Devi Sarinjeive

Doubling effects in Michael K: the text, the language and the writer

Summary

This paper seeks to correct binary readings of *Life & Times of Michael K* by using a post-modernist paradigm that takes into account contradictions and paradoxes in the text. By reading through a revisionary postmodern escape-entrapment framework, the encoded presence of resistance and its effectiveness in praxis in the allegorical narrative and language are assessed. It is also shown how the writer, J M Coetzee, in his discursive practices and philosophical standpoint, is caught up in the linguistic web he himself weaves.

Verdubbelingseffekte in Michael K: die teks, die taal en die skrywer

Hierdie artikel poog om 'n binêre lesing van *Life & Times of Michael K* te korrigeer deur van 'n postmodernistiese paradigma gebruik te maak wat die teenstrydighede en paradokse van die teks in ag neem. Deur aan die hand van 'n hersienende, postmodernistiese "escape-entrapment"-raamwerk te lees word die geënkodeerde aanwesigheid van weerstand en die effektiwiteit daarvan in die praktyk in die allegoriese verhaal en die taal beoordeel. Daar word ook gewys hoe die outeur, J M Coetzee, in sy redenering en filosofiese standpunte vasgevang word in die linguistiese web wat hy weef.

Prof D Sarinjeve, Dept of English, Vista University, Sebokeng Campus, Private Bag X050, Vanderbijlpark 1900; E-mail: srnjv-d@serval.vista.ac.za

In the second book of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the medical officer calls Michael "a great escape artist" (Coetzee 1983: 166). Michael's life is punctuated by institutions and imprisonment, from the orphanage, through hospital, through a forced railway labour camp, to a police cell, and hospital again, to the Jakkalsdrif resettlement camp, and finally to the hospital of a rehabilitation camp in Cape Town — all of which are meant to appropriate and make him other than he is. But he says, as the medical officer is made to recall, "I am what I am"(Coetzee 1983: 130).

In the text he is shown to insist on being his own person. He is depicted as resistant to any form of control, any form of systematisation, "a hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life" passing "through [...] institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else [...] Through the intestines of war" (Coetzee 1983: 135). At the receiving end of coercive acts intended to subdue and possess him, he seems to succeed in non-aggressive ways in remaining outside, unabsorbed, unincorporated into the systems of the state.

This is the image and effect that predominates, but it is only part of what the writer Coetzee wishes to convey. For in the language and discourse Michael succeeds only up to a point in being himself and evading impositions meant to change him. In this sense he mirrors the text through which he is represented, by partially eluding the efforts to turn him into a specific, fixed meaning. The relative liberty that Michael and the text convey is echoed in Coetzee's approach to his writing. He, too, is determined, come what may, not to be imposed upon but to remain his own man.

But, as Coetzee himself makes us aware, there is a flipside, the other side of escape and freedom, constrictions and restraints, that curtail and pull back. In the main, the novel and the major character in the novel have been read to emphasise liberation from oppression, but if the nature of language, text and authoring are fully taken into account the freedom celebrated amounts only to moments within the engulfing textual matrix of control and domination. What is produced during reading is rather a doubling effect — "seeing double", first escape, then entrapment, in juxtaposition. Instead of the novel being decoded into just an image of liberation, these doubling effects

of the text, reflected in the author's struggle to be himself, are what need to be revealed.

The main focus of this paper will consequently be on clarifying through deconstructive means what Michael, as a linguistic-discursive construct, and through him his creator, J M Coetzee, determined to go his own writerly way, during times of great social and political injustice in South Africa, actually escape or are constricted by in textual power arrangements. The tendency in critical practice, as has been indicated by calling the eponymous anti-hero an "escape artist", favours one side of the binary paradigm. In the process the contradiction, the fact that Michael is also entrapped, is erased. The writing of Michael, as I shall show, demands that both premises of the binary, the contradictions, the paradox, be taken into account at one and the same time. It is in this way that the "truth" of Michael is problematised, and refuses closure. To take this further, it is the writer recognising the other by refusing to definitely totalise in representative binary form and, in turn, expecting the same treatment for himself, as shall be shown below. By leaving unresolved irreconcilable difference, preserving and not foreclosing, the writer ultimately shows recognition and respect for the other. It is a form of ethics as assertion and erasure that countermand each other as the narrative unfolds.

