphor of two counterparts so alike and so close to one another, but so caught up in their own consuming worlds that they cannot even register one another’s presence, let alone communicate, emphasises the division between individual and subject. As Derek Attridge notes in his article “A Writer’s Life”:

What "He and His Man" explores is the strange process of fictional writing: the self-division it
necessitates, the uncertain origins of the words that one finds oneself writing, the haunting illusion—captured in that image at the end of the piece—that there is an unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words. (260-1)

Throughout his critical and creative literature J.M. Coetzee grapples with a broad and fundamental dilemma that is alluded to by this image of isolated proximity. This dilemma concerns the schism between that which can be felt, or experienced, and that which can be spoken. At base, it concerns the absolute distinction between reason and unreason; between the enclosed logic of the reasoned discourse typically accepted as total by the self and intelligible to society, and the final truth, or essence, that it seems must lie beyond the finite boundaries of this arena in which all value must be explicitly accounted for. From the tension between these two incommensurate domains of being arise the more specific, or ‘superstructural’ issues of ethical relation and self-knowledge for which Coetzee’s writing is well known. Ethical response to the specificity of the other and faithfulness to the true nature of the self are ideal actions and states that are hampered by this irreconcilable split between the structured logic of society and the idea of impossible truth about which this supposedly impassive logic revolves.

Three of Coetzee’s novels; *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, together offer a multi-faceted treatment of this underlying philosophical problem. This creative working-through of philosophical concerns progresses from the relatively straightforward opposition between the social machine and the embodied individual found in *Life and Times of Michael K*, through an investigation into the power relations hidden in seemingly innocuous social patterns in *Disgrace*, to a consideration of the manoeuvres that may be possible in the limited space marked out by the totalising edifice of reason in *Elizabeth Costello*. These novels explore the various means of challenging reason, bringing into relief its inadequacies and internal tensions, but at the same time leading inescapably to the realisation that all meaningful acts must share these same limitations if they are to
avoid falling into the impotent incoherency of 'unreason.'

Several authors have published work contributing to a broad critical awareness of this philosophical preoccupation with the interrelation between self, world and other that underlies Coetzee's fiction, often by focusing on its treatment of the difficulties facing any project for ethical relation to the Other and its tendency to foreground its own discursive status. Although their focus may not coincide directly with the argument advanced here, those critical works which treat Coetzee's novels and other works as exercises in the navigation of ethical and epistemological concerns are of particular relevance, having provided the discursive environment for further investigation to take place. Derek Attridge's recent publication, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, presents the argument that Coetzee's fiction seeks to acknowledge or otherwise respond to the demands of alterity via an essentially modernist strategy of reflexive textual cynicism that "disrupts the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality" (12). David Attwell's various publications on Coetzee's life and work also provide numerous ideas and insights that continue to resurface throughout the growing body of critical literature surrounding the South African author. In particular his contribution to *Doubling the Point*, a collection of Coetzee's essays and interviews which considers in detail the problems of confession and self-knowledge along with the responsibilities (political, artistic, ethical) of the writer.

David Attwell's *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* provides an account of *Dusklands*' "Critique of Rationality" (37), and of the metafictional aspects of *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe* that operate to juxtapose discursive authority and societal power relations.
Coetzee’s fiction is often concerned with setting out and challenging the dry, mechanical operations of reason – specifically, reason as a written, spoken system by which the world is ordered and made coherent to the intellect. In order to examine the nature of reason, and in particular the nature of logos, the specifically linguistic dimension of reason, it is useful to outline the core principles of the structuralist tradition. As a brief overview of Saussurian linguistics and its associated branches of structuralist investigation will show, such projects demonstrate in particularly striking form the totalising drive inherent in all patterns of formal comprehension and representation. They also serve to highlight the binary operations of reduction and exclusion that characterise all conceptual logic, giving rise to the ethical dilemmas of violence and solipsism often depicted in Coetzee’s fiction. Saussurian linguistics in particular demonstrates the ability of formally structured language to maintain its integrity as totalising system, by acting to reduce all speech acts to their function as collectively negotiated signs and consigning those that defy such reduction to the domain of the nonsensical.

Structuralism is a discursive field derived from the study of language undertaken by Ferdinand de Saussure. Broadly speaking it refers to a conceptual model that is applicable to any of the ways in which the meanings of signs, and thus the sphere of what can be known and said, are negotiated between individuals and social bodies. An examination of the framework of structuralism in its original sense, as a mode of linguistic study, is useful in elucidating the broader philosophical implications of such an outlook.

In Course in General Linguistics, a text collated and edited by his students and colleagues after his death, Saussure proposes that the sign be viewed as composed of two inseparable components whose relationship to one another is nonetheless arbitrary. The 'signifier', or
physical manifestation of the sign is connected, in this model, to the 'signified', or mental concept invoked by the signifier.

A popular conception of language is that it connects the physical world of objects and the mental world of concepts, two realms that are mapped directly onto one another in the common medium of the sign: “Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (65). According to this perspective, there exists a natural correspondence between the object in the world and the sign that is used to refer to it.

Saussurian structuralism, however, presents the fundamental and far-reaching thesis that language is purely systematic. Saussure argues that language is an enclosed system that produces value independently of the world to which it is generally supposed to refer. It does so, he claims, by arranging a number of indivisible units, or signs, to form an internal network of differences. Signs thus take their value from their location relative to those around them, and not from the world of objects. Meaning and identity are based upon difference, rather than essence, according to this model. This identification of a discrete region in which meaning is produced systematically, through the differentiation of discrete units, is characteristic of all structural analysis.

Saussure forges a further distinction between langue and parole, and his description of the way in which these two dimensions of language relate to one another develops the implications that the systematic model of language may have regarding the status of the individual speaker. Saussure uses the term langue to refer to the rules of an entire signifying system, while parole refers to any individual speech act. Langue thus enables parole, although langue does not, strictly speaking, exist. Langue is the abstract total of all the signs and combinatorial laws available to a community of speakers at a single point in
time, and thus is finite but only ever implied, an ideal state of perfect comprehension in which all ambiguity is resolved. Although the linguistic *langue* is too extensive to be grasped, as an abstract function it represents the ideal of finitude to which *parole* appeals. It is significant that, in the case of signifying systems far less complex than language, the possibility of absolute conceptual mastery implicit in this function is realised: because one can comprehend the rules of a chess game in their entirety, one can know all the moves that can be meaningfully made within such a game. Although the parameters of language are so much broader as to be practically unattainable, the difference between the two systems of chess and language is one of extent rather than of type.

Significantly, no instance of *parole* can exceed the parameters of *langue* while retaining its status as a valid exchange in the linguistic economy. While any act of *parole* will inevitably have a number of unique qualities due to the specificity of its enactment, the systematic nature of language entails the reduction of all such idiosyncrasies to the finite (although very large) number of formal combinatory possibilities afforded by *langue*.

According to the synchronic structural model, every sign functions only insofar as it corresponds to one unit within the formal economy of language. As Saussure notes here in *Course in General Linguistics*, the material form of a sign operates only as a vehicle by which this function is indicated and not as its own source of meaning: “…Just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chesspieces, language is characterised as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units” (107).

Thus, in the production and reception of meaningful speech acts, any idiosyncrasy in the presentation of the sign is dismissed as irrelevant. For example, while a given word may be pronounced differently by speakers from different regions of a country, these accentual characteristics are set aside by the listener, who reduces words to their formal function as signs in order to recuperate a statement that makes sense within the shared system, or
language. Language is shown, according to Saussure's structuralist model, to be very effective at retaining its integrity as an enclosed and totalising system. Any act that does not reinscribe the logic of this system is either excluded as nonsensical or forcibly approximated to the finite parameters of the linguistic economy. Thus there is never an organised or knowable 'outside' to language.

The completeness with which the formal and extra-personal system of language orders the domain of individual experience is made clear by Saussure's analysis of the relationship between language and thought. Here Saussure argues that language as a system organises and structures the vague and nebulous domains of words and ideas by cutting across them decisively, connecting them to one another along definite lines of correspondence:

Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. (111-112)

The system of language connects and profoundly 'systematises' sound and thought by generating positive associations between the two realms. The positive connection of signifier to signified (as opposed to the negative associations, or differences, between signifiers) brings an appearance of epistemological fixity unavailable to an otherwise continuous body of sound. Thus it can be said that language precedes and enables thought, as long as 'thought' is taken to refer to the realm of clear-cut ideas and concepts: "Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object..." (8). Because nothing of semiotic value can exist beyond the parameters of language and the systematic conceptual framework that language engenders, language wholly circumscribes the possibilities of thought. Saussurian linguistics thus
strongly emphasises the role of language as the basis for thought and experience.

Freudian psychoanalysis likewise presents an absolutist structural account of a field of study, in this case the human psyche, purporting to delimit the systematic processes of the psyche by which the latent content of the libido is transformed into manifest actions. The psyche is thereby treated as an enclosed system within which meaning is produced in certain consistent and predictable ways, via associative networks and combinatory models that, in the healthy individual at least, are aligned with social norms.

Like Saussurian linguistics, Freudian psychoanalysis seeks to work backwards from manifest speech acts to the set of universal principles from which they are mechanically derived. Freud's 'talking cure' requires the patient to construct a narrative, in dialogue with an analyst, in order to bring to consciousness memories or desires obscured by the mind's repression barrier. By arranging and relating the units (remembered events) of one's life history within an enclosed economy (in this case a spoken narrative) the nature and value of those units that are not normally evident due to repression can be deduced. As with all structural models, psychoanalysis relies on the fact that the larger a system is, the easier it becomes to fill in the spaces where no information is available, by charting their relations to other terms in the system. The nature of the repressed term that lies behind the outwardly inexplicable behavior is thus deduced by a process of triangulation, in the same way that a reader can skim-read a text, inferring the meanings of those terms that they do not look at directly by charting their surroundings in order to reconstruct a story that conforms to the laws of narrative continuity.

In order for the process of inference to work, the analyst must have an understanding of the laws by which terms may be related to one another in the process of differentiation that constitutes their value. Saussure identifies two axes of selection, the syntagmatic and the
paradigmatic, by which the latent totality of the linguistic world (*langue*) may be encoded to produce specific speech acts (*parole*). Freud likewise identifies the processes of metaphor and metonymy as the only routes by which the contents of the latent unconscious, the psychoanalytic version of *langue*, may be encoded to produce manifest actions. Saussure's paradigmatic axis deals with the vertical substitution of terms, while Freud's metaphoric axis likewise represents the dimension of modification in which terms may stand in for one another. The syntagmatic and metonymic axes both deal with the way in which terms take their meaning from their situation in a given sequence (a sentence or a dream-sequence, for instance), along the horizontal axis.

For both Freud and Saussure, every manifest action may be situated at a conjunction of these two axes. By thus delimiting the possible pathways of encryption, these analysts seek to work backwards from *parole* to *langue*. Although neither theorist claims to have fully delimited the linguistic and psychic economies that are their respective objects, such consummate awareness is the logical apotheosis of each conceptual programme. The human psyche and the text, or utterance, are thus placed in analogous positions. Structuralist thought takes each to possess a superficially comprehensible surface behind which lies a latent structure from which all outward actions stem.

For the structuralist critic there is always an ultimate truth to be discovered in any field of investigation one may wish to delineate and systematically analyse. By tabulating the units of a given economy, be it a folktale, a language, a cultural stratum or a psyche, and mapping their relations to one another, the entire system is, ideally at least, rendered transparent to the critical mind. Once the processes by which terms in such an economy may be related have been identified, the value of any term may be presented to consciousness with no remainder. According to this model, there exists no region of meaning that can exceed the totalising conceptual order of the apprehending intellect.
Structuralist thought, in its essence as a systematising epistemology that informs the theories of Freud and Saussure, posits the reality of the world as something that is only available to consciousness through structured reflection that partakes of the conceptual matrices laid down by the social body, matrices which are available through various media, especially that of language, in which their logic is concretised. Thus one's awareness of self, one's apprehension of others and one's understanding of the world is seen to be dependent upon structured reason, a universal matrix which finds order in a chaotic world by drawing arbitrary but rigid lines of correspondence between signs and objects.

With a view to emphasising this connection between reason and language it is useful to introduce the term *logos*. This term refers to the domain of language, or the 'word,' within which no term may exceed the parameters of orderly thought and representation. In particular, this term emphasises the tacit but grandiose claims of all structured thought, invoking the purportedly absolute ability of spoken reason to describe and explain the world without remainder. Just as Freud's patient must accept the conclusions of analysis as ineluctable in order for them to realise a fully integrated psyche, those who speak must subscribe to a world of utterance whose parameters are delimited by *langue*, and in doing so implicitly validate language and reason, or *logos*, as a totalising formation.

In a formulation that supports this parallel between structured thought and the patterns of the social body, Louis Althusser, a French theorist heavily influenced by Marxism, notes the way in which society itself acts as a structural milieu, acting to assimilate or exclude that which does not correspond to any of its predefined terms. Althusser notes the structuration imposed upon the individual in the movement from isolated existence to social location. He draws a distinction between the notion of an embodied individual and a socially viable subject, arguing that the social body can only acknowledge those individuals who have taken up a position as such a subject. In the language of
structuralism, to be a subject is thus to be a term. To illustrate this point, Althusser uses the example of the policeman who hails, or 'calls out' an individual on the street. By this action the individual is identified as a term in the economy of formal social codes represented by the policeman and is thus transformed from an embodied individual into a subject whose existential parameters and available courses of meaningful action (that is, courses of action that 'make sense' within the social sphere and thus stand to be interpreted) are circumscribed by these codes. This situation is, Althusser claims, allegorical of the relationship between any individual and her or his social environment. In *Essays on Ideology* Althusser introduces the term 'interpellation:' "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals, or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing..." (48). The individual is constantly called to account by figures of discursive authority, real or implied, and is offered certain avenues of creativity along which to construct and present an identity. In this way subjectivity is interpellated, or 'shot through' by a cultural logic that precedes it, both logically and temporally. While all individuals are unique due to the material specificity of their embodiment and thus in all cases exceed the finite representative capacity of discourse, only subjects can project an identity by engaging in semiosis. The individual as physical entity exists beyond the economy of reason, and thus can have no viable meaning within this economy.

A brief overview of the conceptual route from structuralism to post-structuralism via the influence of existential thought will serve to explicate the seemingly paradoxical role played by 'desire' in the operations of reason. While the discourse of structuralism establishes *logos* as a universal ground with which every viable assertion of meaning must be commensurate, such an outlook is at odds with a body of literary and philosophical texts that hold the embodied individual to be an irreducible locus of meaning, an enigmatic figure whose specificity may be overwritten by the superficial structures of language and
social patterning but is never ultimately determined by them. Such texts present the world of words and formalised ideas as forever asymptotic to the world as experienced by a transcendental consciousness, a primary state of being that remains inaccessible to any investigative branch of *logos*.

Throughout much of what is generally described as 'existential' literature there is an effort to refute the totalising claims of various social structures that disallow subjects any essential attributes that exceed their discursive reification. The literature of Jean-Paul Sartre is exemplary of a discourse that draws heavily on the philosophical tradition of existential phenomenology, representing the systematic machinery of collectively negotiated reason as 'absurd' by demonstrating the vacuous and arbitrary nature of its claims to sovereignty over a human existence that infinitely exceeds the totality of *logos*.

In Sartre's *Nausea* the protagonist, Roquentin, writes a series of diary entries, which constitute the text, as he tries to negotiate an episode of his life characterised by ennui and an ill-defined sense of spiritual unease, or 'nausea'. Roquentin decides that these feelings, particularly the feeling of nausea, are brought about by the apparent contingency of existence and the oppressiveness of a physical world that seems wildly excessive with respect to the explanatory narratives traditionally used to systematise (or in a more literary sense, thematise) it. Finally, Roquentin undergoes something of an epiphany as he experiences a catastrophic failure of the *logos* before the brute reality of things:

The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me. (182)
Sitting on a bench in the municipal park, he comes to realise the absurdity of imposing semiotic finitude on a world whose irreducible presence will inevitably overflow its reification in narrative. *Nausea* examines the possibility that the world of objects may be experienced directly and on its own terms, in way that radically surpasses language: “And suddenly, all at once, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen” (181). A corollary of this outlook is that the consciousness which experiences the world must itself be logically prior to the externally imposed economy of language, and thus itself unapprehendable by any reflective critique conducted within the domain of *logos*.

Here exists a primary node of opposition between structural and existential epistemologies, as behind Sartre’s position lies the idea of ‘pre-reflective’ consciousness. While structuralist thought requires that a viable and communicable consciousness of objects and ideas be conceived of as a state that is commensurate with the extra-personal *logos*, Sartre argues that the level of awareness offered by such systematic reflection is secondary to the irreducible immediacy of a lived consciousness that can never be apprehended as an object.

Language, identified by the structuralist tradition as playing a fundamental role in the organisation of conscious thought, is seen by Sartre to be implicated in the perpetuation of an untenable dualism that stems from Descartes’ formula, “*cogito ergo sum.*” Sartre’s position regarding the primary nature of consciousness, and the infinite regress faced by the reflective consciousness, are noted by Dan Zahavi in *Self-Awareness and Alterity: a Phenomenological Investigation*. Even as one says “I,” Sartre argues, one divides the self into the subject that perceives and the object that is perceived, approximating the immediacy of consciousness in the structured domain of language that is drawn from outside the self. The event of consciousness can never be captured by this secondary order of systematic self-reflection, as consciousness is always directed at an object and thus constitutes the condition for apprehension itself. Consciousness can never be reduced to a
phenomenon, as every time it is made the object of reflection there must always be a consciousness directed towards it, renewing the cycle of reflection ad infinitum (Zahavi, 14-37). For this reason, throughout Sartre's writings consciousness is figured as a void, a fundamentally unknowable space through which nothingness spills into the world. It is held to be the enabling condition for the secondary operations of logos, and as such always exceed the terms of this rational domain.