Through this process the resistance to power, which character and writer both embody, will be examined more closely as impelling motif and ethical touchstone in the discourse. It is to these ends that the encoded presence of resistance and its effectiveness in praxis will be discussed in Michael's narrative life, the allegorical discourse, the language and the writer.

To begin with Michael will be discussed as an "escape artist" and a mirror-image of the recalcitrant text, which also refuses to be pinned down. But where necessary, this aspect of the discussion will be intertwined with what entraps Michael. For example, when language is considered, especially English, particularly in white writing in Africa, Michael's escape will be shown to be far from complete or absolute.

Furthermore, what Michael is made to undergo, "doubling" in the escape-entrapment pattern, will be connected, as far as is possible, with the writer's determination to make his own way in his use

of words. For both — the linguistic construct, Michael, and his creator — there is resistance, freedom and autonomy, to be sure, but only within the conditions laid down by claustrophobic textual, linguistic and theoretical constraints. In the discussion that follows there will also be an endeavour to widen the parameters of definition and understanding, specifically in relation to what is considered relevant literature in SA.

1. Michael K

The novel is set in a future time at the terminating stages of totalitarian degeneracy in an increasingly militarised state bureaucracy. Coetzee's textual configuration, Michael K, one of the dispossessed, leaves war-torn Cape Town with his mother in a home-made barrow for the farmland of Prince Albert where they may live in peace. After her death, however, the journey through the political and military network of boundaries criss-crossing the land surface, through roadblocks and security camps to the Visagie farm and back again to the city, becomes one of survival.

Physically disfigured by a hare-lip, possibly mentally retarded, institutionalised in childhood and by trade a nondescript gardener, Michael is shown to negate the attempts of the state to contain and control him. He is portrayed as refusing to be made into a meaning, a word-structure within a conceptual framework invented to deal with him and what is perceived as the vast emptiness and unbroken silence of Africa.

And, yet, offsetting this at various points in the narrative, Michael is named "thief", "vagrant", "labourer", "parasite", "trespasser", "body servant", "monkey", "prisoner", "runaway", "terrorist", "arsonist" and "opgaarder" (storage man). Even the sympathetic, more reflective medical officer has to name him: "creature", "simpleton", "lost soul", "albatross" and "universal soul". Michael's resistance and the medical officer's naming are examples of the doubling effects of the escape-entrapment pattern of the novel.

In a more complicated way the medical officer rings a change on this pattern by defending his freedom, that is, his own notion of

beleaguered identity as a white man in Africa, by renaming Michael. In the words of Laing (1965: 76-7) he could be said to be

> [...] subject to the dread of his own dissolution into non-being ....[he] fears a real live dialectical relationship with real live people. He can relate himself only to depersonalized persons, to phantoms of his own phantasies (*imagos*).

Authority figures, akin to the medical officer, all male, father many Michaels. For themselves, for their own definition and recognition, they have to label him. With no help whatsoever from him, this is usually in binary opposition to terms they choose for themselves. In this regard what Doris Lessing wrote in her review of Van der Post's *The Lost World of the Kalahari* in 1958, forty-odd years ago, is still applicable today:

> An African once said to me that beyond the white man's more obvious crimes in Africa there was an unforgivable one that 'Even the best of you use Africa as a peg to hang your egos on'. To this crime Mr Van der Post is open. So are all of us (Lessing 1958: 700).

She expands on this particular propensity, especially among those born and brought up in Africa. Van der Post's book, she says,

> is mainly valuable because of its conscious crystallisation of the white man's malaise, an unappeasable hunger for what is out of reach (Lessing 1958: 700).

An exemplar of this tendency, the neo-colonial medical officer, hounds Michael: "I appeal to you, Michaels: yield!" (Coetzee 1983: 152). Yet even as he seeks to know him, the officer cannot help but do so on his own terms by renaming him "Michaels". Similarly, the police constable, in another variation of the pattern of escape and entrapment, names him "Michael Visagie", after the owners of the farm where he was captured. And in the third book, in another permutation of the pattern, and an interesting extension of Lessing's assessment above, so do the homeless people he meets, who call him "Mr Treefellers", the label on the back of overalls that he takes when he escapes from the rehabilitation camp.

The writer, too, as part of the escape-entrapment pattern, and as the begetter of text, fathers the textual character "Michael K" with all its signifying and intertextual resonances. The fatherings, the

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impositions of tyrannies of state and author, dovetail into each other. Michael, albeit not as flesh and blood, is, nonetheless, imprisoned, interrogated and tortured in the camp and in the text.

The medical officer, like the author, attempts to insert Michael/Michaels as a character of his own making into the records, the text, history. When he fails to get a story, which would be regarded as a "fiction" anyway, he suggests making up "something for the report", ironically, more "fiction" (Coetzee 1983: 141). But Michael, silent for the most part, and who, when he speaks, says, "I am not clever with words", is made to appear immune to manipulation through language (Coetzee 1983: 139). His silence is met by the officer's loquacity, which fills the interrogation scene with a flow of words let loose to seduce Michael into the linguistic web of reification (Coetzee 1983: 140).

In spite of all the efforts to re-invent the unheroic subject, Michael, he seems to manage to keep his sense of self, whatever that may be. In Ward's (1989: 165) view,

> [his] self is to be preserved, even at the risk of the body itself being sacrificed. The shrunken, the minimal, the deprived, becomes preferable to a comparative ease that threatens selfhood, the ease offered by the regimented society .

The state, the medical officer and the author are all shown to be incapable of getting to him; unable to accept this, or that Michael can have his own self, the medical officer is prepared only to see him as incomplete, unfinished, an "unborn creature" (Coetzee 1983: 135).

The author, by contrast, makes Michael's silence function, in a way, to erase the master-servant power relationship. With his silence Michael is meant to signify that he is unusual, different, "other" and, much to their frustration and fury, equal to his captors.

He does not join forces with the guerrillas in the liberation struggle against the totalitarian state either, because by doing so he would, according to Marais (1989: 36), "become a term in the power relations of dominance-subservience". As such, according to Marais, he "escapes the times" completely and remains "untouched by history", a conclusion that is challenged below.

In a sense, Michael's resistance to determinism may be seen, in keeping with the doubling effects of the text, as the artefact's escape, after having been inserted into the text, from the author. By giving him the slip, the gap Michael leaves in his wake could be said to signal the failure of inscription and representation — and, ultimately, the "death of the author".

Michael, as textual being, may also be said, in a sense, to repudiate both the medical officer's and the author's existential need to make meaning in order not just to know and understand, if possible, but to know so as to dominate and control. As author/reader the medical officer scrutinises Michael hermeneutically, "puzzling over the mystery" (Coetzee 1983: 164). Michael is asked to "yield" but he gives and asks for nothing. Like the text, Michael appears to resist interpretation and mastery, but only to a point, as will be shown, in the greater scheme of discursive arrangements.

2.   The text

Like Michael, the text, too, "doubles", showing one or other side of itself at a time. It is composed of words, signs, arbitrary configurations that are attempts to encapsulate perceptions of reality. On the one hand, it acts as a mirror to create a "reality" in the marks on a page, words. And, on the other hand, the text shows up as gaps, indeterminacies, ambiguities, secrets, enigmas and mysteries, that emphasise the unreliability and recalcitrance of such multiply compounded mediations. All in all, its loquacity, like that of the medical officer, does not guarantee closure and resolution. For the noise made by the talkative text, "sound and fury", terminates inevitably in silence, mystery, "signifying nothing".

Both the novel and Michael K, as texts, are shown at one or other time as the "same" or the "other"; that is, they can be made into some kind of meaning at times or, at others, they cannot be coerced to yield, to give themselves up completely. Because they have the capacity to defy and resist, the text with instabilities and Michael by slipping eventually into a hunger-strike, their strangeness and unpredictability have to be erased, familiarised into conventional, naturalised modes of understanding, that is, into the "same".