In her introduction to Sartre's Being and Nothingness, Hazel E. Barnes writes: “Because consciousness infinitely overflows the “I” which ordinarily serves to unify it, we feel vertigo or anguish before our recognition that nothing in our own pasts or discernible personality insures our following any of our usual patterns of conduct” (xii). Due to the fact that human consciousness radically exceeds the finitude imposed on it by logos, the various narratives by which we may identify ourselves are, contrary to the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis, thoroughly inadequate to explain our past or predict our future. It is acknowledged, however, that such narratives are very comforting. It is tempting to concretely define one's place in the world by ordering one's actions according to the narratives of national and cultural identity. Affiliation to such grand ideologies imparts a sense of purpose and belonging as it locates the self in a tradition that began before its birth and will continue after its death.

Existentialism offers a discursive viewpoint from which it is possible to interrogate the deterministic conclusions of structuralism, pointing out the limitations of structuralist thought and indicating the often uneasy fit between language and lived experience. However, existential fiction in particular tends to explain away interpellation as a seduction to be avoided through rigorous self-awareness rather than an inevitable facet of human existence. Nor is the existential position itself free from paradox. It presents a somewhat utopian view of the human potential for autonomy, compromised by the very
fact that its stories of transcendence must be set down in writing, the domain of logocentric reflection, in order to exist at all.

The work of Franz Kafka offers further commentary on the darker side of reason, from what may be called an existential position. Kafka's texts show how absurdly reason can be twisted while still retaining its integrity as a totalising system. Rather than the matrix of universal truth, reason is presented as an idiosyncratic logic wielded stubbornly by communities of drone-like bourgeoisie as they act to either dismantle or re-assimilate the lives of those who attempt to exist beyond its boundaries. In *The Trial*, logocentrism is figured specifically as a tortuously complex legal bureaucracy that brings its various advocates to endlessly recursive but staunchly upheld positions. In "Metamorphosis" the potency of the *logos* shows itself as a more pervasively social consciousness, a social order that has the ability to close ranks and totally exclude any who threaten to challenge or destabilise its logic. Likewise, Kafka's surviving short stories tend to present bleak indictments of society's alienating structuration. More often than not, Kafka's characters are heavily implicated in the bureaucratic mazes that entangle and alienate them. They are unfortunate individuals whose capacity for auto-emancipation is limited by the fact that this sterile machinery forms a large part of their own identities. Kafka's understanding of human existence takes into account the inevitability of some degree of interpellation and the thoroughness with which modern society imposes order upon individual lives, while at the same time gesturing towards the possibility of some degree of human 'authenticity.'

The concern, demonstrated by these authors, with bringing to light and challenging the totalising claims of reason is paralleled by a trend in critical discourse that likewise arises from concern regarding the circularities of formal thought. The work of those theorists who could be reasonably but broadly categorised as 'late-structuralist' in terms of philosophical alignment reveals a struggle to come to terms with the problematic circularities of the
structuralist approach and realise a critical discourse that fulfils the existential promise of transcendent self-awareness without transgressing the structural bases of formal philosophical thought. The strategy of choice here is to present arguments in a way that draws upon figurative language, offering the tacit depth-of-meaning generated by a poetic style in an attempt to escape the potentially endless regress of structuralist self-critique. In the early work of Michel Foucault it is possible to discern the use of rhetorical sleight of hand in order to posit a coherent line of authentic self-awareness, or quasi-reason, without falling into either totalising logocentrism or impotent utopianism. His attempt to write a history of madness, in its own terms, in *Madness and Civilisation* exemplifies the fragility of the late-structural position. In the preface to this volume Foucault states that his aim is to trace madness’s own reality without capturing it in the structured discourse of reason, an act of discursive violence committed inaugurally in the seventeenth century through the installation of an absolute conceptual division between reason and unreason, and recapitulated at every turn thereafter through the development of institutional structures which act to justify this division in the terms of legal, medical and political discourse:

> We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbours, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness; to define the moment of this conspiracy before it was permanently established in the realm of truth, before it was revived by the lyricism of protest. We must try to return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself. We must describe, from the start of its trajectory, that “other form” which relegates Reason and Madness to one side or the other of its actions as things henceforth external, deaf to all exchange, and as though dead to one another.” (x)

In his analysis of this text in *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida points out the paradoxical nature of a project that purports to represent the irrational from some ill-defined vantage point beyond the constraints of discursive finitude, utilising the ambiguity generated by a somewhat poetic style to gloss over the fact that the text is itself operating
in the domain of language and reason:

The history of madness itself is... the archaeology of a silence.

But, first of all, is there a history of silence? Further, is not an archeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the repetition, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced? (41).

This brief exchange between Foucault and Derrida is indicative of the endless regress forced upon critical analysis by the structural underpinnings of western thought. Each new analytical mode finds itself limited to a set of critical or rhetorical structures that reinscribe the totalising boundaries of logos and preclude any transcendent self-awareness. As Madness and Civilisation shows, the most that can be achieved is an oblique gesture towards an 'outside', a domain in which logos has no purchase. Any subsequent attempt to thematise or explain this gesture more fully serves only to re-inscribe the absolute division between reason and unreason, reciprocally affirming the totality of reason and the semiotic nullity of all that lies beyond its boundaries. Here Derrida speaks of the universality and totalising power of the order that Foucault's text attempts to transcend:

If the Order of which we are speaking is so powerful, if its power is unique of its kind, this is so precisely by virtue of the conversal, structural, universal and infinite complicity in which it compromises all those who understand it in its own language, even when this language provides them with the form of their own denunciation. Order is then denounced within order...

Total disengagement from the totality of the historical language responsible for the exile of madness, liberation from this language in order to write the archaeology of silence, would be possible in only two ways.
Either do not mention a certain silence... or follow the madman down the road of his exile. The misfortune of the mad, the interminable misfortune of their silence, is that their best spokesmen are those who betray them best; which is to say that when one attempts to convey their silence itself, one has already passed over to the side of the enemy, the side of order, even if one fights against order from within it, putting its origin into question. There is no Trojan horse unconquerable by Reason (in general).” (42)

Derrida’s position, typically labeled ‘post-structural,’ offers an alternative solution to the problem of infinite regression faced by structuralism by arguing that it stems from the division of the sign into the signifier and the signified. According to post-structuralism, the identification of the signified as a fundamental aspect of the sign is a flawed position that implies metaphysical notions of essence, notions which are opposed by the systematic conceptual machinery of structuralism’s own rationalistic project. The signifier/signified couplet is thus seen to engender a fundamentally aporetical epistemology based on the dualism of essence and presence but operating strictly in the monistic domain of the logocentric. This disparity between latent belief and procedural scepticism represents a fundamental point of failure in the edifice of structured reason, giving rise to the dilemma of self-awareness faced by the reflective consciousness.

For post-structuralism, language consists solely of the signifier and thus, like the world as represented by existentialism, is characterised by irreducible ambiguity. For any given term there can be no denotative fixity. Instead there may only ever be a range of possible connotations, some of which are more viable than others at any one cultural or historical moment, but all of which may be subject to change over time. These connotations arise from a network of associations between signifiers; meaning thus remains a product of difference, as in the structuralist model. The structuralist notion of the signified, however, is discarded. This mode of language, one confined exclusively to the domain of the signifier, is known as ‘dissemination,’ a term coined by Derrida, as explained by Richard
Harland in *Superstructuralism*:

In dissemination, language reveals an anarchic and unpredictable level of functioning, subversive of all proper meanings on the ordinary socially controlled level. Such is the Post-Structuralist mode of language, the mode of the Sign's real being.” (136).

Although such categorisation runs contrary to post-structuralism’s emphasis on irreducible ambiguity and emphatic denial of textual closure, it is useful for explanatory purposes to view post-structuralism as synthetic, combining some of the fundamental principles of structural and existential philosophy. Generally speaking, structuralism posits a world of words that structures and brings order to an otherwise vague and nebulous world of objects by differentiating them from one another. Existentialism seeks on the contrary to re-emphasise the absolute gap between word and world, claiming that meaning enters language from the unknowable 'outside' of the irreducibly present physical world via a primary consciousness that likewise cannot be captured by *logos*. Post-structuralism unifies word and world in the figure of the text, rendering language commensurate with the world of objects by arguing that it continually exceeds its own narrative finitude, and seeking to prove this point by identifying the many ways in which every text produces an irreducible plurality of meanings that overflows its self-ascribed boundaries. Post-structuralism thus defines desire as the insatiable drive to actualise or possess the illusory signified, an ideal state of absolute truth and textual unity apotheosised by this fundamentally indeterminate language.

The subject, according to this line of thought, is likewise governed by desire. The post-structural works of Lacan and the later Foucault place emphasis on the discursive construction of subjectivity rather than presenting identity as a unified or transcendent phenomenon. For these writers, no analysis of self or other can lead to summative finality, a point at which the subject has been fully defined. Instead, the subject is, by its very
nature, predicated upon a 'lack,' a space that its own faculties of structured perception cannot account for. The work of Lacan is particularly relevant to the post-structural ordering of semiosis, presenting the argument that subjectivity is based upon an irreconcilable split between essential self and communicable reason.

Lacanian psychoanalysis follows the discourse of existentialism informulating human vitality as an impossible and enigmatic space that continually generates desire, a gap that rational introspection is unable to account for. This formulation is crucial to post-structuralism's synthesis of structural and existential principles, as it defines the motivation (signified) behind the projects (signifiers) we employ to order the world as incommensurate to the structured domain of logos in which these projects are carried out and interrelated. Continual desire for the impossible signified is thus a fundamental aspect of the subject and of the text, the motivation behind every action.

Thus, post-structuralism retains the structuralist assertion that communicable identity is based on difference rather than self-sameness, or essence, but discards the axiom of analytical finitude and the associated idea of the attainable signified as endlessly regressive and therefore aporetical. However, post-structuralism in general does not deny the seductive force that the idea of the signified continues to have on the human imagination—on the contrary, this impossible ideal is taken to be the driving force behind all meaningful actions. In all cases, narratives appeal to some form of discursive finitude in order to present themselves as enclosed and logically consistent. This inherent drive towards closure is not limited to structuralist projects such as those of Freud and Saussure, which demonstrate it in an overt and theoretical sense, but is a fundamental function of all discourse. The existential notion that meaning enters logos via a void, or unknowable space, is therefore reinstated in more pragmatic terms as the Lacanian concept of 'lack:' all texts and subjects gesture or appeal towards closure, an absolute and impossible truth that
is denied them by their inherently ambiguous nature as collections of recombined signifiers. Therefore they must always revolve around an unknowable space that is irreducible and indefinable.

This conceptual path from structuralism to post-structuralism via the influence of existential philosophy is of fundamental relevance to Coetzee's work, as it lays out in exemplary form the systematic basis of reason to which Coetzee's texts often return. Structuralism lays bare the framework of knowledge, showing that reason is grounded in networks of difference that are arbitrary rather than natural, and emphasising the role played by these systematic networks in the inner life of the individual. Existentialism posits an absolute gap between word and world and condemns reason as a secondary reification of this phenomenal world of experience, emphasising the primacy of the pre-reflective consciousness to the experiencing subject and pointing out the endless regress faced by the reflective consciousness that is governed by *logos*. The post-structural synthesis of these two viewpoints in the concept of the manifest text, or subjectivity, that is ordered about an impossible centre presents an enclosing solution of which Coetzee's fiction continually demonstrates awareness; the inescapable reality that all meaningful acts are motivated by desire for the signified. The signified represents, for post-structuralism, the impossible finality towards which texts and subjects array their permutations of signifiers in a continual but futile attempt at ideal correspondence between representation and being, the ideal truth that the self sees in the enigmatic other and will resort to violence, physical or discursive, to possess.
Chapter Two:

As an introduction to Coetzee’s extensive treatment of the problems associated with structured reason, it is useful to briefly consider several texts in which related themes of self-awareness and ethical relation arise. *Dusklands* brings up the issue of self-knowledge by dramatising the failings of the subject that turns exclusively to itself in its search for meaning and truth, directing its conceptual resources inwards in an attempt to capture the truth of self and world alike through rigorous introspection. Coetzee’s essay “Confession and Double Thoughts,” which appears in *Doubling the Point*, offers a critical background to this problem of self-knowledge by analysing the infinite regress faced by confessional narratives.

*Dusklands* is a novel that focuses on the violence and solipsistic self-affirmation that occurs at the boundaries of conceptual systems, whether they are those of an individual or those of a society. It does so by incorporating two relatively short novellas, a juxtaposition that serves to emphasise the parallels between the physical violence of the South African frontier and the discursive violence that marks western society’s affirmation and expansion of its ideological boundaries. The protagonist of the first novella, Eugene Dawn, works as a propaganda specialist for the American Defense Department during the Vietnam War. His job is to reaffirm America’s waning ideological traction in Vietnam, and he attempts to do so by formulating strategies by which the Vietnamese population may be persuaded of the mythical status of the war, and thus of the inevitability of American victory.

Jacobus Coetzee, protagonist and narrator of the second novella, is a farmer and explorer who makes a living by venturing into the wilderness that surrounds his homestead in order to tame it, reducing its vast continuity to discrete terms that may be assimilated by the empire that he represents. This story is largely taken up by an account of his expedition
into the land of the Namaqua, a tribe of the indigenous Khoisan. His ‘mission’ is to explore the territory and harvest ivory, two projects by which the wilderness of the African interior is made comprehensible to the European consciousness; as mapped ‘countryside’ and as exchangeable commodity.

Both Dawn and Jacobus employ the binary strategies of reduction and exclusion in order to maintain and expand an absolute boundary between that which circulates in the network of terms accessible to the self, and that which is consigned to the nonsensical outside of this hermetic domain. These characters embody the principles of structured reason, and their lives follow these principles through to destructive conclusions. Those who are the objects of the representative strategies employed by Dawn and Jacobus are denied alterity and are reduced to quantified units with no provision for self-definition on their own terms. This situation offers a general reflection on the violence implicit in all discourse. In particular, the stories of Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee serve to emphasise the ethical implications of semiotic self-affirmation by directly associating physical and discursive violence.

Both characters show signs of outright pathology, committing violent acts to the accompaniment of what is apparently a lucid introspective monologue. Jacobus Coetzee returns with armed soldiers to the camp of the Khoisan tribe before whom he has been humiliated, killing many of the tribe and destroying their homes. In particular, he executes with great relish and formality those Khoisan formerly in his service as workers who abandoned him in favour of living with the indigenous tribe. Terms that exceed the value attributed to them by an enclosed system (in this case, that of property rights) cannot be tolerated without acknowledging the imperfection of this system, and there is little chance of Jacobus Coetzee, self-professed avatar of western ideology, conceding to the survival of any rogue term that threatens to undermine the legitimacy of European hegemony.
Although in the case of Eugene Dawn the pathological tendencies of his character show through more clearly in his somewhat frantic report and progressively solipsistic monologue than in his actions, he nevertheless comes to the point of physical violence also, first abducting his son and then stabbing him in the neck with a fruit knife. By such literalisation, the text demonstrates that all who act to assimilate the specificity of the world to a finite conceptual system engage, to a greater or lesser extent, in the violent negation of alterity.

The autobiographical narratives delivered by the main characters serve to literalise the latent circularities of the self’s representative capacity, as they continually operate to expand and uphold the milieu of that which is subject to the conceptual mastery of the self. While from the outside the violent acts that these characters carry out are discrepant to say the least, they seem to make complete sense to the characters themselves, who justify them by weaving them into socially legitimated narrative forms. Dawn draws upon the accepted principles of academic discourse in order to sanitise the macabre reality of the Vietnam war and justify his solipsistic ramblings as hermetic structuration, while Jacobus Coetzee’s Sadean meditations on the role of the explorer often substitute insight for morality, reducing relationships to an equation of affectless social and conceptual mechanics that blandly relates the self to the other at a superficial level of cause and effect. The highest goal is communicable knowledge, the ability to explain and predict; the matrices of this knowledge are not interrogated as long as the narrative vehicle gives the impression of absolute integrity. Both men are articulate, their accounts carrying a disturbing air of lucidity that nevertheless fails to engage with the gravity of their acts in any meaningful way.

A similar although more moderate scenario appears in Coetzee’s autobiographical work, *Boyhood*, in which the young author partitions off the untidy and somewhat embarrassing
milieu of school-life from the home-life shared with his parents by presenting to them an idealised façade of perfect grades and positive comments:

He shares nothing with his mother. His life at school is kept a tight secret from her. She shall know nothing, he resolves, but what appears on his quarterly report, which shall be impeccable. He will always come first in class. His conduct will always be Very Good, his progress Excellent. As long as the report is faultless, she will have no right to ask questions. That is the contract he establishes in his mind. (5)

As a general rule, it is much harder to discern, or be concerned about, the framework that supports a seamless product than that which lies poorly concealed behind an obviously flawed exterior (a poor report or self-contradictory narrative). Like Dawn and Jacobus, who seek to present narratives too perfect and insightful to be questioned, disavowing the solipsistic and self-affirming processes that lie behind their production by presenting a flawless aesthetic or conceptual artifact, Coetzee’s schoolboy self avoids dialogical intimacy by presenting self-sufficient monologue. This is a maneuver that is to resurface throughout Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello in particular, as characters attempt to reassure both themselves and others of the comforting totality of logos by presenting works of intellect that, despite their limited scope, are so hermetically self-consistent that they cannot be faulted.

In “Confession and Double Thoughts” this model of pathological introversion is figured as the problem of confession, giving rise to a theme that reappears throughout Coetzee’s fiction. In this text, Coetzee’s analyses of works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Rousseau focus on the question: how does one go about discovering the truth about one’s self when behind every self-reflective statement one makes it is inevitably possible to discern an element of self-gratification? Despite the apparent sincerity of confessional narratives, in every case problems of authenticity arise regarding motivation and self-deception.
Confession faces the same infinite regress as the reflective consciousness, as each stage at which the self speaks about the self rests upon some motivating impulse (some desire which influences the self to favour certain self-representations rather than surrender to the passive and transparent recollection of the ideal confession) to which even the most candid statement is blind. Confession, even in its secular form, is generally considered to be somewhat sacrosanct; a selfless commitment to the interlocutor that surrenders judgement (the process of semiosis, the assignment of value to the terms proffered) to this other. In reality, Coetzee points out, such projects do not abstain from some degree of semiosis and thus lead inevitably back into the orbit of desire, to an inward regression without end that can never reach beyond the self to the other, or to any ultimate truth about the self. In this process, then, there likewise comes into play the desire to hide the circular workings of semiosis behind a façade of perfect truth, to find finality in a flawless exterior that fools even the self: “Because of the nature of consciousness, Dostoevsky indicates, the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception” (291).