3. The reading process

The reader, too, like the medical officer, is compelled by the will to power to assimilate the text into the system of conventional literary meanings. Marais (1989: 40) explains what makes this possible:

> It is a function of the hegemonic working in culture: the imperialist imperative to demarcate cultural boundaries and then to appropriate that which threatens these boundaries, in this way protecting and fortifying its identity and enforcing its hegemony.

However, in the doubling process, even as the reader domesticates the text hermeneutically, its holes, gaps and indeterminacies swallow up interpretations. The text, like Michael K, does not strike or talk back, but is passively resistant, "other" and silent. It may be misread, territorialised within received norms and systems of interpretive conventions. At the same time, "the text [...] reads the reader" and so brings to light the imprisoning, the authoritarian and authoritative systems of reading and writing, the prison-house of literary production and reception (Freund 1987: 129).

Reading is like other acts of perception, taught and learnt through pre-existing schema (Freund 1987: 124). Michael, the character and the text *Life & Times of Michael K*, are schema, ideological mediations that block out the real and the flesh and blood. The Michael who is, therefore, made absolutely to escape constraints of whatever kind, is a product of wishful thinking at one time; and at another, and in spite of itself and Coetzee's utopian attempts, the text is mimetic, referential and a reflection of apartheid life, as experienced with all its oppressions by the representative of the downtrodden, Michael.

While Coetzee makes it possible to unravel his own textual configurations as he weaves them, or to double the effects, he also disturbs the relationship of text and reader by making the reader a self-conscious observer of his/her own reading process. By such disruptions Coetzee also shows how both he and the reader are implicated in the treacheries of power and authority.

By contrast Michael K, the textual character, is shown, in one of the moments of freedom in the text, to epitomise the alternative to the paradigm of dominance-subservience. He is portrayed harmonis-

ing with the earth into which he burrows. He does not ask it to "yield". What the earth gives he gratefully and graciously receives. The plants are his brothers and sisters and meant for all to share. "What grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth," he says (Coetzee 1983: 139). Michael, who has no partner or child himself, is depicted liberating and disseminating the seed.

4. The language

Michael's equality and reciprocity with the earth and its fruits suggest alternative possibilities for relationships with no need for mastery. His continuing silence in the midst of the officer's and the text's loquacity is a means of reinforcing his rejection of the power relations inscribed in language.

However, the structural principles of binaries, oppositional structures such as subject-object, hierarchies and linearities echo hegemonic forces of the state and culture. In this regard Watson (1986: 374) points out how another Coetzee text, *In the heart of the country*,

> is constructed on the principle that it is through language itself, through those conventional representations which come to be accepted as either 'natural' or 'universal', that we are colonized as much as by any event of physical conquest .

To Coetzee, who "admits to being a linguist before being a writer", the linguistic, just as much as the formal, the historical and the political, governs the writing of fiction in South Africa (Atwell 1990: 95). The constitutive functions of language are identified in his Ph D thesis submitted at the University of Texas at Austin in 1969. In his stylistic analysis of the English fiction of Samuel Beckett he traces the writer's dissatisfaction with English as "systematic parody" and "binary patterning at every level of language: words imitating the pattern of other words, and words setting up their own obsessive pattern" (Atwell 1990: 94).

Coetzee shows how a construct in English, while used to mirror the "real", is also a form of dispossession and alienation because it stands for something it can never be. In an attempt to deal with these disconcerting tendencies of language he uses discourse and language

self-consciously and self-referentially. And Michael's silence is used to underscore

> [...] the vicissitudes of the I-You relation showing its implications
> for the subject in a deeply divided society where a language of equal
> exchange seems to be unavailable (Atwell 1992: 7).

Coetzee also attempts to disrupt authorial agency by varying the narrative voice to create multivocalism, with a number of characters providing commentary: for instance, the medical officer and Robert in books two and three respectively. The narrator is also absent from the heterodiegetic books, one and three, and in the homodiegetic book two he is present as a character in the story he tells.

As the Afrikaner's ploughshare fails to break the sun-baked rocky surface of Africa, so too, Coetzee, while using English, finds it inadequate to render African realities. Although English is now considered a neutral language in spite of its colonial baggage, and one of the eleven official languages in South Africa, it is a reflection, a schema of a very different world. But the question of an authentic language to fit Africa is problematic too, given the non-referentiality, the yawning gap between signifier and signified, of any language, whether from Africa or Europe. In Coetzee's view and in terms of non-referentiality, even an African language indigenous to the subcontinent "is not necessarily the right authenticity" (Coetzee 1988: 7). Added to which, for a European to learn an African language "from the inside", "like a native", and "[share] the mode of consciousness of the people born to it" he will "to that extent [have to give ...] up his European identity", leading to a doubling of the linguistic alienation (Coetzee 1988: 7).

It is to keep his identity that Michael must decline to join the rebels and repeatedly escape internment. In Atwell's (1992: 9) view, linguistically handicapped since he is "marked with a harelip, K remains outside human intercourse and, by extension, outside the culture's various forms of entrapment", a questionable point taken up as the brief of this article. Also in question is the elaboration of the statement made to show that, as

> [...] a meaning [that] can take up residence within a system without
> becoming a term in it, 'K' is therefore Coetzee's muted affirmation

of the freedom to narrate, to textualize; the narratological equiva-
lent, in a sense, of the Derridean trace (Attwell 1992: 10).

5. J M Coetzee

But in the very next statement Atwell (1992: 10) confirms the
doubling taking place when he says

> However, Coetzee's is a precarious affirmation whose pertinence
> comes from a precise and clear-eyed recognition of a general
> hostility which continually threatens textuality's eclipse.

The "precarious affirmation" may be taken to come from Coetzee's al-
most relentless postmodern scepticism about what can be achieved
linguistically, particularly since, while he writes, he also struggles
with the dynamics of authorial agency and positionality as a white
writer in Africa. In Chapman's (1996: 388) view the writer's discom-
fort with himself elicits

> [...] monologues of narcissistic self-flagellation spoken by characters
> who often sound like Coetzee himself, the post-structurally aware
> but inwardly tormented intellectual.

Instead of brushing aside or concealing these doubts about the ef-
ficacy of discourse and authorship, and the tensions between readers,
texts, authors, and the subjects or characters of stories, he forces the
reader to confront them. Nor does he refrain from demonstrating
that writing is not free expression. His non-representational mode of
thought, a consequence of the post-modern, is constituted as a site of
contradictions, competing meanings and possibilities that I have
attempted to draw out as doubling effects by means of the escape-
entrapment reading approach.

Because of his representational procedures and his own radical
doubts about white writing in South Africa, Coetzee has been criti-
cised for not dealing more directly with the realities of South African
oppression. This criticism, which Atwell refers to as "left empiri-
cism", has made Coetzee out to be conservative to the point of legi-
timising the *status quo* (Van Rooy 1996: 112). Dovey (1957) says of
the critics on the left that they are more or less "univocal in their
dissatisfaction with Coetzee's mode of writing and in their desire that
he write in some other way" (Van Rooy 1996: 112). But there are

others who take a different view; in Strauss's (1992: 379) opinion, for example,

> there is no writer who makes us feel so uncomfortably that his no-
> vels are speaking about our immediate situation as South Africans
> in the second half of the twentieth century.

To Coetzee (1988: 2) the voices that criticise from the left, just like the apartheid state which is a "crime against Africa" (Coetzee 1992: 342), are also "lay[ing] down the law (Coetzee 1992: 394). He objects to readings which

> [...] subsume the novel under history, read novels as what [... he]
> will loosely call imaginative investigations of real historical forces
> and real historical circumstances; and conversely, [...] treat novels
> that do not perform this investigation of what are deemed to be real
> historical forces and circumstances as lacking in seriousness
> (Coetzee 1988: 2).

Apart from rejecting what he calls "the discourse of history" because it reproduces the structural principle of prescriptiveness, he adds:

> I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making
> that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a
> novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse;
> that inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of
> forcefulness try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of
> discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend
> themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of
> story that people agree to tell each other (Coetzee 1988: 4).

But this response, too, comes from a set of dictates from the art of writing that, in Cooper's (1990: 91) view, is more acceptable to Coetzee because it offers "the labyrinth, the illusion, the lie". To Gordimer, Coetzee is "squeamish about giving up his own white intellectual, social and literary authority" (Chapman 1996: 391). Cooper (1990: 91) also writes that Coetzee gives up "the apple with its tangible core" for "the onion with its elusive layers of skin".