Coetzee’s writings often play out the dilemma of the self as it seeks to manipulate the terms available to it in order to reach some transcendent truth; that of the Other or of the self. In each case this represents an impossible task, as the inner truth of the self remains, by its very nature, as elusive as the hidden essence of the Other. The task of confession is a specific instance of this general theme of transcendence: through the words of the confession, the confessant seeks, impossibly, to transcend what Coetzee calls in “Confession and Double Thoughts” the “sterile monologue of the self” and thus to attain a state of grace (281). It represents an illustrative metaphor to which Coetzee’s texts often return.
Chapter Three:

As the previous chapter has shown, *Dusklands* presents the inherent solipsism and predilection to brutality, both physical and metaphysical, of the self that is constructed and maintained solely through reflective introspection. Bringing into focus the potentially destructive gap that exists between the constructed self and the specificity of the lived body, *Life and Times of Michael K* presents an alternative to these expansionistic figures by depicting a character who abstains almost entirely from reductive thematisation, refusing to overwrite the world around him and the people he encounters with narratives that would assert, to himself and to others, his authoritative grasp of a socially viable reality. By largely forfeiting his right to speak, as well as his right to ‘make sense’ in even the most general of ways, K renders himself liable to be overwritten by the narratives of others. Yet by his passive resistance to these stories that others impose on him K gives substance, if not full-fledged articulation, to the existence of an irreducible absolute, an anomaly that may be surrounded by discourse but which cannot be reduced to its terms. In doing so he offers a perspective from which the absurd reductiveness of reason may be brought into relief, an entirely autonomous interior space before which all discourse is incapacitated. In *Dusklands*, it is the unchecked metaphysical desire to close the gap between the formal, communicable concept and the material specificity of world – between signifier and signified – that spills into the social world as a desire to penetrate, both literally and metaphorically, the enigmatic interiority of those figures who resist such mastery. K, on the contrary, seeks continually to reinstate this gap that protects his interiority from the reductive grasp of *logos*, by refusing to play society’s ritualistic games of self-presentation, opting instead for a life lived at or beyond this society’s margins.

This theme of absolute independence from all things social is not, however, presented simply as a recipe for transcendence in *Life & Times of Michael K*. As with all Coetzee’s
novels, this text features a strong thread of reflexive self-doubt, as parallels drawn between the reductive mechanics of a semi-fictitious military bureaucracy and the totalising structure of the narrative itself become too cogent to allow comfortable thematic closure, or indeed any form of epistemological certainty. The efforts of various representatives, both of society and of the totalitarian bureaucracy that is the dystopian extrapolation of this society’s rigid inter-personal dynamics, to comprehend and categorise K, are echoed in the very text that presents his story to the reader, organised comprehensibly into an orderly narrative and a particularly compact prose style. The ultimate failure of all such efforts, both aggressive and benign, implies that this act of discursive violence may be reiterated in the apparently innocent projects of both author and reader, two figures whose often unquestioned relationship serves to uphold the integrity of literary representation and comprehension as viable methods of capturing otherness without remainder. The medical officer’s respectful but ultimately hollow pursuit of K’s true interiority gives further indication that even the most selfless commitment to the other, such as that which the text may seem to advocate, may be difficult to remove fully from the orbit of desire.

In simple terms, K is a man set apart from society by his inability and unwillingness to enter into relations of symbolic reciprocity with others. His name recalls several of Kafka’s protagonists who are similarly detached from the world of human congress, surrounded by others but irrevocably alienated by the disturbing clarity with which they see the world of social customs. Attempting to avoid persecution and likewise declining charity, K wishes only to live on his own minimalist terms, a demonstrably futile hope in a country given over to rigid martial bureaucracy in order to meet the material and ideological demands of civil war. Marginalised by a social order ill-equipped to deal with him as anything other than a vagrant, considered by many to be mentally deficient and treated accordingly with a mixture condescension and distaste, K is confronted with the discursive violence of social reason in a way that other more socially competent people are not. He offers the
perspective of one who is condemned by nature to see the formal patterns of the social milieu from the ‘outside,’ as arbitrary and superficial regimes of order imposed upon a passively resistant natural world. He himself identifies more closely with this natural world than with the world of human history and society, bewildered by the rigid complexity of social convention and much more at home in the largely uninhabited expanse of the South African Karoo. His is thus the perspective of one looking in from a hazily defined outside, or ‘beyond.’

From birth K is looked upon as an unpleasant anomaly, unwanted by the society into which he has been born. His hare lip is the physical mark of his alienation from his own social matrix, whose attitude towards him is prefigured by the initial response of his mother at his birth: “...from the first Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months” (3). His birth is as much his expulsion from his mother’s body as an entry into the world, an act of rejection that inaugurates an uneasy fit with his surroundings that is to continue throughout his life. His efforts to reinsert himself into the social body meet with failure, as K feels unable to produce an account of himself that reconciles his own impression of selfhood to the socially viable terms of self-representation:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (150-1).

This passage carries strong existential overtones, recalling Roquentin’s semiotic incapacity before the irreducible presence of the world. K is poorly equipped to overwrite the world as he experiences it with words and stories, and does not feel particularly compelled to try. In a statement that engages with Althusser’s metaphor of the policeman, K claims that he is “…one of the fortunate ones who escapes being called” (143). He does not hear the call of
ideology as clearly or forcefully as those around him, if indeed he hears it at all.

Throughout the novel, Michael K’s attempts to live on his own terms run up against a disorganised but militant bureaucracy that acts to fix his identity in various ways; as a vagrant, a criminal and as an escapee, fitting him awkwardly into a preconceived order against which he struggles in his own passive but resilient way for self-definition. K’s reluctance to accede to the determinations of narrative renders him vulnerable to the stories of others, aggressive synopses which he has difficulty countering. His journey away from Cape Town to the Karoo desert, a period of his life followed by the novel, is driven by an ideal vision of the farm from his mother’s childhood, a vision initially imposed on him by his mother but one that haunts him even after her death.

From his position at or beyond the margins of society’s procedural logic, K can see the gaps in a conceptual order that appears seamless to most of its exponents. The pretensions of logos seem ridiculous to him, insubstantial stories that lay claim to totalise an utterly enigmatic subjective existence and a natural world too vast and varied to be reduced to society’s narrow discursive regimes without an embarrassingly large remainder. In this way, K echoes the defiant nihilism of the existential heroes, repudiating the comforting but inauthentic regimes of social determination in an attempt to remain faithful to a temporally immediate interiority that is irreducible to collectively negotiated economies of meaning based on permanence and finitude.

By depicting this innocent, childlike character who seems possessed of an essential nature which remains impervious to the normative influence of logos, Life and Times of Michael K offers a partial answer to the bleak epistemological dilemmas depicted by Dusklands. In this earlier volume, characters Jacobus Coetzee and his recent-modern counterpart Eugene Dawn enact the destructive tautologies of reason, revealing the deficiencies of logos.
through their violent and macabre acts that are characterised by incongruously lucid introspection. Standing in contrast to these expansionistic representatives of reason K increasingly, over the course of the novel, refuses to thematise the world around him, preferring to remain receptive to the immediacy of his experience rather than fix it within an artificially imposed order. Unwilling or unable to reduce his experiences to a coherent and communicable narrative thread, K demurs from making reductive assertions and thus, like Kafka’s Josef K, the protagonist of *The Trial*, he fails to ‘justify’ himself (the main character of this novel makes many unsuccessful efforts to explain his life and actions to a mysterious court, despite being ignorant of what crime he is charged with committing). Unlike his namesake however, Michael K generally makes little effort to do so, as he finds the process of justification, the banal and fruitless equivalent of secular confession, false and trivial: “It struck him… that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else he simply did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive” (240).

At times K does negate the alterity of others to a certain extent, reducing them to terms in his characteristically loose webs of meaning. He is, however, far less comfortable with such negation, going through the motions of discursive consolidation without entering into the spirit of violent subjugation in the same way as Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. Over the course of the novel K distances himself from these already somewhat vestigial traces of social patterning, moving towards a state of complete somnolence in which his mind imposes little or no order upon the objects that come to its attention: “He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open staring at the corrugations in the roof-iron and the tracings of rust: his mind would not wander, he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy…” (158-9).

Poorly equipped and disinclined to play the endless social game in which individuals
reduce one another to terms in their own solipsistic worlds, K focuses on the immediate sensations of his own existence at every moment and treats all other sources of meaning as fraudulent abstractions from this primary state of receptiveness, reifying narratives that are never innocent and transparent but invariably act as vehicles for the agendas of others.

The allegory of the hunt, a major theme of Jacobus Coetzee’s monologue in *Dusklands* that also appears in *Life and Times of Michael K*, adds depth to the comparison between K and his more aggressive counterparts. Jacobus Coetzee relishes any opportunity to bring a part of the wilderness into his own economies of meaning and value. K, on the other hand, is unable or unwilling to reduce others to terms with any effectiveness, despite occasional attempts to do so. In need of food on the Visagie farm he catches and drowns a goat, but it is an awkward and unsatisfying act. Recollecting the long and somewhat farcical stalk, he is disgusted with himself and with his rather insubstantial trophy:

> The urgency of the hunger that had possessed him yesterday was gone. The thought of cutting up and devouring this ugly thing with its wet, matted hair repelled him. . . . He would have liked to bury the ewe somewhere and forget the episode; or else, best of all, to slap the creature on the haunch and see it scramble to its feet and trot off. (75-6)

This situation offers commentary upon the nature of all such aggressive reductions when seen from an uninvolved standpoint: the pursuit appears an absurd game, while the capture is a grotesque show of power. It echoes a scenario found in Kafka’s *The Trial*, in which a nondescript accountant finds himself accused of an undisclosed crime and tried by a shadowy legal system whose workings are similarly obscure. For many months he tries by various means and without success to defend, or “justify” himself to his unseen accusers. He makes no forward process whatsoever, and is even told by several characters that his efforts are hindering the likelihood of a favourable outcome. Finally, he is executed by a pair of excruciatingly polite representatives whose task is made easier by his own
exhausted apathy in the face of so implacable a system: "like a dog!" he said. It was as if the shame of it should outlive him" (254).

The metaphysical conditions of these two executions are very similar and emphasise the fundamental link, which Foucault elaborates in *Discipline and Punish*, between discursive competency and social power: We should admit... that power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (27). Due to their obscurity, Kafka's Josef K has little or no power before the inexorable processes of the legal system that orders his execution, while the goats that Michael K chases are similarly deprived of any insight into the workings of the human mind that orchestrates the pursuit of them. They do not flee for cover but keep pace with him for hours, oblivious to the fact that a slip from this economical parity will see a polarisation of survival and death. For both Josef K and the goats, the struggle for the freedom to live on one's own terms remains a trivial game until the last moment, when the dominant system reveals its capacity to totally and irrevocably overwhelm the individual, showing what is at stake in the moment it takes it away. In both cases, the logical conclusion of the interaction between hunter and hunted imposes a shocking finality on a game that seems set to continue forever without gravity or consequence.

This situation is allegorical of the semiotic process, as it dramatises the unaccountable jump from affectless procedural logic to essential value and meaning, the illicit possessiveness of desire, as a fundamental principle behind the workings of the human world. K is cast only briefly in this role as a tamer of the wilderness, as something of a tourist; a naïve commentator who is afforded a brief glimpse of the workings of violence from the viewpoint of the aggressor. As a relative stranger to the role of the hunter K offers
an insightful perspective on the workings of desire, one that is not compromised by a
deep wish to uphold the sanctity of *logos*, for he has no vested interest in the eminence of
spoken reason. This is a role that he adopts momentarily, rather than a fundamental
principle upon which, in the manner of Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, he bases his notion of
selfhood.

These passages from the fiction of Kafka and Coetzee focus attention on the arbitrary
violence of imposing an ending upon any story, whether it is the story of the self (brought
to an end by naïve or deceitful confession that claims totality) or that of the other (brought
to an end by violence, physical or discursive). They offer reflection not only on the violent
nature of semiosis, but also upon the reductiveness of reason itself. To bolster his
confidence and remind himself of his task K thinks: “They have many thoughts, I have
only one thought, my one thought will in the end be stronger than their many” (72). Like
Dawn, he establishes himself in the role of the omniscient author/narrator, an organising
intellect that imposes order and meaning on disorganised and ambiguous milieu. By
reducing the various conceptual elements of his situation to a single coherent narrative (the
story of the hunt) that consigns to the domain of the nonsensical that which cannot be
totalised (the uncooperativeness of the goats, the awkwardness of actually killing one) K
draws upon the sense of purpose and epistemological solidity imparted even by such *ad
hoc* reasoning. In doing so he reveals the arbitrariness and absurdly restricted horizons of
all reason, as his hunt turns into a delirious chase across the plains. Here K most fully
adopts the role of the hunter, taking a leaf out of Eugene Dawn’s book by reducing his
encounter with the world to a single unequivocal line of reason that disavows ambiguity
and plurality.

Desire, it is shown, is driven by the promise of the absolute; the promise of food and
physical accomplishment represented by the goat, the epistemological mastery promised
by others who appear to be privy to secret truths that may likewise be assimilated to the sovereignty of the self through possessive acts of aggression, physical or discursive. But as K discovers early on in life and accepts with equanimity, this transcendent correspondence between representation and reality is an illusion generated and perpetuated by language, an impossible signified posited and apotheosised by a hermetic circle of signifiers. The project of bringing that which is other under the sovereignty of the self proves unsatisfying as the true object of desire, the secret truth of the Other, always eludes even the most proficient hunter: once caught, the body of the other becomes familiar and mundane, while its essential nature remains elusive, a ghost in the machine. While the body is vulnerable as an object, the essential nature of the Other proves enigmatic, an ungraspable essence that somehow transcends the physical and is thus inaccessible even to the brutal dissections carried out figuratively by Eugene Dawn and literally by Jacobus Coetzee. Unlike Jacobus Coetzee K learns this lesson – or knows it intuitively – and turns away from the empty temptations of semiosis to a faith in his own existence that is, in social terms, nihilistic, as it makes no provision for the future and fails to account for the past, focusing solely on the present.

Thus K more generally finds himself in the role of the hunted, one who is forever struggling to free himself from the “nets of meaning” cast over him by others, but who refuses to respond in turn, with competing narratives that utilise the same strategies of reduction and assimilation. While his thoughts are insightful enough, as his inner monologue shows, they lack focus and constantly drift away from, or altogether fail to engage with, the matter in hand. Unable to offer a narrative of his own to compete with the narratives of those around him he is condemned to be interpellated by their stories, as he cannot offer resistance on equal terms.

K’s aversion to all forms of organised production serves to indicate that all exchangeable
products of human labour organise the world about a central, controlling self in the same way that narrative does. K is simply not a person who constructs, in any systematic way. He is capable of many things – indeed, at some things, such as handiwork and physical labour, he is more capable than most – but on the whole is deterred from committing himself to any but the most simple of projects by the metaphysical implications carried by all forms of construction.

Perhaps the most significant of these projects is that of fencing – the arbitrary and final division of the world into that which is inside and that which is outside; that which is the Same and that which is Other. It proves one of few paths open to K that offers the possibility of gaining capital in the economy of human relations, in terms of status and respectability as well as monetary profit. While he enjoys the task of fencing as pure and largely undirected labour, when it comes to the metaphysical act of dividing the landscape into sectors, subjecting a continuous body of land to the laws of ownership and commodification, he is repelled by the idea of pursuing such a trade:

Ducking through the fences, he could feel a craftsman’s pleasure in wire spanned so taut that it hummed when it was plucked. Nonetheless, he could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land. He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp or butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust. (133)

K prefers to inhabit the spaces that exist between the fences erected by others rather than staking out his own territory, seeking out unaccounted-for gaps whose existence the totalising discourses of ownership and cartography disavow: “He wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see” (64).
He is able to think deeply about various aspects of his life and experience, but shies away from linking his thoughts together and extrapolating from them in order to make deductions, leaving them as disconnected meditations characterised by mild confusion. A further example of his aversion to producing anything that endures in his wake or commodifies his labour is his construction of a ramshackle home on the Visagie farm following his return from Jakkalsdrif labour camp. During his first stay on the farm he occupies the house used by the previous owners. Upon his return however, he feels that in doing so he had asserted ownership and dominion of the land, establishing himself as an authoritative figure controlling a segment of territory from the symbolic centrality of the homestead. Repudiating what little purchase this tentative claim to authority has lent him in the world of human affairs (his encounter with the Visagies’ grandson initiates an uncomfortable relationship in which he vacillates between contempt and obsequiousness, unable to assert himself but unwilling to submit fully to a person he considers childish and incapable) he decides to build for himself, in an out-of-the-way corner of the farm with a dam and water pump, a ‘burrow;’ an arrangement of rocks and corrugated iron so loosely constructed as to be almost unidentifiable as a habitation:

I should have laid a bed of stones beneath the sand, he thought; and I should have allowed myself an eave. But then he thought: I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations. What I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heartstrings. (135)

His aim is to carry on an isolated existence independently of society, sheltering in a minimally functional dwelling that makes no implicit claim to meaningful placement in the overarching discourses of ownership and socio-cultural affiliation. Living in this makeshift shelter almost entirely detached from the rest of society, K achieves a form of transcendence, entering a state in which all abstract projects, grand and trivial alike, fade before the uninterrupted and unabstracted immanence of an embodied existence.
The protagonist of Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate of a small border town stirred by its central government into an anarchic frenzy over the largely imaginary threat of the indigenous people who live in the wilderness beyond the city walls, laments the interpellating power of Western “Empire,” a social order that dictates the very terms of temporality:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons, but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. (133)

The ‘time of empire’ is built upon projects and actions; it is a time measured in tasks accomplished, stories begun and ended. This treatment of socially regimented temporality is part of a broader preoccupation, throughout Coetzee’s work, with the insidious influence of acculturation; more specifically, with the tendency of western thought to apprehend the world in terms of objects and actions, rather than states. This issue is raised explicitly by Coetzee himself in *Doubling the Point*: “On the one hand we tend to excerpt objects out of the endless flow of nature because we have nouns that predispose us to do so, while on the other we see actions and forces where our verbs predispose us to see them” (183).

K, by comparison, comes to lead an existence beyond the sort of regimented time lamented by the magistrate, as he reclines in his new habitation:

...he was learning to love idleness, idleness as no longer stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flower-bed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids. He was neither pleased nor
displeased when there was work to do; it was all the same. (158)

It is during this utopian state of complete independence from the social body that K arrives at a state of what might be called transcendence. However, as soon as he relaxes into this perfect state concerns crowd into his mind, as the residual voice of social reason continually brings his attention back to concerns of possession and accomplishment. In particular, the wellbeing of the two melons that have grown amongst the pumpkins he has planted causes him a great deal of anxiety: “He did not know what he would do if he lost his two beloved melons” (161). The pathos of this passage indicates that K finds it impossible to value something without feeling possessive of it in some way, as well as being apprehensive at the possibility that it may be lost.

Like the existential protagonist and like the theorist who seeks to walk the impossible line between logical exegesis and faithfulness to that which is beyond logic, K is caught between reason and unreason; while his relative alienation makes it possible for him to see the arbitrariness of human reason and posit the existence of aporeas in this avowedly hermetic domain, he is nevertheless beset by fears and doubts that force their way into his consciousness, even in his most utopian moments. Even K, it seems, is unable to distance himself from the morass of human congress sufficiently to pursue a pure and wholly unabstracted mode of existence. Again, transcendence threatens to remain something of an impossible dream, an ideal state temptingly indicated by the very language that ties the self to the matrix of differentiated terms circulated by the social body. The elusiveness of transcendence and the practical impossibility of pure being are demonstrated by the fact that K’s existence on the farm proves to be physically unsustainable; he comes close to starvation, and is only saved from death by the soldiers who come to dismantle his shelter and take him back to a labour camp. His turn away from reason and towards a purely physical existence is partially successful – the nature of a truly transcendent existence is indicated – but ultimately unsustainable, as it necessarily involves the repudiation of all
directed projects, including that of survival. His body as a physical organism proves incapable of sustaining itself without the intervention of at least some measure of pragmatic, instrumental reason.

Here the pragmatic effectiveness of the committed or transcendent existence is called into question, a doubt that is likewise raised in both *Disgrace* and in *Elizabeth Costello*. Transcendence is by nature apolitical; a state of apathy that is totally disengaged from the social and as such cannot attain final victory over *logos*, cannot become consolidated as an alternative mode of existence, because it has no substance as a directed project. The purely embodied existence has, by nature, no purchase in the domain of language and reason, and thus no defenses against a politicised milieu that demands active narrative and counter-narrative for the formation of recognisable identity.

As noted above, K's transcendence of social concerns is marred by his continual fear that he may be discovered and called to account in some way, a demand to which he has proven ill-equipped to respond. Every moment of freedom is tainted by apprehension at the thought of his discovery and forceful re-assimilation to the world of human affairs: "He could not sleep but lay on his bed of grass beneath the oven-heat of the roof straining his ears for the sounds that would herald his discovery" (144).

In a dream an old man warns him off the land, a further indication that social convention and the interpellating power of the law have left him with a residue of guilt and anxiety: "He bent over K gripping his shoulder. 'You must get off the land!' he said. K tried to shrug him off but the claw gripped tighter. 'You will get into trouble!' the old man hissed" (163).

Throughout the novel, K's resistance to all discourses, aggressive and benign, within
which he might be accommodated and defined, confounds the various representatives of logos whom he encounters. However, just as his impenetrable nature goes some way towards freeing him from the oppressive regime that controls the country, this ‘woodenness’ also entails his abstention from those narratives within which reciprocal participation would prove beneficial. On his journey to St Albert, following the death of his mother, K is offered lodging for the night by a man with a wife and two children. Although he accepts this offer, K is uncomfortable being the object of charity and unable to offer thanks, especially when it becomes evident that they are helping him in accordance with a system of belief, rather than out of some genuine impulse that recognises his specificity: “People must help each other, that’s what I believe” (65).

K is a figure whose enigmatic nature serves to undermine reason in every system of meaning he encounters. This failure of the rational is depicted in K’s metaphor of his own lineage: “He tried to imagine a figure standing alone a the head of the line, a woman in a shapeless grey dress who came from no mother; but when he had to think of the silence in which she lived, the silence of time before the beginning, his mind baulked” (161). In a dramatisation of the infinite regress faced by the reflective self K’s inward search for self-truth ends in a failure of reason before the idea of infinity.

K provokes a similar re-appraisal of social reason in the last camp in which he is held, Kenilworth, whose authorities no longer have the strength of purpose required to overlook or forcibly assimilate this rogue term. The climax of K’s encounter with the monolithic institutional order that attempts to contain him is reached in his metaphorical pursuit by the medical officer of this camp, a benign figure who feels respect for K’s tenacious resistance and who tries, respectfully, to understand him. He imagines following K as he leaves the camp, in the hope of being led to a space between the fences, a space in which the “grinding of the wheels of history” (220) cannot be heard:
...I am convinced there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of camps – certain mountaintops, for example, certain islands in the middle of swamps, certain arid strips where human beings may not find it worth their while to live. I am looking for such a place in order to settle there, perhaps only till things improve, perhaps forever. I am not so foolish, however, as to imagine that I can rely on maps and roads to guide me. Therefore I have chosen you to show me the way. (223)

Even as this dream-like sequence begins the real K has already gone, having escaped from the poorly fortified camp in a characteristically innocuous way. The very act of apprehension itself precludes the capture of its object, as it acts to impose an artificial finitude that is exceeded by the vitality of a being still making its way through the world. The medical officer is struck by K’s absolute imperviousness to the various institutions that have tried to contain him, wondering at his defiant transcendence of these hermetic systems:

...when the state stamped Michaels with a number and gobbled him down it was wasting its time. For Michaels has passed through the bowels of the state undigested; he has emerged from its camps as intact as he emerged from its schools and orphanages. (221)

Eventually, however, after resisting so effectively for so long against the various camps and authorities, K succumbs slightly to the temptations of social inclusion as the rigid bureaucratic structures of military rule, easily identified and rebelled against, are replaced by the more flexible but equally efficient mechanisms of interpellation woven into seemingly innocent human relations. In this final chapter of the novel K sinks back somewhat into the easy rhythm of social life. At the beginning of this section, following his escape from Jakkalsdrif, the reader finds K lying on a beach back at the Cape where he lived with his mother, sunning himself: “At peace, on familiar ground, grateful for the warmth of the day, K sighed and slowly let his head sag sideways” (233).
On the beach he encounters a confidently outspoken man accompanied by a group of women who appear to be prostitutes. In a symbolic act of beneficence, while others watch intently, the man offers K something to eat: “The stranger recovered himself and cut a thick slice of bread, which he decorated with loops and swirls of condensed milk and presented to K. With everyone watching, K ate” (237). The ‘loops and swirls’ emphasise the elaborate formality of the gesture, which itself is not a donation of food so much as a ritual that establishes the roles of beneficiary and benefactor. Like many of the characters in this novel, these people do not appear to feel any real empathy for K, but instead play out social roles that involve the dispensation of charity. Their actions towards K, while assertive, are distant and formulaic, and the man’s attempt to rob him while he sleeps shows that they feel no real sense of commitment to his wellbeing that goes beyond this general ideological bias. K recognises the superficiality and interpellating power of all such beneficence, avoiding it as he avoids the more aggressive assimilating drive of the labour camps: “I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (249).

However, he proves less capable of resisting this more seductive form of interpellation, giving in to the pressures of simple social etiquette that in turn lead into a deeper acceptance of social relations. Despite his lack of hunger K accepts wine from the man, accepts (or at least does not resist) the advances of his female companion, feels shame for doing so and afterwards is surprised at the impulses that even this small concession to the ‘natural’ patterns of life has awakened in him: “He watched their backsides ascend the steps and surprised in himself an urge to dig his fingers into that soft flesh” (245).

Following K’s triumph over the rigid protocols of the camp, this final chapter presents the unnerving possibility that, even for K himself, his journey away from the Cape was merely
a brief foray into his own otherness rather than the hard-won attainment of an enduring state of authenticity. All he is left with by the end is a dream that he will one day find someone with whom he can share his 'parasitic' existence, a father-like figure divested of paternal authority, one who will not force or expect him to play out a stylised role of any sort:

They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching the back streets for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o'clock... (250)

*Life and Times of Michael K* dramatises the tension between its own drive to present an alien and iconoclastic subject from whose viewpoint the illusory totality of society's determining networks becomes absurdly transparent, and the understanding that all representation inevitably captures its object in a reductive conceptual order that serves only to reinforce this very totality. This novel shows that while it is tempting to put forward a figure of absolute otherness against which the commonly obscured deficiencies of the familiar may be revealed, the representation of this state of enigmatic alterity is continually compromised by the desire of the speaking or thinking subject to gain conceptual control of all that is encountered, a desire for closure and finitude that, as is implied by other texts such as *Dusklands*, may be endemic to discourse itself rather than a product of the individual will.

Michael K is not a truly transcendent figure, one who escapes fully from the morass of human society to live peacefully on his own terms; he is not an existential hero who triumphantly rejects the superficial patterns of the social in favour of personal authenticity. Instead, he presents an alternative to figures such as Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, one who proves that it is possible to challenge the edifice of reason and question the legitimacy of commonly accepted social practice, if not to escape either of these
formations fully. His thorough alienation from all things social serves to bring into relief the constructedness of various forms of knowledge, particularly the inflexible categorisations of a bureaucratic government. Although he cannot offer a viable solution to the failings of social reason and eventually falls back into its patterns, K give an impression of what such transcendence might look like, a sketch of absolute distinction between reason and unreason.
Chapter Four:

*Life and Times of Michael K* considers closely the tacit claims of social reason and those of its underlying component, desire, from the perspective of an alienated character to whom the language of reason seems an absurd game, transparent in its foreignness. In *Disgrace*, the protagonist is, at least in his initial guise, affiliated to the opposite camp; an authorised proponent of reason who, the developing narrative shows, is unable or unwilling to maintain the façade of respectable self-possession that this position demands. David Lurie fails to maintain outward control of his desire for the Other, is denounced publicly, and subsequently falls from 'grace,' the state of authorised self-possession afforded him by the institution of the university for which he works. His indecorous display of reason's formally disavowed undercurrents is condemned by the very milieu that has supported him, an academic body that expels him in order to maintain its own appearance of integrity before the wider community.

In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the monolith of reason is manifest in obvious, Kafkaesque forms. It is figured, for the most part, as a rampant and self-sustaining bureaucracy against which the individual struggles to attain existential autonomy. Readily identifiable as arbitrary social difference engine rather than a natural order, especially by an inherently disinterested figure such as K, it is all too easily questioned, and is thus offered as something of a straw figure against which the infinitely more robust phenomenon of the pre-reflective self may be defined through weighted dialectic.

*Disgrace* presents an apparently more moderate scenario, a set of characters who do not live in such demanding times and do not enact their roles in the conflict between reason and being to the same degrees of extremity as those found in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Nor does *logos* present itself so obviously as a vehicle of rigid oppression. Rather, it is
manifest generally as the rational order of polite western society, and more particularly as
the tradition of academia by means of which institution, among others, this order is
perpetuated. However, despite the relatively benign and respectable form taken by *logos* in
*Disgrace* as compared to *Life and Times of Michael K* a similarly brutal determinism
underwrites its operations. Possessive desire, for either conceptual or sexual mastery of the
other, constitute the disavowed subtexts of the overtly dispassionate ideologies of
academic discourse and political paternalism, representing a formally unaccounted-for
movement from the phlegmatic permutation of terms to an insatiable drive towards
absolute mastery.

Desire is a covert essentialism that in literary, academic reason, as in all such
manifestations of *logos*, contradicts the systematic outward display of reason by positing
an impossible absolute, a truth possessed by the other that must be grasped in order to
realise the transcendent unity of the self. The relatively subtle claims to mastery contained
in academic discourse are paralleled in the novel by Lurie’s more obviously illicit rehearsal
of possessive sexual desire. His impulsive affair with a young student – one whose
authority, particularly in an academic setting, is disproportionately minor compared with
his own – serves to draw this parallel by bringing the commonly overlooked undercurrent
of desire into direct conflict with the avowed respectability of the academic institution.

As an ageing professor, Lurie finds his continued attempts to rationalise both himself and
his world confounded by the impulses of his own desire, as well as by the intractable
alterity of others who resist his possessive grasp. While sexual desire is the most obvious
force operative in this situation (the sequence of events traced by the novel is set in motion
by Lurie’s affair), it is possible to read this narrative as a more general comment on the
workings of desire, and on the respectable sectors of society that bring significant
resources to bear in their attempts to conceal the existence of this dark undercurrent. In
particular, the issue of paternalism – the question of at which point paternalistic relationships move from commitment to desire; from altruistic supervision to the megalomaniacal drive for absolute control that stifles, rather than protects, the other – presents an informative case in which the somewhat abstract concepts of desire and commitment find expression as recognisable forces in the world. *Disgrace* features a more moderate consideration of the distinction between desire and commitment than that which appears in *Life and Times of Michael K*, as Lurie’s relationship with his daughter demonstrates that some measure of paternalistic intervention is necessary in order to protect those without power from the violence and injustice that is inevitable in the world. At the same time, it is evident that in his relationships with both of these young women Lurie has at some stage overstepped the mark, moving from benign assertiveness to possessive aggression, despite the apparent honesty of his introspective musings. Thus a question of degree is introduced into a distinction that has hitherto been considered as a binary. Paternalism, *Disgrace* demonstrates, is not straightforwardly categorisable as either a politically elaborated analogue of desire or as a straightforward example of selfless commitment, but rather is a general mode of relation within the bounds of which either form of gesture is possible. By accepting, even relishing his fall from a respectable bourgeois lifestyle to a socially and physically ascetic existence in which he is stripped of virtually all authority and dignity, Lurie appears to attain some measure of salvation, if not the transcendent awareness of self and world posited as the utopian dream of *Life and Times of Michael K*. Thus the absolute technical distinction between desire and commitment – or at a more fundamental level, between reason and being – is called into question.

As a professor at the Technical University of Cape Town, Lurie is a figure of some authority. He is also, however, something of an anachronism in the sceptical and economically savvy climate of modern academia as he specialises in Romantic poetry, a
subject considered obsolete by the new regime due to its waning financial viability. For the most part he is required to teach courses in “communication skills”, a generic title that suggests a cynical and utilitarian approach to the study of the humanities:

Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications. Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale. (3)

In this new, ‘rationalised’ environment, certain space is allocated for indulgence, a measured concession to the human need for interest and excitement. In this way desire is controlled by formal discourse, subordinated to a fully accountable order that quantifies irrational impulse as an outlet by which productivity is maintained. In the anti-essentialist climate of a modern academia that claims complete self-possession, Lurie’s alignment with the passionate essentialism of Romantic literature renders him a liability, formally accredited but in reality somewhat under-equipped to occupy a position that demands a display of enthusiasm as well as technical proficiency:

He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age. (4)

The rationalisation of the university places Lurie, among others, in an awkward position between formal economic accountability and the tacit expectation that his teaching remain true to the apostolic spirit of literary criticism by inspiring passion and enthusiasm in his students. He is forced to reconcile the demands of institutionalised academic reason with those of desire, two competing influences in his life held together in exemplary and productive tension by the corpus of romantic literature in which he traces his own artistic
influences.

This minor but telling vocational quandary is paralleled by a more hazardous duplicity in which he juggles his professional and private lives. The novel begins with Lurie’s account of his apparently successful efforts to reconcile his need for sexual contact with the outward respectability upon which his career depends: “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1).

The narrative goes on to outline the arrangements he has made for weekly, ninety-minute liaisons with an “Exotic” escort named Soraya (7). Lurie’s meetings with Soraya serve to partition his life in the same way that the university allocates a small but necessary sector of time and resources to what it now considers to be eccentric courses. Desire is given controlled outlet rather than repressed or denied, lest it resurface in a more intemperate and damaging form.

These meetings are arranged by an escort agency, which also leases an apartment for the purpose. In an act of overreaching that prefigures his later relationship with Melanie Isaacs, Lurie transgresses his own code of distinction between personal and professional lifestyles when he tries to contact Soraya personally. Shortly after he sees her in a shop with her two sons and catches her eye Soraya leaves the agency, telling him that she is going to see her sick mother. He tracks her down with the help of a private detective and calls her at home, provoking an angry response: “I don’t know who you are,’ she says. ‘You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never’” (10).

This episode sets the scene for the relationship that follows, between Lurie and a young student, establishing him as a sacrificial figure who embodies the irresolvable tension
between polite society and its own latent but inevitable undercurrents. He takes advantage of the power and mystique his position lends him to seduce a girl in his class on romantic literature, Melanie Isaacs. It is a short-lived affair and she is passively resistant throughout, unwilling but clearly intimidated by his social and professional standing. As Lurie himself notes, the relationship is entirely one-sided: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25).

This statement shows Lurie to be fully aware of the inappropriateness of the situation, but at the same time compliant to the "rights of desire" (89). Like many of Coetzee's characters, his actions follow an unwaveringly solipsistic path despite his reasoned and often rigorous self-critique, leading to a catastrophic manifestation of the desire so carefully hidden behind society's established procedures. Instead of indicating to him a proper or prudent course of action his philosophies accommodate themselves to his actions, often retrospectively. As long as he is able to fit his actions into an elegant and workable model of human nature and society, through whatever logical or rhetorical means, his 'confessions' operate effectively as 'self-serving fictions.' While he fully understands the dim view society takes of such relationships between teachers and students, these meditations retain sufficient integrity as works of the intellect to stand firm against any moral arguments that may be brought to bear. In this way, Lurie avoids accounting for his actions on all but the most abstract and impersonal of levels, in terms that do not engage with the specificity of those to whom he relates.