The shift from "apple core" to "onion layers", if that is really what is taking place, is not such a drawback as it is made out to be, since it allows more of the complexities involved to be exposed. For instance, a significant layer which Coetzee helps to emerge tells of

> [...] the peculiarities of white writing, a developing literature that
> he reads as attempting — tentatively — to appropriate a place for

itself in Africa. It attempts to achieve this by manufacturing a mythology that provides a basis for the historical act of colonisation of an inhospitable land, with its resistant native inhabitants. *White Writing* (1988) is a critical re-reading of the colonial narrative, focusing on such aspects as the domestication of the 'empty' landscape and the 'civilising' of its 'primitive people' — it is an interrogation of the discourse of colonialism that Coetzee's fictional works continue (Dept of English, Vista University 1994: 77).

A finer sub-layer that is also exposed is that of the white writer who seeks "a dialogue with Africa, a reciprocity with Africa, that will allow him an identity better than that of visitor, stranger, transient" (Coetzee 1988: 7-8). The sense of alienation comes from straddling Africa and Europe and consequently feeling disabled, disqualified and without authority to write (Coetzee 1992: 392). Situated thus, and given the privileges of race, education, income and reputation, white writers

> have felt the need to be enormously self-conscious about the truth of their fiction. As artists in literary company they have had to ensure that their forms and tropes [...] strike consonance at least with the West's novelistic expectations (Chapman 1996: 386).

It would seem from what has been said above, then, that it is more a matter of stepping "out of history", that is, out of Africa, than the white writer not knowing his place "in history" in Africa, as claimed earlier by Chapman (1996: 386). In fact, Doris Lessing (1958: 700) puts it more bluntly in the review previously quoted:

> All white-African literature is the literature of exile: not from Europe, but from Africa.

Bryan Rostron (1999: 24) elaborates more broadly:

> Constantly it strikes me, returning home after nearly three decades, how many white South Africans still don't really want to live in Africa: they just want to live in a sunny suburb [...]

> The otherness of Africa lingers deeply in the European mind. Africa, as for early colonists and explorers, remains remote: out there, unknown, menacing.

In addition, Coetzee also makes statements such as the following, post-structural to be sure, but leaving the reader uncertain whether

he intends defence or discovery, self-protection or never-ending baf-
flement:

> There is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is
> not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear
> to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call
> Class Conflict or the game called Male Dominations or any of the
> other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be
> possible to read the book as playing one of these games, in reading
> it in that way you may have missed something. You may have
> missed not just something, you may have missed everything
> (Coetzee 1988: 3-4).

Coetzee overrides this, however, by querying the efficacy of his
own creative imagination. Confronted in the 80s by stories and
images of the South African Police brutality that defined the emer-
gency in the alternative newspapers *New Nation* and *Weekly Mail*, he
says, recalling Nietzsche:

> We have art so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa
> now there is too much truth for art to hold — truth by the bucket-
> ful, truth that overwhelms and sways every act of imagination
> (Chapman 1996: 399-400).

Coetzee has chosen to deal with what he feels are uncontainable
extreme realities by recourse to linguistics and literary theory. Yet to
Cooper (1990) this is an unsatisfactory way of dealing with writing
in South Africa, particularly since it allows Coetzee only a precarious
kind of independence, an independence which he appears determined
to preserve, whatever the consequences. To explain, she says:

> Coetzee's fiction, perhaps more than that of any other South African
> writer that I have encountered, is powerfully and even self-
> consciously fired in the kiln of his chosen body of literary theory.
> Autonomy is illusory (Cooper 1990: 92).

She is not alone in thinking this way; Robert Young (1990) also
finds radical reading and writing theories colonially implicated. In
the context of the imperialist bunker in which we are all entrapped,
he elaborates how the theories

> [...] have themselves been implicated in the long history of Euro-
> pean colonialism — and, above all, the extent to which [they] con-
> tinue to determine both the institutional conditions of knowledge
> as well as the terms of contemporary institutional practices — prac-

tices which extend beyond the limits of the academic institution
(Young 1990: viii).