It is not long before moral arguments are, in fact, brought to bear, by a university committee established to investigate charges of misconduct laid by Melanie Isaacs. Before this committee Lurie positions himself as a pariah by refusing to treat reason (specifically the legal logo-rationalism employed by the university in disciplining him) as a totalising discourse, instead condemning it as a specific and limited discursive realm that is incapable
of engaging meaningfully with the transcendent realm of sexuality. By doing so he points out, if somewhat obliquely, the existence of reason’s blind spot to its own undercurrent of desire, its brittle self-possession that implies the existence and significance of passion, but has no language appropriate to the task of describing or quantifying it.

The few allies that he has tend to take a pragmatic view of the situation, suggesting measures by which Melanie, the university and various other parties, including the aggressively named ‘Women Against Rape’ group, may be appeased. Lurie, however, mistrusts these recommendations as poorly veiled demands for a media-driven spectacle of repentance, representative of an improper drive to extend the nominal grasp of an inherently self-deceived logos over the domain of spiritual confession formally assigned to religious and romantic discourses. As Coetzee points out in “Confession and Double Thoughts,” a true confession requires a perfect, divine confessor in order for the process to result in final absolution, the impossible emergence, into the world, of the absolute. In semiotic terms, the self’s spoken account of the self demands a reader sensitive to every possible meaning contained in this speech act in order for judgement to be passed without inscience or partiality. It is inevitable that the members of the committee will not, individually or collectively, possess such inhuman sensitivity to the depth of meaning contained in every statement, and as such, Lurie’s argument implies, are inadequate to the task of hearing his confession.

Having been called to account by a secular committee that deals solely with the rational and manifest, anything above and beyond the formally recognised terms of legal debate belongs, Lurie believes, to the alternative domains of romantic or religious discourse. Thus he enters a formal plea of ‘guilty’ to the charges brought against him but refuses to repent, claiming that such moral engagement is simply beyond the scope of legal discourse:
'I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.' (58)

In making this statement Lurie challenges the avowedly universal scope of legal discourse, perhaps the most overtly totalising of languages in which every truth must be spoken in order to have meaning or value. In the modern academic climate portrayed in Disgrace passion is seen, from both academic and administrative viewpoints, as an effect of discourse, a quantifiable and replicable phenomenon that can justifiably be allocated a delimitable place in a wider discursive order. Where passion exceeds its assigned parameters, as in the case of Lurie's affair, the responses of foes and allies alike tend strongly towards pragmatism; his lawyer suggests that he “take a yellow card,” accepting disciplinary action and counselling to minimise the damage to his career, while other friends and family voice similarly sensible opinions (42). Everyone but Lurie seems to agree that for all intents and purposes there is nothing inaccessible to the grasp of reasoned response, no aberration or crime that cannot be abrogated by working through established procedures. All believe that appearing to enter into the spirit of emotionally engaged repentance demanded by the tribunal, rather than going through the formal motions of plea and sentence, will bring the matter to a satisfactory close. Lurie, however, continues to distinguish between private guilt and public accountability: “I have no challenge in a legal sense,” he replies. ‘I have reservations of a philosophical kind, but I suppose they are out of bounds’” (47).

Such unwillingness to engage on common terms is not looked upon kindly by the strictly rational discourse employed by the university when it comes to serious matters for which formal accountability must be total. At least one member of the committee regards these responses as “fundamentally evasive,” demanding that he engage at an emotional level by demonstrating contrition rather than making impassive and disengaged statements that
admit his legal culpability but go no further. The committee demands "an admission that you were wrong" rather than a confession of technical guilt (54). Such engagement would validate the totalising scope of the legal discourse employed by the university in this matter, maintaining the institution's respectability by demonstrating that while individuals may transgress its codes, as an integrated whole (an ideal, abstract construct, akin to the unity and self-possession commonly attributed to the self) its administrative procedures are capable of effectively reasserting formal and accountable order without awkward remainder. They are dissatisfied with his stance that the discourse of justice is paralleled by that of passion, an arena of roughly equivalent value and significance in which the logorational has no purchase. This stance is consolidated by Lurie's claim that he became, for the duration of the affair, a "servant of Eros;" that he was operating in accordance with a second, alternative value system rather than merely transgressing the boundaries of the first (52).

This demand for a spectacle of contrition is caused in large part by the media interest that comes to surround Lurie's case. Because of the publicity that this case has attracted the university is forced to make an example of him in order to maintain its respectability in the eyes of the wider community. Aram Hakim, the head of the disciplinary committee, acknowledges the effects of this pressure: "Ideally we would all have preferred to resolve this case out of the glare of the media. But that has not been possible. It has received a lot of attention, it has acquired overtones that are beyond our control. All eyes are on the university to see how we handle it" (53-4).

Thus the investigative process is abstracted even further from what Lurie considers the irreducible specifics of passion, to the crude terms of modern media in which subtleties and fine distinctions are reduced to sensationalist binaries of victimised innocence and incorrigible guilt. Department chair Manas Mathabane makes a final entreaty to Lurie to
publicly affirm the fairness and totalising scope of the law by signing a brief statement of contrition written by members of the committee. Lurie forces the university to expel him by refusing to sign this statement, and leaves Cape Town itself shortly afterwards.

It is possible to read Lurie’s expulsion by the university as the sacrificial expulsion of a failed term, the banishment of an internal anomaly that threatens to throw the orderly system (which may be the self, the text, or, as in this case an important social formation; the institution of the university) into disarray by revealing the untenable duality that exists beneath its orderly surface. This is a process illustratively prefigured by a critical essay written by Coetzee and entitled “Achterberg and the Poetics of Failure.” In this text Coetzee identifies in works such as Achterberg’s “Ballade Van der Gasfitter” and in the drama of Samuel Beckett a common process by which the failure of a work of art to reconcile its formal semantic logic with the vision of transcendence that this very structure revolves impossibly about is nullified by the elusive regression of the speaking voice, or subject position.

In the case of “Ballade van der Gasfitter,” Coetzee argues, this process of defensive regression involves the splitting off of the ‘I’ that fails to bring the transcendent ‘You’ to consciousness, relegating it to the third person in order to maintain the integrity of the true, but eternally elusive, I. As Coetzee notes, this self-division is the start of an infinite regression, a paring back of the self’s manifest form in a futile approach to an ever-retreating core. It is possible to view the university’s expulsion of Lurie in light of this regressive process, as a literalised and collective version of the individual’s existential concerns. The university acts to rid itself of those figures that fail to reconcile desire (the romantic ideal of ‘true’ humanity, manifest in accordance with innate human impulse) and duty (the formal ideal of the perfect, politically correct, institution in which all actions are accounted for and prefigured by finite law). Because of the unbridgeable gulf between
these two incommensurate drives, equivalent to signified and signifier, any figure that actually tries to reconcile them will inevitably fail and be expelled. These instances of failure, sporadic proofs of the reality that any body, individual or collective, that tries to reconcile transcendence with the technical complicity that produces or implies it will destroy itself by revealing its own duality, must be distanced and disavowed in order to maintain the body's outward illusion of direction and unity.

In *Disgrace* the university, and thus reason in general, the grand order for which the university stands, cripples itself by disavowing its own latent desire through the process of rationalisation, and must shed sacrificial elements such as Lurie in order to maintain its illusory core of integrity. Just as the written, symbolic *I* inevitably fails to bring the *You* into being and must thus be cast off in order to preserve the unity of the self, by openly acting out the internal contradictions of reason, Lurie forces the university to expel him.

Following his expulsion Lurie enters a state of disgrace from which the novel takes its title, a period of abasement in which his loss of institutional authority is both mirrored and compounded by his loss of social authority in its various forms. He travels to stay with his daughter Lucy in her country smallholding, a block of land on which she grows flowers and vegetables to sell at a market, and looks after dogs whose owners are either away or have no need of them.

From the beginning Lurie's tendency to occupy a paternalistic standpoint and intellectualise the problems that face both of them brings him into conflict with his daughter, an independent woman who lives a relatively straightforward country life characterised by passive stoicism and an unwillingness to deal with weighty issues in abstract terms. Having been expelled from the domain of formal intellectual thought for his revealing demonstration of its internal contradictions, Lurie is again forced to assess the
relevance of reasoned analysis to his personal existence by Lucy's contention that "...there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (74). While Lurie holds to traditional ideologies of formal accreditation and demonstrable accomplishment purveyed by the education system of which he has been a part, seeking to give his life purpose and structure by writing an opera on the exhausted but poignant relationship between Byron and his mistress, Teresa, it is evident that his authority as a middle-aged, male exponent of a highly sophisticated branch of logos is being eroded by the objections of one who, as his daughter, occupies what would traditionally be seen as a subordinate position. Like many of Coetzee's characters Lucy mistrusts what she sees as the blinkered, pretentious language of reason, preferring to deal in concrete experiences without resorting to thematisation or other mechanisms of abstraction such as bourgeois philosophising or literary tropology; means by which the world is brought under the control of logos.

Lucy's pragmatic counters to Lurie's various intellectual views and arguments demonstrate that his actions remain governed primarily by the latent desire of rationalism; specifically, the desire to bring the complex world of human relations in which he finds himself under his intellectual control, to assimilate all that he encounters – others, animals, dilemmas both practical and social – to the hermetic domain of that which is subject to the sovereignty of the self.

As has been the case with Lurie's relationships early in the novel, this relatively good-natured difference of opinion prefigures a later scenario of far greater gravity in which the tension between lived existence and abstract reason carries serious implications for the lives of the characters, and in particular for their relationships to one another. Returning to the house from a walk in the country, Lurie and Lucy are confronted by three black men who they have never seen before. After talking their way into the house on the pretext of
making a phone call the trio assault Lurie, rape Lucy, steal a few items from the house and shoot all but one of the dogs in her care. Father and daughter respond very differently to this act of violence. Lurie feels protective of Lucy and ashamed at his inability to protect her, favoring full disclosure of the event and legal pursuit of the offenders. Lucy herself, on the contrary, prefers to think of the attack as a personal issue that cannot be resolved by recourse to the impersonal arena of legal or moral discourse.

In her scepticism towards Lurie’s outwardly measured, pragmatic approach she occupies a similar position to Lurie’s own before the university’s committee of inquiry, placing Lurie in a position analogous to that of the committee itself and demonstrating that he still carries with him the influence of paternalistic reason. Despite his earlier protestations, before the university committee, of the restricted horizons of legal reason and its inappropriateness to a situation driven by passion rather than logic, in Lucy’s eyes Lurie clearly stands for just such reason, representing reductive logic at its most blunt and uncompromising.

Unable to make this point without lapsing into the language of sober, instrumental reason of which her father is a master, and thus surrendering the specificity of her experience to his alienating rationalism, she responds to his protective advances with mute resistance: “‘My dearest child!’ he says. He follows her into the cage and tries to take her in his arms. Gently, decisively, she wriggles loose” (97).

By this action, Lucy indicates that her father’s apparently benign gestures may carry the same potential for discursive violence as their more outwardly aggressive counterparts. Protective paternalism, her response implies, may be a stifling act of discursive power rather than an indication of genuine and selfless concern for the wellbeing of another. Lurie himself has noted the distant and disengaged nature of paternalism: “Being a father… I can’t help feeling that, by comparison with being a mother, being a father is a
rather abstract business” (63).

In the wake of the attack, Lurie continues to hold fast to the comforting assurances of reason. Unwilling or unable to face the aftermath of the attack on a personal, emotional level, he turns to conceptual schematics as a familiar mechanism by which the situation may be comprehended, and thus brought under control:

Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. (98)

Formalistic, demonstrable comprehension is vital to Lurie’s sense of self and world, particularly in times of stress. Lucy, however, is further alienated by this approach. Lurie’s various attempts to understand her perspective by reasoning with her meet with hostility and exasperation, as she tries to explain her position without falling into the patriarchal and extra-personal language of reason. Her continued reticence and defensive comments show that she views reason as both aggressive and limited: “It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes” (161). Lucy’s moral order appears to be based in stoical pragmatism and a sense of temporality in which the past does not exert a strong influence on the present – a feminine answer to the “Time of Empire.” Of Lurie’s affair with Melanie Isaacs, she has commented: “...you have paid your price. Perhaps, looking back, she won’t think too harshly of you. Women can be surprisingly forgiving” (69).

The socially fractured aftermath of the attack emphasises the disjunction between extra-personal reason and lived experience, as shown by the existential overtones that
accompany his meditations on the event. Lurie is discomforted not only by his alienation from Lucy but by the intractable immediacy of the experience itself, as it is presented to him: “The day is not dead yet but living. War, atrocity: every word with which one tries to wrap up this day, the day swallows down its black throat” (102). As does Life and Times of Michael K, Disgrace borrows briefly from the emphatic language of existentialism in order to make clear the distance that opens between reason and lived existence in such times of extremity and trauma. Behind this passage, as with the meditations of Michael K as he faces a lonely death in the Karoo, lies the figure of the void, an enigmatic and insatiable space which accepts and swallows explanatory terms but is never filled by them, remaining forever irreducible to a synthetic artefact despite the terms that may be employed to surround it. This invocation of the existential void by Lurie suggests a failure of logos before an event too extreme to be contained and sanitised by reason, and recalls Roquentin’s semiotic incapacitation before the brute reality of the physical world that is presented to him.

Following this telling failure of reason on the two related fronts of self-knowledge and interpersonal relations Lurie’s regression to, or realignment with, the immediacy of lived experience is reflected in the increasing impulsiveness of his actions and feelings, which become less and less subject to the potentially stifling influence of rational introspection. In the weeks following the attack and his subsequent disagreements with Lucy, Lurie undertakes a series of personal projects, altruistic actions that set a very different tone from his previous attempts to engage meaningfully with others.

For reasons that are initially opaque, even to himself, Lurie journeys to Cape Town to visit the Isaacs family, the parents and sister of the student who denounced him to the university over their affair. The passage describing this episode begins at the Isaacs house without any explanatory material, indicating the impulsiveness of this action. Despite his desire to
make contact with the Isaacs, and in particular with David, Melanie’s father, Lurie is unsure of what he wants to say and, following a rambling and inappropriate attempt to explain himself, it is only after several promptings by Mr Isaacs that he actually apologises for his actions. Despite this almost fatherly guidance the apology is significant, as it represents the first time he has taken personal rather than technical responsibility for the affair, indicating a shift in the way he views the relationship between self and other: whereas at his hearing and throughout his time with Lucy he refers, in his dealings with others, to principles which are impersonal and abstract he chooses now to engage unconditionally at a less reflective and, apparently, authentic level. His emotional involvement with others is no longer subject to such heavy censure by his highly developed faculty of rational consideration, allowing traits such as empathy to gain expression without demands for reciprocity or accountable equality of social exchange.

In his conversation with Isaacs following a tense dinner at the family house Lurie continues to display contrition, despite finding him manipulative and overly eager to read religious meanings into Lurie’s situation: “Now he is sure of it: he does not like this man, does not like his tricks” (173). Here the distinctively secular nature of Lurie’s moral self-development and his scepticism towards the absolute answers promised by religion are made clear. While the path of personal salvation he is undertaking is loosely aligned with the doctrines of faith and grace put forward by organised religion, he appears to find the store placed by such institutions in unquestioned fatherly figures anathema to the growing open-mindedness and faith in concrete experience that have brought him, thus far, to some measure of secular absolution. In a statement that echoes Lucy’s argument that “‘Guilt and salvation are abstractions’” (112) Lurie explains to Isaacs his resolution to deal with his situation in concrete terms, and indicates that he has opted out of the social game of stylistic self-presentation in favour of unqualified acceptance of his lot: “‘I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have
refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being”’ (172).

Frustrated by Isaacs’s didactic manner Lurie rises to find Melanie’s mother and sister in the next room and kneels before them, apparently preferring a physical act of prostration to an inevitably awkward explanation and apology in which various agendas of self-representation will surely combine and conflict: “With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor” (173). This return to the simple language of the body in order to circumvent the impulse of desire – the drive to reassuring mastery and totality that insinuates itself into all speech, all narratives – is further indication of his commitment to the task of sincere apology, an attempt to bring the frustrating task of confession in which he is engaged with Mr Isaacs to an end by cutting across the circularities and dead-ends of logos.

This effort to reject the more obvious forms of desire in favour of committed openness continues on his return to the country. Lurie continues to volunteer his services to the animal clinic run by Bev Shaw; increasingly, it seems, out of a sense of duty rather than merely as a way of filling in time. To his surprise, he finds himself deeply affected by the process of euthanising the unwanted dogs, despite his previous disinclination to feel compassion or fellowship towards animals:

He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals. Although in an abstract way he disapproves of cruelty, he cannot tell whether by nature he is cruel or kind. . . . His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre. (143)

This daily slaughter of the stray dogs turns out to be a grimly repetitive process that Lurie finds unexpectedly affecting. Whereas previously he may have reduced the deaths of these dogs to figures in a sanitised economy of supply and demand in order to understand why
and how such a number of dogs come to be surplus to society’s demands or resources, he now finds himself responsive to their specific fates, irrespective of whether their deaths may be necessary and inevitable in the wider scheme of things. Despite this apparent upwelling of sensitivity, Lurie reflects that his actions are still motivated, at the most basic level, by self-interest:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (145-6)

It seems that by giving his attention to the dead dogs in this way Lurie is committing an act of compassion, an act that goes some way towards expiating him from the sins of aggressive paternalism he has committed towards both Melanie Isaacs and his daughter. However, at a technical level, his actions towards the dogs are no more honourable than those he commits to these two younger women. Not only are they still motivated to some extent by the selfish drive to maintain his reassuring picture of the world in which he lives, his efforts have no measurable force in the real world of financial and logistical dilemmas and solutions. Such commitment as he shows in this case is, strictly speaking, a complete departure from the terms of reason in favour of what are, in the most literal sense, meaningless acts: “He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded” (146). Thus his efforts fail, technically, on two counts: they fail to transcend the morass of desire, and they have no impact in the real world, a world in which animals and people will inevitably suffer and die. Lurie himself is fully aware of the ineffectuality of what he is doing, commenting: “It will be little enough, less than little: nothing” (220).
Just as Michael K's solitary existence on the Visagie farm in no way constitutes a triumphant escape from the laws and more subtle influences of the social body in the terms of useful, political action, the gestures Lurie makes towards the dead dogs are entirely worthless. Commitment, it seems, is something of an imaginary ideal, an effete doctrine that carries no weight in the harsh and demanding reality of South Africa. Nevertheless, the contrast that does exist between these acts – Lurie's confession before the Isaacs Family, the duties he performs for the dead dogs – and his former lifestyle in which desire operates as a much more uncompromisingly manifest drive, indicates that the attempt to do the impossible, to transcend desire, carries some value. Adding emphasis to this contrast, the final statement of the novel goes some way further towards freeing Lurie's nascent moral order from the grip of desire:

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

'Yes, I am giving him up.' (220)

This act of absolute withdrawal from a fate that is not his own appears to show that within totalising structures like paternalism there is some room to move; room to make gestures that, while strictly speaking engage in totalising aggression, are nonetheless based on a repudiation of the more obvious forms of desire, to a greater or lesser degree. Even though acts do not fully transcend the overarching mode of paternalism of which desire is a fundamental component, within the structure of paternalistic relation they find some space for committed altruism. Lurie clearly occupies a paternalistic role in his relationship with the young dog, and yet his actions towards it indicate a genuine and unselfish attempt to avoid reducing its fate to his own economy of value, even to the point of standing back and refusing to save it from Bev Shaw's needle, an act that would only prolong its life by a few more weeks, resetting the date of its death in accordance with his, David Lurie's economy of value.
This theme of the ever-regressive pursuit of transcendence — of dogged perseverance in the
task of self-questioning and self-denial, despite the inevitability of self-deception and
covet self-gratification at every stage, as demonstrated by the dilemma of confession — is
further developed in *Disgrace*, as well as appearing in *Elizabeth Costello*, as the writer's
pursuit of a truth and specificity that transcend the blandly literal representations available
to reason. In *Disgrace* it finds most striking form as the idea of 'starting from nothing,' of
discarding all but the most insidious accoutrements of *logos* in order to reduce the self to a
more 'authentic' state in which, unable to impose familiar narratives upon that which it
encounters, it is receptive to the being of the other, and to its own truth.

Lurie’s forced resignation from the university turns out to be merely the first step in a long
process of abnegation in which he is divested of virtually all honour and authority. Lucy
discovers that she is pregnant as a result of the attack and tells her father that she plans to
accept Petrus’s financially shrewd offer of marriage. Although he responds stoically to
many of the indignities he is subjected to Lurie nevertheless retains some pride, and cannot
accept with composure the coming extinction of his family line as Lucy is taken under the
protective wing of Petrus’s family:

> A father without the sense to have a son: is this how it is all going to end, is this how his line is
going to run out, like water dribbling into the earth. . . . Standing against the wall outside the
kitchen, hiding his face in his hands, he heaves and heaves and finally cries. (199)

Lucy herself, however, points out that such humiliation may be necessary in order to
achieve some measure of freedom from desire. If the project of committed self-awareness
and ethical response to the other is indeed, as indicated by the model of confession, an
infinite one, then one must resign oneself to giving up everything of value in the process,
relinquishing not only one’s family line but all social and material capital as well:
'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (205)

Even Lurie’s native language is called into question in this purgatorial period of disgrace. As well as taking care of the dead dogs and apologising to the Isaacs family, Lurie is forced by Petrus’s frustrating inertness to reappraise his own systems of meaning and value: “Talking to Petrus is like punching a bag filled with sand” (153). Before such an enigmatic figure, entirely closed off to his explanatory terms, Lurie finds himself uneasy using the English language to describe one who, despite his possible implication in the attack on Lucy’s farm, nevertheless belongs here in a more fundamental way than he does:

More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling into the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

In *Life and Times of Michael K* the stone like and self-sufficient figure of Michael K serves to call into question the arbitrariness of the social order that seeks to assimilate him. Likewise, Petrus’s unresponsiveness has the effect of reflecting Lurie’s assertions back at him, indicating to him the constructedness of his own ways of knowing.

In this novel the commonly obscured deficiencies of reason are again brought into question. The university’s expulsion of Lurie, the rogue term, again serves to reveal reason as a fallible human construct that maintains hegemony through a façade of respectable self-
possession and totalising logic. However, while Life and Times of Michael K presents something of a dream-like story of transcendence, an exemplary period in which the figure of Michael K discovers the nature of transcendence before being brought back to a ‘waking’ reality of human and humanising society, Disgrace deals with the problem of transcendence in more pragmatic terms, as the ethical dilemma of paternalism. While acknowledging the technical futility of such a programme that attempts to forge commitment to otherness out of a fundamentally oppressive and condescending social matrix, the novel nevertheless goes on to assert the value of committed attentiveness to the realities of the self and to the specificity of the other, efforts that are renewed at every stage, as must be the statements of the secular confessant. David Lurie’s attempt to fully accept disgrace as his “state of being” is thus a process technically without end, but one in which he nevertheless appears to find some measure of salvation, or secular grace. The political ineffectuality of selfless commitment, however, is also noted in this novel; despite this note of optimism Disgrace does not foreclose on the possibility that the strength of purpose lent by possessive desire, however artificially simplifying and narrow minded, may be a necessary evil in a world already full of injustices; that commitment may simply be too ineffectual a drive to do any good in such an uncompromising place as South Africa.
Chapter Five:

Coetzee’s most recent novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, further develops the problem of distinction between these two modes of desire and commitment, with particular focus on the status of literary representation as a mode of knowing that may, potentially, be aligned with either side of this binary. Through a series of chapters, or ‘lessons’, the status of literature in particular, and art in general, as special media through which the reality of the world may be brought to awareness independently of reasoned discourse, and thus independently of the violence associated with reason, is interrogated. As a successful novelist, Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist, seeks in a variety of settings to put forward arguments that demonstrate literature’s potential for leading one to transcendent awareness of the nature of both self and other, or of the workings of the world in general, an awareness that not only surpasses the definitions offered by reason, but also serves to bring into relief the limitations of this more literal mode of understanding commonly taken to be exemplary in its concision and purity.

On the strength of her reputation as a lady of letters Costello is offered various awards and extended many invitations to give lectures, some of which she accepts. These lectures are seldom well-received because, despite her good standing in the ranks of contemporary literature, Costello finds herself at odds with academia in general – specifically, with academia’s integral association with reason, a formation whose grandiose and unwavering self-promotion is, she feels, responsible for a great many of the atrocities and injustices in the history of Western culture. Throughout her speeches Costello demonstrates an antipathy towards the dry, mechanical operations of reason and an unwillingness to engage wholeheartedly on the terms of reasoned discourse. Instead, she seeks to challenge reason by establishing literary creativity as a special path to understanding, emphasising the ability of literature to surpass the limited conceptual avenues of reason. Despite her
obvious sensitivity, demonstrated early in the novel, to the objection that literature must necessarily partake of reason’s enclosing patterns if it is to be understood – that literature must thus be considered a complicit dimension of logos rather than an alternative way of representing and understanding the nature of the world – Costello nevertheless feels a persistent impulse to challenge reason’s commonplace assumptions from the standpoint of the writer. At a technical level, as her lectures at Altona College and Appleton College demonstrate, she is well aware that the lucid schematics of reasoned discourse traditionally favoured by academia and those portraits of the world drawn in a more romantic and indeterminate way by the proponents of creative literature cannot be separated. Even the most open and self-aware of texts must inevitably make some claim to mastery, some assertion that it has contained its subject fully and that the ending it imposes is final and absolute. Despite this fundamental flaw in the logic of positing literary representation as a special case, beyond the scope of the overarching term logos in which all dimensions of language are aligned fundamentally with reason, in her later lectures and discussions she continues to do so, often to the derision of her audiences.

This exaltation of literature proves to be an ill-fated project, another attempt to subvert reason from within that is, at every turn, forced back into the realisation of literature’s systematic nature. The rigorously sceptical responses of her audiences continually drag her back to the pragmatic level of instrumental reason, demanding that she engage with their questions on the literal grounds dictated by reason, and thus reestablishing reason as the common ground of all true understanding.

However, the final chapter, in which Costello is called to account by a divine panel in a surreal setting that is apparently some version of the afterlife, demonstrates that despite literature’s technical complicity in the hermetic circularity of logos, there is some value in pursuing the promise of literature. In her judges’ demand for scrupulous introspection,
accompanied by the tacit claim that their judgments are capable of distinguishing between well meaning but self-deceived fabrication and the ideal transparency of true confession, the question of degree raised by *Disgrace* as an issue of paternalism is reappraised at a more fundamental level, as a question not only of ethical relations with others, but also of self-knowledge.

As is made clear by both the complexity of the confessional process and by the utter banality of the town in which Costello finds herself, there is no higher order of thought or speech into which she may accede in order to escape the morass of human terms and human knowledge. She is therefore required to strive for perfect clarity of expression using only imperfect terms, forced to make all manner of approximations in pursuit of specificity. Although this is, technically speaking, an impossible task (a fact of which the reader is reminded by the persistently mocking tone of the chapter), that such an effort is required of Costello by what is obviously some higher power, is significant in the context of this novel. It indicates that desire and commitment, while theoretically indistinguishable, are separable in terms of degree. There is, apparently, some value in one’s dogged devotion to the impossible project of confession, despite the fact that desire will inevitably re-enter the equation at every stage, no matter one’s degree of self-awareness.

Early in the novel, Costello demonstrates her awareness of the systematic nature of language and literature. She is offered the prestigious ‘Stowe’ award and in her acceptance speech at Altona College she acknowledges the reality that, in the modern world, the complacent belief that words are capable of mirroring reality has long since been overturned:

‘There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, “On the table stood a glass of water,” there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them.”
But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. . . . The dictionary that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, where in pious Roman homes the household gods were kept, has become just one code book among many' (19).

Here she gives voice to the objections raised by structuralism against the commonplace essentialism of wider society, invoking the basic structuralist argument that all meaning arises from a hermetic network of terms; a network for which there must be, ultimately, a finite code that prefigures all possible combinations, all possible meanings. Such an outlook carries obvious implications for the figure of the author, and in taking up this discursive position Costello casts herself as a player in the game of language rather than as an inspired creator, a significant diminution intended to remind her audience of the insubstantial nature of fame. She also notes that this position, initially a radical rethinking of the bases of human knowledge, has itself become a commonplace in modern society and that such skepticism towards works of art, the widespread unwillingness to place faith in work or author, has made her position as a celebrated writer historically precarious as well as questionable from a purely technical standpoint:

'There is every reason, then, for me to feel less than certain about myself as I stand before you. Despite this splendid award... despite the promise it makes that, gathered into the illustrious company of those who have won it before me, I am beyond time's envious grasp, we all know, if we are being realistic, that it is only a matter of time before the books which you honour... will cease to be read and eventually cease to be remembered.' (20)

Costello is thus far from naïve in her views on the status of literature as a special case in the world of human expression. While she goes on to argue, in future speeches, against the mechanical brutality of reason and the self-centered arrogance of academia, this doubt regarding the equally hollow and systematic nature of literature continues to haunt her, rendering her claims for the exemption of literature and art from reason's tautologies
unconvincing, apparently even to herself.

In her next lecture, delivered on board a cruise ship, Costello again considers the status of literature as an explanatory medium, first meditating on the fragile unity conferred on the past by the discourse of history:

‘What is miraculous about the past is that we have succeeded – God knows how – in making thousands and millions of individual fictions, fictions created by individual human beings, lock well enough into one another to give us what looks like a common past, a shared story.’ (38)

The novel, she argues, fulfils a similarly totalising role, as it likewise operates to lend the order and unity of narrative to otherwise disassociated events:

‘Like history, the novel is... an exercise in making the past coherent. Like history, it explores the respective contributions of character and circumstance to forming the present. By doing so, the novel suggests how we may explore the power of the present to produce the future. This is why we have this thing, this institution, this medium called the novel.’ (39)

These statements imply that both history and the novel are fairly good maps of human life, capable of explaining the past and predicting the future. At the same time, however, it demonstrates Costello’s uneasiness with the fit between life and literature; she sees history as a “miraculous” coherence of innumerable individual lives, an almost fantastical synopsis so vast and ambitious that it is hard to take seriously. Following her mildly cynical statement on the role of the novel, she likewise reflects on the opaque banality of her own words:

She is not sure, as she listens to her own voice, whether she believes any longer in what she is saying. Ideas like these must have had some grip on her when years ago she wrote them down, but after so many repetitions they have taken on a worn, unconvincing air. (39)
Costello finds herself distanced from her own words and ideas, alienated from the terms that she once proffered so naturally as the outward equivalents of her inner life. This sense of alienation reappears strongly in the novel’s postscript, in which Elizabeth Chandos, wife of Philip Chandos (the narrator of the original text “Letter of Lord Chandos,” by Hugo von Hofmannsthal) pleads with Francis Bacon, a figure historically associated with the rise of deductive reason, to reassure both her and her husband that what they experience and what they say are not two incommensurate realms – that words can indeed capture reality without remainder.

Costello is next invited to give a public lecture at Appleton College, this time on a subject of her choice. While her previous lecture demonstrates her awareness of the totalising effect of all language, including literature, at Appleton she puts forward the special capacity of literature to represent animals and others with greater fidelity than the more staid language of reason is capable of delivering. Here she takes up an aggressive stance against what she sees as the hegemony of reason, dwelling on its violent history and claiming literature’s exemption from such sterile determinism. She does so by addressing the status of animals in modern society, focusing in particular on their mistreatment and misrepresentation at the hands of humans. She does so from a pseudo-philosophical position, as one who is first and foremost a writer rather than a philosopher, putting forward emotional views to which she attempts to lend support in the philosophical terms demanded by a well-educated audience.

She attacks the worldwide livestock industry and wonders at the hard-heartedness of those otherwise decent citizens who refuse to engage with the lives of the animals they eat on a daily basis, arguing that the more general edifice of reason is complicit in this ongoing atrocity due to its fundamental inability to consider or give value to the subjective
experiences of the animals in question. Reason, she argues, is a specifically human formation that has established itself, thanks to the support of the academe, as the sole medium through which the nature of the world can be known; a self-sufficient formation that rigorously excludes all opposing voices and justifies, tautologically, the killing of animals by ejecting them from the circle of the rational. Because they cannot reason, so the argument goes, animals cannot, strictly speaking, be said to suffer in the sense that humans, with their emotional states that are so closely interwoven with intellectual appraisal of the situations in which they find themselves, are capable of suffering. Animal suffering is thus considered to be of a different order from that of humans, and as such should not be taken into account when calculating the appropriate extent of animal rights.

Costello takes the politically treacherous step of comparing this regime with the holocaust in order to drive home both the gruesome scale of this operation and the selective amnesia of a general populace that allows it to continue:

‘Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.’ (65)

Costello is shocked not only by the physical brutality of the abattoir, but also by the discursive brutality of the farming regime, the completeness with which the lives of animals are assimilated to the human economy of production and consumption. To become a term in such an economy, divested of any essential characteristics other than those applied by humans to their material livelihood is, she believes, the ultimate degradation, made all the more surreal by the unwillingness of an otherwise decent population to engage responsibly with the situation.

The issue she takes with reason in this case is clear: reason, she believes, sanitises the
brutal reality of humans’ interaction with animals by turning it into an equation of supply and demand, a morally neutral relation of terms rather than a specific encounter complete with the face-to-face engagement associated with altruistic commitment to the other. Such an assertion requires that she take up an essentialist stance, arguing that such engagement with otherness can produce meanings inaccessible to reason but nevertheless viable in terms of human relations.

Her argument is based, in large part, on her assertion that it is possible for both people and animals to function in the world on their own unique existential terms, living happily without applying reason to their existence. Thus, she claims, reason is not the sole key to understanding the nature of the universe, but rather an idiosyncratic and domineering form of conceptual logic developed and exalted by western society:

‘Might it not be that the phenomenon we are examining here is, rather than the flowering of a faculty that allows access to the secrets of the universe, the specialization of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning, in the same way that the forte of chess players is playing chess, which for its own motives it tries to install at the centre of the universe?’

(69)

In support of this principle she refers, among other examples, to Kafka’s “A Report for an Academy,” a short story in which a recently ‘humanised’ ape recalls, apparently before an educated group of gentlemen in a formal setting, the story of his journey from wild animal to intellectually capable sub-human. Captured by hunters in the jungle of the Gold Coast, he is transported to Germany and gradually acquainted first with crude human customs, and then with human speech and reason. As he becomes more human, his recollection of his life as an ape fades until he can no longer remember it as anything more substantial than a dream, a shadowy impression of pure, unreflective existence.
This former life represents an existence that lies beyond reason, and as such has no meaning, nor any representable specificity, in the domain of reason that the ape has now come to inhabit. The schism between these two eras of his life is absolute, indicating the hermetic nature of reason and the fundamental inability of the purely lived existence to present itself symbolically. Costello uses this excerpt as an example of the totalising drive of structured human reason:

‘Now that I am here, says Red Peter, in my tuxedo and bow tie and my black pants with a hole cut in the seat for my tail to poke through... now that I am here, what is there for me to do? Do I in fact have a choice? If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?’ (68)

Once one has been subjected to reason – once one has been called out of the crowd by a figure of authority and brought to account, as a subject of reasoned discourse, there can be no return to a state of pre-reflective existence. The nature of logos is to colonise consciousness completely, as an enclosed system for which there can be no meaningful outside, nothing of value beyond the finite parameters available to all who share in the system.

Costello’s other examples – of the untaught Indian mathematician Ramanujan and of experiments carried out on apes by Wolfgang Kohler – are similarly directed at outlining the pretentiousness of reason as a totalising edifice, propped up by popular dogma and the institution of academia rather than standing on its own merit as an arbitrary, human method by which the workings of the universe may be explained and predicted.

She goes on to discuss the human ability to imagine oneself into the position of another, an experience of alterity that is faithful to the specificity of the other:
‘For instants at a time... I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it.