Against the backdrop of South Africa during the turbulent 80s,
deconstruction, which forms part of Coetzee's chosen approach, and
offers a means of depicting Michael as an "escape artist", may thus be
regarded, in a sense, as self-indulgence and

> an endless deferral of moral consequence which, in the agonised so-
> ciety, can merely provoke the impatience of those for whom reality
> is less an elusive signifier, more a crack on the head by a police trun-
> cheon (Chapman 1996: 389).

And given the harsh realities of apartheid, Michael, the representa-
tive of millions of the oppressed of colour, who is idealised into "es-
caping the enforced society at whatever cost" when he is actually kept
on the run in his native land, always "out of place", also comes into
question (Ward 1989: 165). From this perspective, the seriousness of
the cruelty of apartheid is, in truth, undermined by marginalising
political specificity for the sake of discursiveness and a parable on the
universal human condition.

At the same time, when pressed to comment about *Life & Times
of Michael K*, Coetzee does try to break the linguistic, textual log-
jam. He finally ventures to say that the novel "says, if it says any-
thing, about asserting the freedom of textuality, however meager and
marginal that freedom may be", a point well illustrated by Michael,
the textually configured "escape artist" (Coetzee 1992: 206). Coetzee
(1992: 341) reveals more when he says of himself,

> I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained
> person has) and constructs representations — which are shadows
> themselves — of people slipping their chains and turning their
> faces to the light. Freedom is another name for the unimaginable
> [...].

Coetzee is, certainly, clear about the dominance and hold of Wes-
tern discourses of power, which have to be understood if there is to
be moral reconstruction, beginning significantly with self-abnega-
tion, exemplified by Michael, within "meager and marginal" free-
doms. At many points in the novel we are led to believe in the
possibility that Michael is free of history's referent and of the tyranny
of authority inscribed in the text — views also held by Marais (1989)

and Atwell (1990 & 1992), as mentioned above. At the same time, however, Michael is still denied agency in the "meager and marginal" freedoms, and these are also kept in check in the colonised and colonising text by the *angst*-ridden Coetzee himself. It is Coetzee, through the characters and narratives he presents, who, in spite of himself, both creates and deconstructs Michael as an "escape artist".

Because the writing situation is so complex, it would seem that the white writer (or a writer of any other "colour", for that matter, if the doubling effects of the situation are taken broadly) is damned whether he writes or not. Given the linguistic and textual constrictions and ambiguities, Coetzee himself questions the morality of writing books at all in one of his novels, *Dusklands*. According to Strauss (1992: 378-402), he links writing

> [...] with an impulse of distinctive aggression, a splitting off from life which becomes fear and hatred and a need to assert dominance.

Textual signs, the bricks and mortar of discourse, freeze, alienate, sterilise, and objectify reality and in themselves are impervious means of power. As signs, too, the silence and inarticulacy of Michael do not afford much of an escape since they, too, are caught up and implicated in the text and sign system.

In the final analysis Van Rooy (1996: 112), commenting on the writer's dilemma, finds that the Coetzee text, for instance, though more honest, is itself "so preoccupied with its own nature that it becomes a mere repetitive staging of its own limitations and its own paralysis". At the same time, it makes possible a relative truth even though this occurs within textual and linguistic terms which have proved problematic. Given Coetzee's international reputation and authority as a writer, the relative truth, whatever the reservations, has, in turn, the power to become authoritative and self-legitimating. To add to this, Michael may be presented as "other", but in discursive practice he may be said to be "simply the same masquerading as alterity" (Marais 1996: 59).

It would seem that the establishing of equal and reciprocal relations is always compromised by structures of knowledge and representational procedures. To negotiate this it would, perhaps, be more useful to change the focus from interpreting the text, since that

cannot assure an escape from the power relations of the verbal maze, to viewing the text as a performance which comes into play whenever it is read. It would thus constitute enactment which, by coming into play as we read and write, may perhaps open up gaps or possibilities for the subversion of power relations, as Coetzee attempts to do in the Michael text. Writing and reading may, in this way, become responsible encounters between author and text and reader and text.

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