All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge that we have is not abstract... but embodied. For a moment we are that knowledge. We live the impossible, we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back only as a dead self can.’ (76-7)

At this point Costello runs into the inevitable paradox encountered by all who attempt to posit the possibility of an experience that is beyond reason: “For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.” She attempts to resolve this paradox by treating the issue as one of temporality, a stance that allows her to claim the existence of a brief moment at which the two ontological domains of subject and object coexist despite their utter incommensurability. This stance draws “a little snort from Norma,” Costello’s daughter-in-law who is a trained philosopher and who is highly critical of her philosophies (77).

Later in her speech Costello makes clear her position on ethical engagement, arguing that ‘sympathy’ for the other allows one to transcend the ontological boundaries of the self:

‘The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and nothing to do with the object... There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else...’ (79)

Costello appears to be claiming, for people in general and for artists in particular, a mode of knowing that does not reduce the other to an object but instead engages with them subject-to-subject, a way of representing the other without discursive violence and without the possessive desire of semiosis. Literary representation, she believes, is capable of achieving this level of pure and direct understanding, without falling into the reductive description that accompanies all conceptual efforts aligned with reason. Here she treats sympathy as a specifically literary mode of understanding, an unaccountable connection between author and character that, it is implied, may also come into play between real...
people, or between people and animals:

‘...there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination... To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today.’ (80)

Literature, according to this argument, is capable of transcending the logical constraints of reason and presenting the other to the self without reduction.

In the three novels here under consideration, Coetzee’s characters find various avenues of self-development that promise to free them from the constraints of logos in its various forms. Michael K chooses to shun society and society’s concepts of time and action, and instead yielding himself up to “a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world...” (158). For David Lurie the gulf between reason and being is manifest most urgently as an ethical issue, as the struggle of the self to respond benignly to the being of the other without lapsing into domineering desire, and thus his efforts take the form of selfless acts toward people and animals, attempts to enter into ethical relations. Costello, for her part, appeals to the capacity of literature to create resonances that go beyond the limits of reasoned discourse from which this art form has in fact arisen, claiming that literature can present the being of the other to the self transparently, without mediation by reductive conceptual mechanics.

For both Michael K and David Lurie, efforts to go beyond reason are hampered by more pragmatic concerns such as the problem of physical survival and the paradoxical violence of altruistic action. In Costello’s case, literature likewise proves a problematic alternative, a limited medium that does not deliver fully on its promises of transcendence. She ends the discussion over dinner that follows this lecture with an awkward metaphor which
demonstrates her confusion and her untenable position between reason and unreason; between the need to explain herself and her unwillingness to enter fully into the terms of rational debate and thus be forced to follow her thinking through to a final, logical conclusion:

‘Do we really understand the universe better than animals do? Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you have made all the little bricks snap into place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don’t…’ (90)

Costello goes as far as positing the inadequacy of the self’s conceptual resources before the inescapable fact of otherness, announcing her uneasiness at the claims of reason, but is incapable of putting forward a viable resolution to this dilemma, or even presenting her thoughts succinctly. As Norma comments of her philosophising:

‘It’s naïve... It’s the kind of easy, shallow relativism that impresses freshmen. Respect for everybody’s world view, the cow’s world view, the squirrel’s world view, and so forth. In the end it leads to total intellectual paralysis. You spend so much time respecting that you don’t have time to think.’ (91-2)

Here Norma reiterates the dilemma that haunts Michael K’s attempts to live on his own terms and that likewise arises in *Disgrace*: the possibility that absolute commitment to otherness may be crippled by its very nature as a doctrine of passivity, an impotent principle that can never lead to action, benign or otherwise, because it requires the self to surrender all claims to semiosis, the process by which value is attributed to objects and ideas. She also calls attention to the fundamental paradox associated with any reasoned argument that claims to call reason itself into question: “I know it sounds old-fashioned, but I have to say it. There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason” (93).
In her next seminar delivered the following day, Costello continues to talk about the subject of animal rights, this time focusing more specifically on literature’s putative capacity for faithful representation that betters the lifeless schematics drawn by reason. Despite her earlier stance regarding the systematic nature of writing, here she emphasises the formally unaccountable qualities of literature and its faithfulness to the specificity of animals, as opposed to the brutal discursive reductionism of ‘mechanical reason’: ‘By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will’’ (97-8).

Again, however, pragmatic concerns threaten to undermine Costello’s somewhat idealistic train of thought. As he listens to this speech, her son quietly ponders over the implications of the animal rights movement and its covert appeals to desire:

Isn’t that what is so suspect in the whole animal-rights business: that it has to ride on the back of pensive gorillas and sexy jaguars and huggable pandas because the real objects of its concern, chickens and pigs, to say nothing of white rats or prawns, are not newsworthy? (100)

He suspects that despite the fact that they claim to both operate in accordance with, and appeal to, purely altruistic motives aligned with the principle of commitment, animal rights philosophies must slip back into the morass of systematising semiosis and thus of selfish, possessive desire if they are to accomplish anything in the real world. No one genuinely cares about the fates of prawns or white rats, and people therefore require affecting images upon which they can project human qualities in order to feel empathy. Absolute alterity is valueless to the self, by default, and in the final analysis only the familiar, that which circulates in the network of the same, is considered worthy of attention and effort. Such an outlook must inevitably lead to the denial of literature’s status as a medium for
transcendence. As he says to his mother: “You said you were tired of clever talk about animals, proving by syllogism that they do or do not have souls. But isn’t poetry just another kind of clever talk: admiring the muscles of big cats in verse?” (103).

Professor O’Hearne, invited to debate formally with Costello the following day, raises similar objections, arguing that animal-rights sentiments and philosophies should be considered as historically recent idiosyncrasies of the west, the whimsical product of a culture successful enough and idle enough to have time to devote to such issues. He also argues for the fundamental distinction between humans and animals, based on the fact that humans can reason, whereas animals cannot. In response to O’Hearne’s respectful argumentation, Costello’s somewhat impolite reply closes their debate with a hostile refusal to engage on equitable terms: “If the last common ground I have with [my opponent] is reason, and if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I’ll talk to someone else” (112).

Thus it is indicated that art, or more specifically the poetic dimension of literature championed by Costello, proves incapable of offering a coherent model of social intercourse based on universal ‘sympathy’ and respect for alterity. At best it can offer a utopian but confused vision, giving a distinct impression that something may be wrong with the world of reason, but offering no readily explicable programme for an alternative, despite the depth of the rhetorical resources that are obviously available to its representatives. The momentary insights that it does offer – those passages that seem to resonate inexplicably with their readers – cannot be arrayed in support of any grand scheme. At best they remain, by their very nature, sporadic visions of otherness or authenticity that cannot be reproduced; at worst, illusory fragments that can be reasoned away by rigorous analysis. Costello’s earlier skepticism towards the medium of literature – her suspicion that it may come down to a question of supply and demand rather than one of
inspired creation – lends gravity to her hesitancy in this more demanding setting, as she tries without a great deal of success to establish literature formally as an alternative and more authentic means by which to understand the world.

In late middle age this search for a way of escaping the claustrophobic confines of systematic reason has become, for Costello, as much a personal dilemma as a philosophical one. Her lifelong study, as a writer, of the human condition has not brought her any closer to understanding the true nature of the world, or to accepting the apparent necessity of certain aspects of it: “Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?” (115). Despite its promises of transcendence, promises that obviously motivate her speech at Appleton, literature threatens to reveal itself as a false prophet, one more circular economy in a world of reason.

The special status of literature is further undermined by Costello’s encounter with her elder sister, Blanche. While Costello has pursued the humanist path of literature her sister has, in an equivalent but at the same time radically divergent move, turned towards God and religion. As her speech to the graduands of a nameless university in Zululand makes clear, she sees all human art as a misdirected and imperfect version of this more genuine turn to the absolute, the study of the humanities a fundamentally introverted doctrine that shares the blind self-sufficiency of reason:

‘...I applaud Martin Luther when he turns his back on Desiderius Erasmus, judging that his colleague, despite his immense gifts, has been seduced into branches of study that do not, by the standards of the ultimate, matter. The studia humanitatis have taken a long time to die, but now, at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed. All the more bitter should be that death, I would say, since it has been brought about by the monster enthroned by those very studies as first and animating principle of the universe: the monster of reason, mechanical
It is clear that both sisters have turned away from ‘mechanical reason’. However, Blanche believes that the humanist’s faith in redemptive power of art, as argued for by Elizabeth in her lecture to the staff and guests of Appleton College, is a seductive doctrine that will inevitably lead its followers back into a state of intellectual arrogance, characterised by the desire to erect absolute truths that beneath the façade of rigorous scholarship can in truth only ever be arbitrary, the complex but finite permutations of the limited terms available to humans and their limited intellects. She cites Hellenism as an example of such arrogance, claiming that textual scholarship, the study of classical texts, arose as a seductive but ultimately meaningless offshoot of biblical scholarship:

‘Poor as it may have been, Hellas was the one alternative to the Christian vision that humanism was able to offer. To Greek society – an utterly idealized picture of Greek society… they could point and say, Behold, that is how we should live – not in the hereafter but in the here and now.’ (131-2)

Blanche condemns humanism (and by extension the institution of creative literature for which Elizabeth stands) for positing a vision of perfection for the real world, rather than acknowledging the fallen nature of man and leaving such ideas of transcendence to the corporeally inaccessible realm of the afterlife. By reaching unashamedly for the signified, the humanities have, in her view, led their followers away from divine salvation and towards a tacit belief in the ability of man to effect his own redemption:

‘Rebirth, without intervention of Christ. By the workings of man alone. Renaissance. On the example of the Greeks. Or on the example of the American Indians. Or on the example of the Zulus. Well, it cannot be done.’ (133)

Costello responds to Blanche’s attack on the humanities by arguing that art offers a richer
life for the living, while selfless commitment to the divine practiced by those such as Joseph, a carver who has spent a considerable portion of his life carving the same "gothic" image of Christ on the cross, risks falling prey to the ascetic traditions of the church, resulting in a needless denial of the positive aspects of human life (138). The will of a benign god would be better served, she suggests, by those who celebrate art and life, rather than dwelling on the fallen nature of man and placing all their hope in a divine salvation that has, by nature, no purchase in the realm of human affairs. She is also uneasy about the importation of a distinctly European religious tradition into the unique setting of Africa:

‘Frankly, Blanche, there is something about the entire crucifictional tradition that strikes me as mean, as backward, as medieval in the worst sense – unwashed monks, illiterate priests, cowed peasants. What are you up to, reproducing that most squalid, most stagnant phase of European history in Africa?’ (139)

Blanche’s reply is that art – in its Apollonian guise as a medium of cold, distant perfection aloof from the earthy reality of human lives – is a realm inaccessible to the common people, while “the living Christ” offers a more engaging alternative, “because they suffer and he suffers with them” (140-1). From the point of view of the average person, she implies, the promise of divine grace is, paradoxically, more ‘real’ than the idealised images of beauty and perfection offered by art. Costello concedes defeat in this battle of rhetoric with her sister, who’s triumphant parting remark detracts somewhat from the gravity of their debate: “‘You backed a loser, my dear. If you had put your money on a different Greek you might still have stood a chance. Orpheus instead of Apollo. The ecstatic instead of the rational. Someone who changes form, changes colour, according to his surroundings’” (145).

This last statement of Blanche’s, made before the two sisters part, implies that art, at least the kind of art for which Elizabeth stands, is too closely affiliated to the rational, too
Apollonian to offer any form of salvation to the common people. Transcendence, for her, remains a question of belief rather than a perfection towards which the works of man progress. Blanche considers Elizabeth’s turn away from reason and towards art to be a halfway measure, an incomplete transition that comes to some degree of self-knowledge but remains within the domain of logos, and thus susceptible to the inevitable temptations of desire. Only by entering into unwavering and logically insupportable commitment to that which is beyond the realm of the known and the knowable, Blanche believes, can one finally escape the grasp of reason and the solipsistic drive that comes as a result of taking up reason as the internal language of the self, a totalising language that drowns out other impulses such as compassion and empathy.

The next chapter, entitled “The Problem of Evil,” further develops Costello’s consideration of the capacity of art and literature to take one beyond the world of order and reason. In this chapter she delivers a lecture on the possibility that literature may be a unique vehicle by which not only benign understanding but also evil, a satanic force that defies formal description, may be brought into the world. Costello feels impelled, upon reading a particularly lurid novel based in the Nazi Germany of the Second World War, to deliver a lecture on the topic of evil. Her argument – again an impulsive outpouring to which she struggles to bring philosophical coherence – is that by depicting violent and sadistic events in his novel, the author, Paul West, has exposed both himself and his readers to the taint of an evil that transcends the very words through which it passes, an extra-personal force that should be left outside of human knowledge rather than brought to light. There exist, she avers, horrors of such magnitude that only art can recover them fully, and that by vividly re-enacting events that took place in the torture chambers of the Third Reich – events known to the world as historical fact but never before treated as the subject of creative art – Mr West has brought this original evil back
into the world. History, she implies, sanitises such events by reducing them to bland factual data, numbers and names of the dead. It is this reductive effect of historical discourse to which Costello gives her uncharacteristic approval when she says to her audience:

'The cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is [a] forbidden place. I do not believe we should go into that cellar, any of us. I do not believe Mr West should go there; and, if he chooses to go nevertheless, I believe that we should not follow. On the contrary, I believe that bars should be erected over the cellar mouth, with a bronze memorial plaque saying Here died... followed by a list of the dead and their dates, and that should be that.' (173)

History assimilates atrocities to its totalising teleology, reducing them to affectless data. Literature, on the other hand, brings them back to life as fresh events, presenting them to modern readers in all their gruesome detail and thus tainting author and reader alike with an evil that defies rational description.

This sentiment is not well-received by her audience, who, as the single polite but pointed question from the floor indicates, are sceptical of such essentialism and tend to believe instead in the cathartic power of reasoned discourse – that nothing is too atrocious to be contained by logical exegesis and thus dealt with rationally, divested of its mystique through analysis. The experience of reading the book and being shocked by its content remains primary to Costello, who has difficulty replicating this original event of consciousness in formal, abstracting speech: "Obscene. Go back to the talismanic word, hold fast to it. Hold fast to the word, then reach for the experience behind it: that has always been her rule for when she feels herself slipping into abstraction" (177).

She finds herself unable to convey this feeling of visceral disgust to her listeners, who are receptive only to the terms of formal discourse. Nor is her cause helped by the fact that Mr.
West, the author of the novel in question, is among their number. The socially awkward situation that arises serves to bring attention back to the real world – to the world of polite bourgeois society in light of which comfortable reality the question of satanic evil seems whimsical and somewhat ridiculous, the stuff of fairy stories. The episode closes with a banal scene in the corridors outside the auditorium in which Costello imagines a chance meeting with Mr. West, an indication that she has struck upon some buried truth, that there is some form of preternatural evil attached to this otherwise unassuming figure. No such sign appears however, and Costello is left to walk alone in the empty hallway faced by the blank reality that evil as well as transcendence are merely effects of discourse, impossible ideals indicated by a language that cannot, in the final analysis, capture them. Again, Costello takes the invitation to a conference as an opportunity to challenge reason from within by pointing out literature’s excession of its boundaries, only for reason to take control, relegating to the domain of the nonsensical all that cannot find a place in its closed economy.

In the episode that follows Costello ponders over the possibility, occasionally discussed in literature, of sexual congress between gods and mortals, focusing on the mechanics of crossing the boundary between these two incommensurate modes of existence. In accordance with the nature of desire as a drive to realise the impossible truth, or wholeness, that appears to lie beyond the boundaries of the self and the self’s language, she imagines the passion of each to be motivated by a glimpse of the other that it is impossible to bring fully to light: “As for us, do [the gods] guess (what irony!) that what makes our embraces so intense, so unforgettable, is the glimpse they give us of a life we imagine as theirs, a life we call (since our language has no word for it) the beyond?” (190).

Like Michael K, as she becomes more detached from the morass of a society dominated by the youthful she grows proportionally more aware of the mechanical nature of human
interaction: “Strange how, as desire relaxes its grip on her body, she sees more and more clearly a universe ruled by desire” (191). It is only when alienated from society’s various networks of meaning, unable or unwilling to participate in their enclosing logic, that one gains an objective overview of the order that they impose upon the world. From the inside such systems appear natural and exhaustive; one must step outside them, thus relinquishing any internal claim to capital in their economies of value, in order to see them for what they are. For Costello this fact of absolute distinction between performance and transcendence, a mutual exclusivity that prevents any truly critical voice from being heard or from making any impact in the arenas upon which it comments, seems to be an inevitable fact of human life: “Must one be too creaky to join the dance before one can see the pattern?” (192). The transcendence that she seeks to attain through literary creation belongs properly to the ‘beyond’, to a domain of ideal truth and understanding that may be indicated, obliquely, but never grasped.

As if to reinforce this point, her meditation on the topic of divinity is marred by her awareness of the ugly reality of human desire. Men worship the gods that their art and language have created, she notes, but as soon as these perfect figures actually become available – as occurs in a Hollywood film that she cites, although the figure in question is a movie star rather than a god – this respectful awe turns to bitterness and contempt, as the image of perfection has been betrayed by the reality of a corporeal body, brought to the same order of reality as that inhabited by the self. Such purity as that apotheosised by a self-regenerating film industry can only exist as a perfect idea, an unattainable ideal. When man does gain possession of this figure, the secret of the other, he instantly goes about reducing it to a term, a mark of his conquest: “Bring an immortal down to earth, show her what life is really like, bang her till she is raw. Take that! Take that!” (185). Again Coetzee’s fiction alludes strongly to the solipsistic violence of desire, the drive to aggressively reduce alterity to the terms of the self, to master the Other. Costello runs up
against yet another version of the universal dilemma, the impossibility of bringing truth or purity into the real world without irrevocably altering it in the process.

The novel’s final chapter, in which Coetzee’s preoccupation with reason and truth makes a synthetic return to the problem of confession, begins without preamble. Costello finds herself in a desert outpost, the surreal nature of which indicates that she is no longer in the physical world. Costello’s troubled but persistent belief in the power of literature to transcend the limited boundaries of reason is put to a final test in this artificial border town, as she is required to produce a document that states, without ambiguity or dissimulation, the truth of her innermost self. At the centre of the town lies a massive gate, through which she must pass in order to proceed in her journey towards what is, presumably, some form of paradise. To do so she must present to the authorities a confession, a statement of “what you believe” (194). Here, the problems of the confessional process that often hamper the efforts of Coetzee’s characters to both realise self-definition and enter into ethical relations with others are reiterated explicitly, as each confession is rigorously scrutinised by a panel of judges who question the applicant closely in order to determine whether they have in fact demonstrated true belief.

Thus Costello becomes caught up in a process that seems shallow and farcical compared to the grandiose scene of judgement one might expect in such a situation, a confused melee that degenerates into a battle of rhetoric rather than a final weighing of good deeds against evil. It becomes clear that she must act to free herself from the maze of human semiosis, rather than being led from it by a divine hand, or offered a new set of pure terms, a new language in which she may speak her own truth without ambiguity. Even in the afterlife, she must still grapple with the circularities and limitations of language and with the confused self-deceptions of her own introspection, a process that is itself, as much of Coetzee’s fiction demonstrates, inseparably entangled with language. All she is given to
encourage her is a more substantial glimpse of what lies beyond than those feelings or intuitions she has had during her life, an assurance that her efforts will not necessarily be in vain. The guard opens the gate fractionally in order for her to peer through, showing her a bright light but no detail of what lies on the far side. This sliver of light shows her that there is at least the possibility of final truth, final transcendence of this human maze, at the end of the frustrating task of confession. The guard encourages her: "Now you have seen, he says. Now you will try harder" (196). Effort, surprisingly, seems to be significant in this context. Rather than a futile exercise in self-deception, producing a statement of belief proves to be a labour whose austerity in some way ameliorates its inevitable re-entry into the infinite curvature of *logos*.

The setting in which she is forced to live do not make the process of confession any easier. The whole scene, she observes, seems to be constructed of clichés, literary fragments pieced together to make a town, as if to taunt her with the banality of her plight. The gate in particular is reminiscent of one of Kafka's short stories, in which a similar theme regarding man's doomed search for the truth, or "the law," is explored. In this text the eternal elusiveness of final truth is allegorised as a gate, guarded by an inhumanly powerful sentry, which is meant for one person alone but through which this person can never pass.

This paradox – that truth is a highly individual state that is inaccessible to the very subject to whom it applies, due to the abstracting and thus self-alienating nature of reflection – forms a meaningful background to Costello's attempts to set down on paper "what [she] believe[s]." Everything, it seems, conspires to force her back into the maze of language and all its dead-end avenues of cliché, tautology and rhetorical non sequitur. Even the judges, while obviously intelligent, hardly cut the majestic figures one would expect to encounter in such a situation. They act without a great deal of professionalism and, at
times, ridicule her openly: “They cannot contain themselves, her panel of judges, her board. First they titter like children, then abandon all dignity and howl with laughter” (221).

In her first confession she claims exemption from the rules of the gateway, on the basis of her occupation as a writer. A writer, she argues, should not have beliefs, as beliefs stand in the way of objectivity and creative freedom. By taking this stance Costello gives voice to the distinctively modern (or, properly, post-modern) idea that all meaning is nothing more than the interrelation of terms, that reason is merely a game within which to believe uncritically in the existence of irreducible essence is to succumb to the temptations of the impossible signified – to give oneself up to desire. Only rigorous scepticism towards the temptations of self-identification, she implies, allows her to create (or to ‘put together’, as Costello herself more accurately states) texts that explore the world of human nature without semiotic disingenuousness – without claiming a false integrity that does an injustice to alterity by forcibly subjugating it. Her attitude towards her own books is one of distant critical approval, demonstrating her scepticism towards essentialist humanism:

Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clearly as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place. More modestly put, they spell out how one person lived, one among billions: the person she, to herself, calls she, and whom others call Elizabeth Costello. If, in the end, she believes in her books themselves more than she believes in that person, it is belief only in the sense that a carpenter believes in a sturdy table or a cooper in a stout barrel. Her books are, she believes, better put together than she is. (206)

Her initial attitude towards the process of confession mirrors this philosophical scepticism, drawing a further parallel between her philosophical views and her concept of selfhood: “A performance will be required of her; she hopes she can pick up the cues” (198).
This first attempt is rejected out of hand by the guard, who presents her with a clean sheet of paper and repeats his demand: “‘What you believe,’ he says” (195). A second, more moderate version makes it through to the board of examiners, who respond with similar disapproval: “Without beliefs we are not human… What do you say to that, Elizabeth Costello?” (200). This response indicates that her judges will not be satisfied with such arguments, for all their apparent honesty and cultural topicality. It is made clear by the board that cynicism, absolute openness to the multiplicity of connotations that lie beneath every act of semiosis and every attribution of value, is not a valid stance in this demanding arena. It is not enough to continually acknowledge the limitations of the self and the self’s conceptual resources; at some stage there must be a positive assertion of value, a statement of absolute belief. As discovered by both Michael K and David Lurie, repudiating the right to attribute meaning in an attempt to avoid the violence of desire leads to a state of crippling passivity in which no harm is done, but in which no action can be taken to prevent the atrocities and injustices that will inevitably occur throughout the world. Such withdrawal leads to political inaction, to the inability to participate in even the most benign projects for fear of becoming caught up in the seductions of ideology and its attendant subtext of reductive aggression. This is a dilemma alluded to by one of Costello’s judges, who challenges her on the subject of violence: “‘Atrocities take place,’ he says. ‘Violations of innocent children. The extermination of whole peoples. What does she think about such matters? Does she have no beliefs to guide her?’” (202-3). She can come up with no response that satisfies the board, indicating a failure of her philosophical stance before this challenge, and is returned to her dormitory to prepare a new statement.

While she is at work she encounters another character who is apparently more familiar with the process of confession, a woman whose opinion gives further support to the idea of purifying austerity, the confession as labour: “‘Unbelief – entertaining all possibilities, floating between opposites – is a mark of a leisurely existence, a leisured existence,’ the
woman goes on. ‘Most of us have to choose. Only the light soul hangs in the air’” (213).

This statement amounts to an assertion that surrender to the infinite circularities of language and reason, of logos, commitment only to the detached, floating signifier is the mark of a weak soul, one softened and made complacent by a life of physical and spiritual ease – the modern life of a writer, it is implied, in which unbelief is a viable credo. The forced labour of confession, the unrewarding effort of tracking down the elusive prize of self-truth through the maze of language, is by comparison, a somehow more honourable pursuit, despite the fact that both options are of equal hopelessness on a purely technical level. Again an internal distinction is made within the avowedly totalising domain of logos, a distinction between two divergent moves one can make within this realm. Given that one is irrevocably enmeshed in the finite language of human semiosis and is at no stage afforded a pure language in which terms correspond directly to that which they indicate, one can choose, it would seem, either to pursue the task of confession or to resign oneself pre-emptively to the infinite regression of this process, claiming, as Costello initially claims, exemption from an impossible process.

An ethical version of this dilemma arises when, in her next appearance before the board, Costello hits upon the Levinasian formula taken up by the medical officer in Life and Times of Michael K, and by David Lurie in Disgrace. She bases her statement of belief in her respect for alterity, and in her acknowledgement of the infinite excession of the self’s conceptual capacity by the irreducible fact of the other: “I believe in whatever does not bother to believe in me” (218) she states, echoing the medical officer’s fascination with K, a totally self-sufficient and enigmatic figure to whom he himself means, to use David Lurie’s words, “little enough. Less than little, nothing.”

This stance, however, proves similarly inadequate in the eyes of her judges as it fails to
account fully for her own belief, surrendering all claims of value to the Other. In such a formulation, the self simply becomes the opposite of the Other, rather than a positive, substantial figure in its own right. As if dramatising this shortcoming, Costello falls into confusion when confronted with the question of whether or not she has changed her plea:

‘You ask if I have changed my plea. But who am I, who is this I, this you? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No I, no you is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask who is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. I am an other.’ (221)

She seeks at every turn to escape the reductive approximation of the linguistic subject position by resorting to evasion and ambiguity, playing on the inherently metaphorical nature of language and failing to engage on fully rational, accountable terms. Again, this unwillingness to assume responsibility for her own essence, her own belief – an unwillingness rooted in the self-alienating reductions committed by her own words – leads to a state of apathy and semiotic entropy, precisely the opposite of what the judges demand from her. As one judge comments: “Yes, you are not confused. But who is it who is not confused?” (221).

The novel leaves Costello at this stage, apparently at the beginning of what promises to be a long and difficult, perhaps endless, process of confession. Even outside the courtroom in which the judges interrogate her, she must face the deceptive artifices of her own language:

She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. (224)

Despite its promising subject, even this vision is clouded by the figurative tendencies of
literature: “It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. Too literary, she thinks again. A curse on literature!” (224-5).

The guard at the gate gives her a final indication that her predicament is representative of the common human lot, rather than the peculiar fate of a writer, a “trader in fictions”: “‘All the time,’ he says. ‘We see people like you all the time’” (225). This statement alludes to the broader implications of Costello’s dilemma, indicating that her philosophically astute approach to the problem of confession – her ability to address the problem directly and in the terms of language and literature – merely responds in clear and distinctive terms to a test that all people must face in their own way, rather than a problem of metaphysical doubt reserved for the intellectual elite.

Thus, in Elizabeth Costello, an end-point is finally posited; a domain of absolute truth that Costello is allowed to glimpse through the fractionally opened gate. However, as is made clear by the demanding process of confession that follows, and is again emphasised by the novel’s postscript in which the jarring discrepancy between word and world is figured as a source of great personal angst, despite the existence of this final end-point of grace it nevertheless falls to the human intellect to effect its own salvation via the limited human language in which it is enmeshed. Transcendence may be possible, indicate the demanding requirements of this stage of whatever supernatural process Costello may be involved in, but cannot be achieved merely by repudiating semiosis, by acknowledging the conceptual limits of the self and refusing to have any share in representing that which lies beyond the boundaries of the self. A genuine effort to transcend the ubiquitous seductions of desire is required, an attempt to make a positive statement of belief that cuts across the regressive doubt of the reflective consciousness. To this end one is required to take responsibility for one’s own words, despite the fact that words in all cases are imperfect abstractions of one’s
primary experience of being, conceptual routes into which one is forced through one’s own speech rather than natural corollaries of an inner life.

Costello is aware of language’s limitations as an offshoot of reason, its status as a complex but finite game in which speakers recombine the terms of their environment rather than as a pure medium through which inspired creation flows without hindrance. That she continues to pursue, in the course of the lectures and arguments that follow, the promise of transcendence held by literature, particularly with respect to the extra-symbolic representation of animals in poetry, indicates that despite her acknowledgement of literature’s technical proximity to reason, she believes literature, and literary language, to be capable of surpassing reason’s restrictive epistemological boundaries.

Her continued drive to establish literary representation as an alternative to reason rather than as its peculiar subcategory is continually thwarted by the philosophically astute objections of others, who, like the officials of Kafka’s stories, methodically reassert the self-sufficient integrity of a twisted but nonetheless totalising logos. However, although it is also condemned by her sister Blanche, Costello’s philosophically problematic position finds some measure of vindication in this penultimate chapter in which, although she is given little in the way of help, she is allowed a glimpse of her goal, a definite indication that there exists a final point of arbitration beyond human reason. The judges’ demand for an authentic statement of ‘belief’, made in the very language with which she has grappled throughout her life, makes it clear that they believe literature to be capable of demonstrating the absolute, despite its apparent inadequacy to the task.
Conclusion:

Behind Coetzee’s texts lies a line of metaphysical query from which many superstructural discussions regarding ethics, politics and psychology extrapolate. This underlying doubt, or unease, concerns the fundamental flaw of reason; its blindness to its own undercurrent of desire, and the possibility of replacing reason with an alternative paradigm, a fuller and more pure mode of knowing that does not suffer from the same duplicity; the same potentially destructive gap between manifest signifier and latent but powerful signified.

In the case of *Life and Times of Michael K*, reason is challenged by the unreasoning presence of the body. The lines between reason and unreason are clearly drawn in this novel: an oppressive and internally fractured society reflects the failures of reason in the same way that Kafka’s dark bureaucracies reflect the internal maze of the self, by unravelling their own convoluted mechanics before the reader implacably and without the least ironic distance, giving the disturbing impression of volition without self-awareness. By contrast, the figure of K himself stands as the embodiment of unreason, his absolute alterity safe in his alienation from the social morass, his life a sketch of what a transcendent existence might look like, more a poetic meditation that establishes the ground for future investigations to cover than a fully fleshed-out example of how reason may be subverted or overthrown. He is an exploratory vehicle, capable of taking up, momentarily, the positions of aggressor and explorer but for the most part operating as an impenetrable, enigmatic term against which the forces of social reason throw themselves in frustration, and in doing so reveal their own constructedness.

This text does, however, raise more subtle questions regarding the possibility of distinction between reason and unreason in their various forms. The transience and absolute vulnerability of Michael K’s state of pure being on the Visagie farm brings into focus the
dilemma of positive action: it becomes apparent that such challenges to the powerful and far-reaching influence of reason are by their very nature ineffectual in the political terms of agitation and constructive change, a theme taken up by Disgrace and elaborated as the ethical dilemma of paternalism. Likewise the inevitable complicity of the text in the very structures of oppression under consideration – the totalising role of even the most committedly reflexive fiction, the most lyrical and seemingly ‘open’ of stories – is brought to light by the medical officer’s dream-like pursuit of a rapidly receding Michael K, an allegory in which fiction’s complicity in the reductive violence of reason is dramatised.

Disgrace, by contrast, portrays a far more ambivalent and less innocent figure, a socially authorised protagonist who struggles against reason from within. In Life and Times of Michael K it is the sternly self-confident voice of officialdom that most openly represents reason’s oppressive regime by calling out the individual and bringing him or her to account in the alienating terms of the collective. In Disgrace, the more moderate influence of the writer and academic, the benign voice of guidance and instruction, nevertheless carries this same interpellating power, the same capacity to stifle the being of the other by presenting flawless aesthetic and conceptual artifacts, narratives seemingly without internal tension that overlay the world with an impenetrable network of terms that interlock perfectly. In his challenge to reason, his attempt to live out reason’s own duplicity without taking the prudent measure of disavowing and concealing the desire that lies behind reason’s pragmatic exterior of total accountability, Lurie finds himself in an analogous situation to that of Michael K. He becomes a rogue term, a revealingly aberrant part of this collective self that must be expelled, refigured as Other, in order to maintain the apparent integrity of that which remains in the domain of the same. Through this process of expulsion the university reveals its own latent subtext of desire, an undercurrent that it is at great pains to disavow but which shows nevertheless through its façade of respectability.
Thus paternalism, in its most broad sense, as an overarching social system in which those without power or competence are aided by those with authority in return for their support of the status quo, is shown to be driven by desire, and is shown to employ the highly effective mechanisms of reduction and exclusion in its drive to maintain its hegemony and conceal this motivating force. However, in the period of disgrace that follows Lurie’s expulsion from the university, a further, more subtle distinction is drawn between desire and commitment, two divergent emphases that coexist within this broad model. Despite the final, technical ubiquity of desire, Lurie’s selfless attention to the dogs in his care, along with the self-abasing apology he makes to the Isaacs family, indicate that there is redemptive value to be found in the committed pursuit of both self-awareness and self-sacrifice before the irreducible specificity of the Other; in the impossible attempt to transcend the reason of the self. Within the grounds of paternalism, it seems, there somehow remains room for one to choose between desire and commitment, between the possessive drive to understand the other and the regressive but honorable process of confession in which the specificity of the other is respected, albeit superficially, at every turn.

Again, in *Elizabeth Costello*, while straightforward transcendence of the morass of semiosis is not forthcoming, some value is accorded, this time by a higher power of arbitration, to the apparently ill-fated project of confession that is such a common figure throughout Coetzee’s fiction. Elizabeth Costello, like Lurie, grapples with the limitations and dead-ends of *logos* in her struggle to present an alternative model of ethical relation to that offered by reason, one in which alterity is not forcibly assimilated to the terms of the self or consigned to the domain of the nonsensical, but is allowed to show through without mediation. Her vehicle of choice is literature, and her emphasis on the ability of poetic language to bring to consciousness that which exceeds the parameters of literal representation – the true being of animals, or objects – again represents the drive of a
hermetic system – in this case language – to surpass itself and reach the ideal centre about which its finite network of terms revolves. While this version of an often-reiterated project again fails on a technical level, as she is continually forced back into the language of reason by her sceptical and sometimes indignant audiences, again something positive is achieved through this act of impossible excess, the unconsummated gesture towards perfection. Like Lurie, her continual prodding at the complacent self-satisfaction of academia serves to bring the edifice of reason into question, pointing out what seem to be genuine deficiencies in this institution although it does not take any significant steps towards offering an alternative. Furthermore, her final encounter with a form of divine authority in “At the Gate” shows, in its neat encapsulation of the confession process, that genuine attempts to pursue the absolute through the medium of literary invention will lead one closer to a state of grace, if not directly to the door of paradise. Again, in the committed pursuit of the impossible, perfect confession, there is some measure of redemption and presumably, at some stage, such labour will allow one, at the discretion of the judges, to pass through this first gate – to move one step closer to purity.

These novels move progressively away from the model idealistic transcendence outlined by Life and Times of Michael K and towards a more subtle consideration of the manoeuvres that may be possible within the enclosed space, ruled by possessive desire for the signified, that is marked out by post-structuralism. That Coetzee pursues this project through the medium of fiction rather than outlining his investigations in more literal terms is of some significance. Figurative language works by indicating the empty, impossible space between two or more terms, gesturing towards truth or otherness by a process of triangulation, and thus is more appropriate to the task of drawing such distinctions that are not technically viable. Thus Coetzee’s creative writing acts to both interrogate and surpass the theoretical constraints of the post-structural model, acknowledging the technical ubiqutity of desire but at the same time indicating the presence of a gap between the
enclosing solutions of theoretical constructs and the always slightly oblique reality of the human world.
Bibliography:


