

**Imagining what it means to be “human” through the fiction of  
J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* and Cormac  
McCarthy’s *The Road*.**

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## **Abstract**

Through a literary analysis of two contemporary novels, J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), in which a common concern seems to be an exploration of what it means to be human, the thesis seeks to explore the relationship between human consciousness and language. This dissertation considers the development of a conception of the human based on rationality, and which begins in the Italian Renaissance and gains momentum in the Enlightenment. This conception models the human as a stable knowable self. This is drawn in contrast to the novels, which figure the absence of a stable knowable self in the representation of their protagonists. The thesis thus interrogates language's capacity to provide definitional meanings of the "human." On the other hand, although language's capacity to provide essential meanings is questioned, its abundant expressive forms give voice to the experience of human being. Drawing on a range of fields of enquiry, both philosophical, linguistic, and bio-ethical, this thesis seeks to explore the connection between human consciousness and the medium of language. It considers how the two novels in question play with the concept of language to produce or imagine other ways of thinking about human existence, and other ways of creating meaning to human existence through the representation of their novels.

## **Keywords**

consciousness, language, meaning, representation, affective meaning, simulation, subvocalization, narrative, hospitality, poststructuralist theory, Being, symbol, allegory, humanism, posthumanism, structuralism, Cormac McCarthy, J.M. Coetzee, Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure, Martin Heidegger

## Declaration

I declare that “Imagining what it means to be ‘human’ through the fiction of J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Name: Sasha Welsh

Date: 3 August 2018

Signature:



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*For Marion Abrahams Welsh, my aunt and mother, without whose support none of this would have been possible.*



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## Introduction: Theoretical Paradigms

This dissertation explores two contemporary novels namely, J.M.Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), in which the experience of the human condition plays a central role. The dissertation asks what forms of language are made available through fictional representation. Key to this analysis will be Charles Taylor's "expressive-constitutive" view of language, in which the full range of expressive forms are incorporated, and in which language does more than just attribute properties to things. He suggests that the novel, which operates on the level the symbolic, does not just create meaning by attributing properties to things, but also by attributing a new emotional significance to words. Through an exploration of the use of these expressive forms in the language of the novel this thesis aims to demonstrate imaginative fiction's ability to figure other meanings of the human that do not only rely on rational thought. Finally, language is often conflated with thinking through the perception that it is used as the tool of thought, and that speech is the representation of thought. Drawing on the critical work of Jacques Derrida in particular, the dissertation frames the difference between language and consciousness, and it explores the novels' imaginative representation of this separation in its construction of meaning. In representing this disjunction, I suggest, both novels enable us to deepen the enquiry into philosophical notions of the "human".

Whispers of the demise of humanism have been circulating for a while now. It is in this context that the idea of the 'posthuman' has emerged. However, it must be said that the importance of these whispers to this dissertation are not in relation to the appearance of the term 'posthuman,' or for that matter its allusion to questions of 'the human' in relation to the sociological and environmental domains, which through the implication of the prefix 'post' suggests the end of humanity, and the collapse of these domains.<sup>1</sup> Rather the importance of these murmurs are that they respond, react or reply to a human reality made present by our ways of being, acting and conceiving of ourselves. The 'posthuman' is a response to other

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<sup>1</sup> This connection is never clearer than when conceiving of the sociological and the environmental domains, firstly, in relation to the particular classification of our living present, as the age of 'the anthropocene,' that species whose sheer number is capable of exerting immense pressure and of physically changing the natural environment. Sociologically, internal stresses and pressures between population groups through over population, and the ever increasing consumption of natural resources, as well as growing levels of inequality between different groups. The 'post' in posthuman would seem to imply what comes after the human once the stresses and pressures in these domains have reached a point of no return.

conceptions of the human. It manifests because of how we conceived human being in the past. Some of the reasons for these voices of pessimism is in relation to what is seen as both the limitations of humanist and Western thought, and this is based on the “ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism” (Wolfe xiii), as identified by philosophers such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, or the more contemporary Nick Bostrom. The whispers then, are in answer to a conception, construction or ideal of the “human”. The dissertation, too might gather some conversational movement in considering other conceptions of the human, particularly those available for exploration in the novels of J.M.Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). The exploration begins with a focus on how these novels navigate notions of the human in their fictional experiments. I will suggest that in both cases the novels do not seem to be constrained by the difficulties with philosophical definitions of ‘the human,’ even though these are inherently worked into the stories. Both novels, it seems, engage with a notion of being that goes beyond the theoretical exploration of language and its relationship to conceptions of the human; at the same time, however, they are immersed in the very fractures and limits of both humanist and Western thought.

In this thesis I will suggest that these novels engage with the assumption that humans are defined by their facility for language in several ways. The novels, I argue, not only formulate philosophical definitions of the human, and depict them through character and plot, but also generate affect through language, through, for example, the subvocal effects of language, and through narrative. Thus they represent a conception of humans as ‘language beings’, while, at the same time, showing language to be the medium through which literature exceeds self-imposed linguistic and philosophical boundaries, evident in the structures of these narratives. Language in this sense may be viewed as a tool or as a prosthetic of the human because, as Niklas Luhmann will argue, humans do not communicate, language communicates. In other words, we do not communicate directly from one consciousness to another. Indeed, communication from one consciousness to another occurs through language whether we understand language to be either somatic or verbal. Human subjectivity, it would seem, hinges on language’s ability to give voice to the human interior and to affect the human’s interiority.

Cormac McCarthy, for example, sees language as an instrument or a tool. For McCarthy, language does not meet some need because, he notes, the “other five thousand plus mammals



among us do fine without it” (“The Kekulé Problem” n.pag.).<sup>2</sup> Language is not a biological system but an invention or a construction placed upon the world, through which meaning is created. For McCarthy, “[t]he unconscious is a biological operative and language is not” (*TKP*). Indeed, in this article above, he is explicit about this: “So what are we saying here? That some unknown thinker sat up one night in his cave and said: Wow. One thing can be another thing. Yes. Of course that’s what we are saying” (*TKP*). The idea that language is an invented tool, or prosthetic, does not subtract from its expressive power. What it does suggest, however, is that language, as an inventive instrument which enables meaning to come into being, is uniquely human, and through it we are defined as “fundamentally a prosthetic creature,” and which for “Derrida . . . includes the most fundamental prostheticity of all: language in the broadest sense” (Wolfe xxv-xxvi). In support of this, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argue that what distinguishes us as humans is participation “in the meta-meta-communicative frame that is language proper” (37). Our use of language, as it is connected to our being “fundamentally a prosthetic creature” and our participation in its “meta-meta-communication frame,” can be seen as a distinguishing feature of what makes us human. My suggestion will be that the way the novel uses language as an expressive form best describes what it means to be human, in the sense that the human being is a creative being and that this creativity relies on his or her predisposition towards using certain prosthetics or tools, one of which would be language itself, in creative and imaginative ways.

In *Life & Times of Michael K* the character Michael K resembles to some extent Heinrich von Kleist’s protagonist in his novel *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810), and from which Michael K’s name is partially derived (Attwell, “Suburban Bandit”<sup>3</sup> 129). In von Kleist’s novel, Kohlhaas becomes an outlaw in an effort to regain the property which corrupt officials swindled him out of, and embarks on a campaign of retaliation by robbing, killing and leading a rebellion (131). However, as David Attwell suggests, the terrain that Coetzee’s Michael embarks on his campaign “is that of society’s habits of thought, and indeed of language itself”, rather than the actual socius (135). It is through narrative, then, that Coetzee’s K rebels against linguistic meaning itself and by implication against the logic of Western thought with its reflex to privilege one term over another. Narrative thus seems to provide the creative resources through which the very medium of language is used to challenge the way it defines social being as a construction of meaning. Linguistically, language needs to name and categorize

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviated as *TKP* from now on.

<sup>3</sup> “Suburban Bandit” will be abbreviated as *SB*.

things, objects, or ideas in order for them to have a meaning. Furthermore, the person who names and categorizes things assumes a position of authority; he or she becomes the human subject that names the natural object. A linguistic view of language frames difference, and separation and creates a hierarchical structure of power between things based on the subject's capacity for agency (he is the one that names) or on their ability to portray their subjectivity (what he chooses to name it). However, Michael K's meaning is never named, he never becomes a term in the system, and Coetzee achieves this by framing his meaning through the literary device of allegory and by switching modes of narration. Mike Marais observes that "Coetzee's K does not name entities" and that "K's life on the farm is free of language in language" (46). Instead he suggests that K relates to things "sensuously and immediately" (46), and as such overcomes "his linguistic separation from the world" and "becomes like the world, part of it" (45). In this way Coetzee seems to promote a more open and equal view of representation, by using the resources of fiction itself to challenge linguistic difference and the authority of the subject.

While Donald Powers remarks that "[a]t the level of prose style, these two writers could hardly be more different from each other" (59), he does observe that a substantial amount of criticism of McCarthy's fiction tries to understand his "method and vision" "in the light of the idea of 'optical democracy'" (70). "Optical democracy", he suggests, "capture's the narrator's equalizing vision in which the human individual enjoys no special privilege but is just another thing among things" (70). Indeed, this may apply to *Blood Meridian* (1985), which Powers refers to, but not, I would suggest, to *The Road*. This is perhaps because the landscape and things in general are partially effaced and the human agents still name things like the cart and assume authority over them. The idea of optical democracy is, perhaps, best suited to K's experience at the dam where the narration does not name things and K "becomes like the world, part of it" (Marais 45). As Marais suggests, the act in which K relocates "from the farmhouse to the burrow," "connotes an overcoming of the separation between human subject and natural object," and that without "this opposition, the impulse to possess and dominate is structurally impossible" (39). K's representation in this section of the novel speaks of his equality among the things of the world. Here K enjoys no special privilege and is seen as just another thing among things. Indeed, he even refers to his vegetables as his "sisters" and "brothers" (Coetzee 113). These terms ask us to reconsider the assumption that relationships usually operate on the basis of privilege and authority, by using

language that expresses the equality of value between things as distant and distinct as human and plant.

What is more significant is a view put forward by Vereen Bell that “a precondition for entering the world of McCarthy’s novels is for one to ‘to surrender all Cartesian predispositions and rediscover some primal state of consciousness prior to its becoming identified with thinking only’” (qtd in Powers 70). In other words, though the novels of McCarthy and, indeed, Coetzee draw upon poststructuralist and Cartesian thought, they also question their assumptions. For example, Coetzee questions whether thinking itself is the basis for the experience of being, while McCarthy asks whether benevolence is based on rationality or on an innate sense of goodness, and which he explores in the protagonists of his novel *The Road*. This is because McCarthy’s narrative depicts a world where reason and logic necessitate committing inhumane acts. Logically and inevitably in order to survive one would have to feed on other humans. McCarthy’s inversion of rational thought with inhumane acts seems to be a critique of benevolence and its association with rationality. Indeed, being benevolent in McCarthy’s vision of the world means acting irrationally, which perhaps, emphasises a view of the human that acts benevolently through feeling and natural impulses rather than the process of rational thought.

Man as ‘the rational being’ perhaps makes his entry by way of the Renaissance sense of the term ‘humanism.’ Ernst Cassirer argues, that the term denotes primarily a specific intellectual program and only incidentally suggested the more general set of values which have in recent times come to be called ‘humanistic’ (Cassirer, qtd. in Davies 94). Tony Davies observes that it was rather an “informal curriculum, the *studia humanitatis* or ‘study of humanity’, grounded in the reading of ancient Greek and Roman authors and the application of Platonic, Aristotelean and Ciceronian ideas and values to contemporary life” (94). Furthermore, the term itself “*umanisti* or ‘humanists’” was “a purely functional term” that the people who wrote and taught on the *studia humanitatis* used in order to refer to themselves (94). In this sense, humanism as an “intellectual program” is “one characterised by a notable absence of coherence and a remarkable degree of discord” (94). It was out of the reading and writing of this informal group, with its unconventional curriculum that the term as we understand it arose and found expression in the works of John Addington Symonds (literary studies), Ernst Cassirer (philosophy), and Jacob Burckhardt (history of art and culture).

Indeed, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Oration "On the Dignity of Man" which has been referred to as "the manifesto of Renaissance humanism" can be viewed as an example of this development (95). It is the first few pages of this oration which J.A. Symonds comes to define as "the Epiphany of the modern spirit" and where many of "the themes elaborated by Burckhardt and his successors" may be extrapolated (97). These themes include: "the dignity and freedom of man, individualism, wide intellectual curiosity and a refusal to submit to the constraints of clerical orthodoxy" (97). However, as Davies argues, the title of Mirandola's Oration ("On the Dignity of Man") was not given by Mirandola himself, but later by "Frobenius' Basle edition of 1557" in Latin (98). Furthermore, Davies observes that the usual interpretation of this version as the "evocation of a transcendent 'Man', belongs, like so much else of Renaissance 'humanism', not to the fifteenth century but to the nineteenth" (99). This can be explained by the fact that as it was written in Latin it could easily be translated as "On a man's worthiness" (99). Davies observes, that it was Symonds who was the "first, in 1882," to give Mirandola's Oration its English title, "On the Dignity of Man" (99). From this perspective humanist thought is as much a nineteenth century construction as it is the unveiling of any coherent narrative present in the Italian Renaissance.

Davies adds further support to this argument by drawing our attention to the century after Symonds and to the writing of Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold on Mirandola's Oration, who argue for the "rhetorical and functional character of the Oration, the incoherence and conventionality of many of its ideas," and who claim that "the 'extravagance and posturing' of its claims for philosophy" is unrepresentative "both of Pico's writings and of humanist thought in general" (102). However, Davies highlights the fact that these views are in the minority. Instead, he suggests that the dominant readings of the Oration remain "Burckhardtian" (102). Davies suggests that it is these readings of the Renaissance that underpin the "proto-modernity of the Renaissance and its unbroken continuity with the present" (102). Furthermore, it is this Burckhardtian intellectual tradition that gives "for the first time 'a positive method and dignity'" to what can be viewed as "the 'haphazard and superficial' speculations of the humanists" (102). As Cassirer suggests, Mirandola's Oration "summarizes with grand simplicity and in pregnant form the whole intent of the Renaissance and its entire concept of knowledge" (qtd. in Davies 102). These original readings and translations of Renaissance writers' marks the beginning of what Davies refers to as a "humanistic religion" (qtd. in Davies 102). The themes or ideals we associate with humanist thought, "the dignity and freedom of man, individualism, wide intellectual curiosity and a

refusal to submit to the constraints of clerical orthodoxy” (97), are as much a nineteenth century construction as an excavation of any specific intellectual program taught or written by Italian Renaissance writers and teachers.

The idea that humans are distinguished by their ability to reason, and that reason, in turn, draws on our capacity for complex conceptual thought may therefore be drawn from the later construction of the intellectual program of humanism which was undertaken by eminent historians, philosophers and literary critics. Language, too, is inseparable from humanism and early definitions of man. As Davies observes, “humanism ... is inseparable from the question of language. ‘Man’, in the old definition, is the ‘talking animal’” (4). Language plays an important role in the conception of the term humanism and this is suggested by the fact that the “fifteenth-century Florentine *umanisti*,” from which the term ‘humanists’ derives, “were above all language teachers, rhetoricians, translators, and the tools they forged for their trade were the lexicon and the glossary” (4). Language, therefore, is at the heart of definitions of the human stretching back to the Italian Renaissance.

Jacques Derrida suggests that there is an “authorizing pressure” in “the history of Western philosophy” or Western thought, which would include humanist thought (Spivak lxix). It is this “authorizing pressure” that comes from a longing “for a center” “that spawns hierarchized oppositions” (lxix). In “hierarchized oppositions” the “superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall” (lxix). It is this privileging of terms that is at the heart of the inequality embedded in Western thought. Furthermore, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests, these “oppositions between intelligible and sensible, soul and body” which form the basis of Western philosophy, have also bequeathed “their burden to modern linguistics’ opposition between meaning and word” (lxix). Indeed, in linguistics “the entire mechanism of language ... is based on oppositions” (Saussure 183). Then, even here, as Spivak suggests, a hierarchy of oppositions occur and one term is privileged over the other, good over evil, presence over absence, or mind over body. Thus language through modern linguistics, and Western thought seem to share the same inherent inequality that privileges one term over another in a binary opposition.

The Cartesian dualism which began to dominate humanism from about the 17<sup>th</sup> century, illustrates this binary way of thinking. In Cartesian dualism the mind and body are seen as

both distinct and made from different substances. However, Descartes privileges the mind.

His *Discourse on Method* argues that his very existence is dependent on the mind. He says,

I knew I was a substance whose essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.

(Descartes 127)

For Descartes, the mind is all that matters. The “I”, the thinking essence distinct from the body, separates man from the inhuman and asserts his anthropocentrism. As Neil Badmington suggests, and with reference to Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, “[t]he human, in short, is absolutely distinct from the inhuman over which it towers in a position of natural supremacy. *I think, therefore I cannot possibly be an automaton*” (18). Indeed, as Badmington says, not only is the machine seen as separate but “because the fact that neither the animal nor the machine could ever exercise rational thought means that there would be no essential difference. In Descartes’s eyes, both figures are ultimately inhuman” (17). It is here that we see how the human as a rational being takes a position of centrality in relation to other species. It is through the binary opposition of mind and body where the mind is privileged and separated from the body. Furthermore, the fact that animals or machines are incapable of reason is what makes them inhuman. Consequently, they are excluded from the centre while the human as rational being defines what constitutes the centre and valorises itself and its position of superiority. However, the limitations of this thinking is that it creates hierarchical oppositions based on the authorizing pressure of the human who is defined as a rational being and who constitutes the centre. Similarly, the way the Enlightenment centres humanity is inadequate as it excludes other species, as well as other groups of people who do not fit the normative rational subjectivity and its universal definition. Such definitions allow categories to be established which mark the distinctions between species and within groups of people, as well as allowing the categories to be ranked according to their distance from the centre. Thinking in this way creates a normative concept of the human and which enabled the wholesale discrimination against non-human animals, the disabled, and people from so called “primitive” cultures, and for no other reason than that they do not conform to the centre’s definition of what was normal and rational.

Furthermore, this type of dualism allows one group to justify its supremacy over another by permanently excluding the “inferior” group based on their constructed difference. The



Enlightenment shares with humanism an emphasis on the importance of the human, characterised by a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous and universal. In this formulation of an anthropocentric worldview, the non-human animal is conceived of as the binary opposite of the human and excluded from sharing the same rights as humans. The advent of posthumanism is one which appeals to relationships of equality, not just between different groups of people but between all life forms. More than this, it searches for a way of thinking which would be conducive to conceiving variety and complexity, and which could exceed the boundaries generated or policed by binary oppositions. This debate is perhaps at the centre of the imagining of the cyborg as a conceptual framework in which other ways of being can be formulated through the image of the cyborg. Donna Haraway proposes that “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (39). This conceptual framework together with Katherine Hayles’s formulation of “how information lost its body, how the cyborg was created as a cultural icon and technological artifact, and how humans became posthumans” (24) are nascent signs of engaging with the limitations of the Enlightenment and its valorisation of reason, by looking at these limitations through an alternative conceptual framework, namely posthumanism.

As language and consciousness have since the Enlightenment been understood as central features of what makes us human, my interest in this thesis lies in how McCarthy and Coetzee have understood and represented human consciousness and its relationship to language in their fiction. More importantly, how they represent a critical engagement with philosophical conceptions of the human and whether their representations may point towards new ways of conceiving of “the human.” I will suggest that in both Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) we see how they explore a world in which language fails to give access to “human consciousness,” and yet we also see how key values associated with “the human” still emerge; values, in other words that stem from the belief in the essential worth of other human beings. In *The Road*, for example, this essential human worth manifests itself, not just in the benevolence the father shows towards his son, but in the benevolence the son demonstrates towards other humans in the story, such as the partially blind old man, who calls himself Ely, and with whom the son shares their rations. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, however, this benevolence is actualised in Michael K’s belief in helping other people, too. The stabbing of the guard in the camp seems to trigger K’s willingness to come to his aid. It is also possible that the lack of support from its other

residents, who do not seem to believe in helping others, is the reason for K's first escape from a camp. The novel ends by proposing a gesture which reflects this belief. It takes the form of K dropping a teaspoon down a well and gathering water in its bowl so an old man can live. As Attwell observes, it is "an image of K's endurance" (SB 147). By bending the handle of teaspoon into a loop, and tying a string to it, K is able to drop it down the well, "and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live" (Coetzee 184). The image is "[i]mplausible in naturalistic terms," as Attwell suggests, but a "memorable image of survival" (SB 147), nonetheless. However, unlike the rest of the novel in which K's endurance and survival is solely for his benefit, it is the old man who complains by saying, "[w]hat are we going to do about water?" (Coetzee 183). The image then must not only be seen in terms of K's survival but also serves to demonstrate K helping the old man endure, while the implausibility of it "in naturalistic terms" may emphasize the lengths he will go to in order to help other people. And this in turn demonstrates his willingness and belief in helping other people, which comes to the fore at the end of the novel.

The longstanding question of what constitutes "the human" has been raised again in a recent debate between Nigel M. de Cameron and Peter Singer (2014), which shows the complexity contained in this seemingly simple question, and the futility of the search for a definitive answer to it. Cameron proposes that the question is a cultural question, and thereby suggesting that "at the heart of every culture, at the root of every civilization is a vision of what it means to be human, what it means to be one of us" (Cameron 00:08:06). For Cameron, the vision of "what it means to be one of us" is steeped in a Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a vision based on "human dignity" (00:11:29), and "a vision of human 'being' made in the very image of God" (00:11:35). However, as Peter Singer points out, "if you ask what it means to be human it's perfectly possible to give that a straightforward biological sense. To be human is to be a member of the species *Homo sapiens*" (Singer 00:18:14). Singer demonstrates that any propositional definition or meaning of the human has the ability to be true if viewed from an understanding of how we came by that knowledge. The meaning or definition of what it means to be human is laden with culturally imposed meanings that are entangled with the discourses of ethics, religion, bioethics, disability studies, and animal studies, within a particular culture.



A definition which seeks to establish the “essence” of the human will depend on a key property which is characteristic of all instances of the “human.” If this property is “rationality,” as Wrathall points out, then “puzzles arise whenever we encounter a humanlike thing that happens to lack rationality” (350-51). An example of this could be a person in a vegetative state, or the example of anencephalic infants that Peter Singer gives in his rebuttal. Mark Wrathall suggests that “in light of such puzzles, it seems a natural thing to say that the essence is fixed not by the property that an entity possesses or an abstract type, but by that in view of which we take it as that thing it is” (351). In this respect

even a person in a vegetative state is a human if she is understood in terms of the essence of being human (in particular, she is understood precisely as failing in some way to measure up to what it is to be human). A person could be a human on this view, even if, in fact, it is factually impossible for her to be rational.

(Wrathall 351)

In this way, any factual correlation is not sufficient for essential definitions; by identifying the facts of an essential definition we already assume the definition is true. As Wrathall suggests, “for essential definitions, correspondence to the facts is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their being true” (352). Secondly, “facts come too late for essential definitions, since we need to assume that the definition is true in order to identify the fact or facts to which it corresponds” (352). It is for these reasons that Wrathall argues that because the world seems to give us no foundation for choosing the correct essential definition, perhaps we should assume that there are no true essences and that we find only what we project onto the world (352). However, “we cannot succeed in linguistically referring to things in the world unless they have an essence,” or a concept. As Stuart Hall suggests, “[m]eaning depends on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects, and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual system, which can operate as *mental representations* of them” (18). But, “if an understanding of essences consists in a grasp of a propositional definition, then nothing in the world can make the essential definition true, because nothing in the world could establish one definition as opposed to any other” (Wrathall 353). However, the “knowledge of essence,” in Martin Heidegger’s view “cannot be communicated in the sense of the passing on of a proposition, whose content is simply grasped without its foundation and its acquisition being accomplished again” (353). In other words, it is through our activity in the world, our acting and creating, our thinking and speaking that we discover the knowledge of essence. Thus we acquire and accomplish anew what someone else may already have acquired and communicated to us through the form of a proposition. In other words, meaning is not only gained through a proposition or a definition

one finds in a dictionary, but is also gained through our activity in the world. Similarly, we can acquire meaning through the activity of reading, by reading and responding to the writer's representation of the events and actions that occur to the characters in a novel, for example.

Semantics, as Hall observes, “depends on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects, and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual system, which can operate as *mental representations* of them” (18). However, in order to represent, exchange or express meanings and concepts “we also have to have access to a shared language” (18). To communicate, it is also necessary to share, “broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways” (18). As Hall observes,

Language is therefore the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. Our shared conceptual map must be translated into a common language, so that we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images.

(Hall 18)

These written words, spoken sounds or visual images which carry meaning are referred to as signs. Furthermore, because we share the same conceptual maps which allow us to interpret the world in almost the same way, it enables us “to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together” (18). It is for this reason that “‘culture’ is sometimes defined in terms of ‘shared meanings or shared conceptual maps’” (du Gay, Hall et al., qtd. in Hall 18). This is a view of meaning which is socially constructed by building “a shared culture of meanings” (18), through the use of a common language that operates in domains linked to “certain occasions or activities” (Wittgenstein<sup>4</sup>, qtd. in Blair 8), along with practices that we share with others. In other words, “meaning *emerges* from the *use* of language in the conduct of day-to-day activities and practices” (Blair 8). This view of meaning seems to correspond to Cameron’s culturally connected definition of what it means to be human. For Cameron the vision of “what it means to be one of us” stands at the core of every culture, “at the very root of every civilization” (Cameron 00:08:07). Meaning is a shared concept, a shared vision. However, as Singer points out, another shared meaning, in a “biological sense,” concerns what it means “to be human” as “a member of the species *Homo sapiens*” (Singer 00:18:14). Indeed, in our present age, this biological or scientific definition is a shared “*system* of representation,” and a way of “organizing, clustering, arranging and

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<sup>4</sup> Found on page 3 of: Wittgenstein, L. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett. University of California P, 2007.

classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them” (Hall 17).

Furthermore, as Hall remarks:

Representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer to* either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events.

(Hall 17)

It becomes evident then that meaning does not just rest on the narrow category of a definition. Furthermore, drawing on Charles Taylor, my interest here is in the full range of linguistic effects and not just the narrow category of nominal meanings. Meaning or signification, then, occurs in connection to all the events that we participate in, social, cultural, political, and is most commonly produced through language. Thus language produces more than just straightforward Adamic or nominal meanings for us. As Hall suggests,

the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our ‘cultural circuit’ – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct. However, in all these instances, and at all these different institutional sites, one of the privileged ‘media’ through which meaning is produced and circulated is *language*.

(Hall 4)

However, the way language has been used in Singer’s scientific definition of the human to name, describe, or classify a thing is comparable to what Charles Taylor refers to as “descriptive language” (439). Taylor remarks that “we do more things in language than describe” (439). “What descriptive speech encodes,” he observes, “is our attribution of properties to things” (439). Subsequently, apart from the “attribution of properties,” Taylor lists “three other ranges of meanings which are opened to us by language: the properly human emotions, certain relations, and strong value” (441). Furthermore, “each of these is carried on the three levels of expressive form .... the projective, the symbolic (in works of art), and the descriptive” (441). As Taylor explains,

We express our emotions, and establish our relations, and body forth our values, in our body language, style, and rhetoric; but we can also articulate all of these in poetry, novels, dance, music; and we can also bring all of them to descriptive articulation, where we name the feelings, relations, and values, and describe and argue about them.

(Taylor 441)

In other words, in the fictional mode of representation all the four ranges of meaning are produced. Furthermore, because the fictional mode is open to the play of our imagination, the meanings that are produced may be newly discovered. These may be relational meanings for example, as in K’s relationship with the omniscient narrator and where he also begins to

narrate his thoughts in part one and three of the novel. The fictional mode also allows for an emotional import to be produced through the way we respond emotionally to certain characters. Fiction also allows us to produce meaning by giving value to things, in the way value is attached to K in his vocation as a gardener through narrative and the choices he has to make in pursuit of it. Furthermore, fiction also produces meaning by the attribution of properties to things. Michael K is given the property of stupidity and the son in *The Road* the quality of goodness. In this way, fiction and the novel which Taylor includes under the expressive form of “the symbolic (in works of art)” produces all these ranges of meanings.

Furthermore, as Stuart Hall suggests:

Things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on *what it means* – that is, within a certain context of use, within what the philosophers call different ‘language games’ (i.e. the language of boundaries, the language of sculpture, and so on). It is by our use in things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*.

(Hall 3)

In light of this, either Peter Singer’s or Nigel Cameron’s definition of what it means to be human could be equally correct depending on its context and the way it is used. What the two definitions do show, perhaps, is a different disposition towards the world, as Heidegger would say, for the world, through which “being” is disclosed. Furthermore, “[a]n understanding of being is concealed when it is not operative in our experience of the things in the world” (354). In this way, “productive seeing”<sup>5</sup> stems from a disclosure of being that consists of being disposed in a particular way for the world, but it also implies that other ways of being disposed to the world are concealed (Heidegger, qtd. in Wrathall 354). As such, “productive seeing” is a prediction of how you will perceive things and how they will stand out as essentially structured for you because your way of being, which is being disposed in a particular way for the world, is the basis for the way you perceive things, and which conceals other ways of being and perceiving from you. Different styles of “productive seeing” (354), “of perceiving things in advance in such a way that they are allowed to stand out as essentially structured” (354), is what Martin Heidegger claimed distinguished “each historical age from another” (354). In Nigel Cameron’s definition, which stems from the Judeo-Christian tradition, things are essentially structured according to their nearness to God.

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<sup>5</sup> Section 24 of *Grundfragen der Philosophie: ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik.”* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984. Translated as: *Basic Questions of Philosophy. Selected “Problems” of “Logic”* (trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

In this context, his vision of “human dignity” (00:11:29) is rooted in “a vision of human being made in the very image of God” (00:11:35), while Peter Singer’s definition seems closer to the Enlightenment vision of Immanuel Kant. Michel Foucault remarked that Kant “describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority” (Foucault 38). In Kant’s view, the human is distinguished by both the capacity for self-reflection and the ability to use its own capacity to reason, that is, in its ability to define and understand the world. In this sense, Peter Singer’s definition reflects this capacity to reason because the definition “a member of the species *Homo sapiens*” (Singer 00:18:14) denotes the ability to define common characteristics among different groups of species and group them under one name: “Homo” as well as defining common characteristics that distinguish one species from another and name them accordingly, “sapiens.” The creation of this biological system of classification is indicative of the human’s ability to use reason under his own authority, and rank and categorize biological life in order to better understand the natural world. On the other hand, Cameron is disposed “to find the true being of a thing in the extent to which it approaches God by being like Him” (354), or seeking “a vision of human being made in the very image of God” (Cameron 00:11:35). The Kantian schema thus makes it possible to question the basis of how we came to the definition of what it means to be human, and how it enables the use of reason to escape the authority of the shared meaning that has defined it. By contrast, Cameron’s definition relies on a shared meaning of the human.

If, as Taylor points out, the desire to “define” the meaning of the human is conditioned by the “productive seeing” of a particular era, our predisposition to perceive things as essentially structured because of our being disposed in a particular way for the world at a particular moment in time, means that, it is futile to pursue a definitive answer to the question of what it means to be human. Rather, my interest is in how two novelists frame these existential questions by questioning what something means and how that meaning is produced within fiction, in relation to the concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Both novels demonstrate how meaning is produced by staging the way language works through representation. Both *The Road* (2006) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) enact the complex relationship between language and human consciousness. In *The Road*, for example, McCarthy posits the loss of all the things language names. His story is set in a post-apocalyptic world and where objects, both natural and cultural, have been destroyed or are on the verge of vanishing. Yet, in McCarthy’s depiction of the wasteland, with the loss of all



cultural formations,<sup>6</sup> meaning is still evoked in the mind of the reader. Similarly, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee constructs a novel set in a dystopian world in the midst of a civil war. The characters' perception in the novel seems to be an allegory for apartheid South Africa where meaning resides in that part of the conflict in which you stand. For instance, David Attwell argues that the "problem for [Nadine] Gordimer was K's indifference to the anti-apartheid struggle" (SB 142), the fact that he does not choose a side. In the novel there is a temptation to define the different characters in terms of political affiliations, which stand in opposition to one another. However, the taciturn protagonist Michael K eludes being defined in these narrow terms, as he identifies with neither the guerrillas nor the state. Indeed, as Attwell observes, "[w]ith gardening elevated to a redemptive mode of being, it comes to stand as an alternative to political liberation in *Michael K*" ("Karoo" 77).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, K chooses the vocation of gardening rather than side with any political faction. This is a problem that occupies other characters within the novel, too, in particular the Medical Officer, who is an educated man ruled by logic and science. The medical officer, who narrates part two of the novel, is unusually occupied with Michael K, as he obsessively tries to make sense of what motivates K, as well as how he understands his own decisions and motivations vis-à-vis K. The difficulty here is how the Medical Officer is to make sense of K in relation to the world he inhabits. Coetzee represents Michael K's meaning as elusive. Having introduced K's consciousness into the novel, the narration shifts to the Medical Officer's efforts to define K from a first person point of view, which is a perspective that excludes K's consciousness. It is because of the way the narration is structured that "K also escapes from the Medical Officer's benevolent clutches" and "he evades even this perfectly respectable conclusion" (146). Moreover, the meaning that he assigns to K is given in the terms of a poststructuralist conceptualisation, which means, in terms of explaining K's meaning as residing in a system while not becoming a term in it. This is similar to the terms Jacques Derrida uses to conceptualize "[t]he movement of signification" in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the

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<sup>6</sup> As Hall argues: "The conventional view used to be that 'things' exist in the material and natural world; that their material or natural characteristics are what determines or constitutes them; and that they have a perfectly clear meaning, *outside* of how they are represented. Representation, in this view, is a process of secondary importance, which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constituted. But since the 'cultural turn' in the human and social sciences, meaning is thought to be *produced* – constructed – rather than simply 'found'. Consequently, in what has come to be called a 'social constructionist approach', representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event" (5-6).

<sup>7</sup> "Karoo" will be abbreviated as *K*.

Discourse of the Human Sciences”<sup>8</sup> (237). Furthermore, the Medical Officer also uses the literary device of allegory in order to harness K’s meaning. Moreover, the meaning he gives to K cannot become a shared meaning between the medical officer and K himself because K’s consciousness is excluded from this part of the narrative. As a result, the reader is unable to correlate K’s thoughts with those of the Medical Officer, particularly regarding the assumption he makes about K. Furthermore, in the Medical Officer’s vision, K himself, never affirms this meaning.

Both novelists, it would seem, invite the reader to reflect upon the words they have used to explain the narrative or the characters. In McCarthy’s case the reader constitutes a meaning for words that no longer name the things of their world, and therefore have no basis for a foundational meaning based on reality. In the case where things are named, the post-apocalyptic context of their naming draws a sharp contrast between what they meant before and what they mean now. An example of this would be the “small cairns of rock” (McCarthy 192) that the father comes across in the landscape of *The Road*. However, through narrative, dialogue, and the acoustic effect of words, McCarthy’s novel generates affect, which allows the reader to constitute a meaning for the lives of the father and son. This, as I will delve into later, is because of the way the narrative represents emotionally loaded events along with the dialogue between a father and son, a dialogue which concerns their struggle to live up to their motto of the “good guys” who are “carrying the fire” (136).

Coetzee, in a different way, aims to demonstrate the failure of language to meaningfully express the condition of being. He engages the elusive nature of meaning itself. Moreover, he also uses the narrative to create an affective response in the reader so that the reader feels and thinks along with K, and thus identifies with the ways in which K eludes the definitions of others. K’s ability to evade definitions allows the reader to attach a meaning to K’s existence because “the novel associates me, the reader/critic, with the medical officer, places me alongside the scouts, interrogators, diagnosticians and cartographers of Empire as I focus my gaze on Michael K to determine what order of meaning can be extracted from him” (Helgesson 182). K’s existence, his endurance and ability to survive, as well as the value he places on a way of being in the world become qualities the reader can identify with. These are qualities that a person of substance, and who has been exposed to the type of experiences K

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<sup>8</sup> “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” will be abbreviated as *SSP*.

has been exposed to, would have. It seems self-evident that a person like this would have meaning. This identification with K seen in conjunction with his ability to evade any definitive meaning in the novel means K holds the possibility of having meaning, or that his meaning is present but not yet discovered. Thus his construction evokes a response from the reader, who like the medical officer will attempt to constitute a meaning for his story. He becomes, in a way, like a blank slate on which meaning can be inscribed. As Carrol Clarkson observes:

Coetzee's writing often seems to play out tensions between what is understood, and what is seen, or heard. His writing, then, is a material artwork in the world, with physical affect, as much as it is an elucidation of abstract ideas and themes. The scene of the novel becomes a physical *site* of engagement between writer and reader.

(Clarkson 101)

In this sense Coetzee creates the space for the reader to constitute a meaning for K and then watches that construction fall apart or deconstruct itself. This is perhaps a demonstration of what Clarkson refers to as the playing out of “tensions between what is understood, and what is seen, or heard” (101). The reader through the course of the novel sees K's endurance and his ability to survive, and witnesses him develop and attach himself to a certain mode of being in the world. The reader also hears the Medical Officer say: “Michaels means something” (Coetzee 165). However, the reader only comes to understand that the meaning the Medical Officer gives is nothing more than the movement of signification as he plays out his definition of K. From this perspective the playing out of the tensions of what is seen, heard and understood allows *Life & Times of Michael K* to become “a physical *site* of engagement between writer and reader” (Clarkson 101). This is because the “*site* of engagement” in the narrative world functions according to the same “physical” laws, boundaries and limits that govern what is possible in our material world. The Medical Officer's words are given within an internal monologue. They are spoken inside his head, through his thoughts, which the reader is privy too through the novel's first person narrative mode. Michael K, however, as a character in the narrative world obeys the physical laws of the material world and is unable to inhabit this physical site and interact with the Medical Officer's thoughts. The meaning that he gives cannot be validated by K, so even this meaning of K, as a movement of signification, eludes physical capture.

Both writers, then, seem to frame abstract or theoretical ideas through literary devices such as voice, narrative structure and the cultural associations of language. However, rather than allowing the author to impose his unique vision of the world through language, they



demonstrate the creative capacity of representation through play by indicating the fluidity of meaning in all semiotic constructions, and perhaps, in the way that meaning is not to be found in the expected places. K's belief in helping people is actualised at the end of the novel when, as I have suggested, he uses a teaspoon to gather water from a well so that an old man may live. In *The Road* the son's innate goodness is finally confirmed by the father in the act of not taking the son with him when he dies. The philosophy of these writers is perhaps best encapsulated in Shoshana Felman's definition of the "knowledge" of writing. "Writing's knowledge," she suggests, while it is

believed to be an attribute of the (writing) subject – is nothing other in effect than the textual knowledge of what links the signifiers in the text (and not the signifieds) to one another: *knowledge that escapes* the subject but through which the subject is precisely constituted as the one who *knows how to escape* – by means of signifiers – his own self-presence.

(qtd. in Clarkson 92-93)

The writer's skill is not in linking words to their signifieds, which is "*knowledge that escapes* the subject," the writing subject (92), rather, the skill is demonstrated by the ability to escape their self-presence in the text, and they do this by linking the words (signifiers) of the text, and allowing the reader to produce his or her own meaning of the story, because the writer's presence and his or her views have escaped the text. In other words, by not representing a definitive meaning in the text the 'authorial' voice of the writer escapes the text and as such their own presence too. And this is because the writer does not prescribe a definitive meaning in the text which would signal their view and thus their presence. Both writers seem to demonstrate this skill by allowing their readers to define the text's meaning in the absence of an overarching authorial presence.

*In Life & Times of Michael K* the writing subject's ability to escape their self-presence can be seen to develop from Coetzee's desire for self-masking or his attraction to impersonality, which he was initially drawn to through the influence of T.S. Eliot. However, Attwell suggests that although impersonality seems to fit in with Coetzee's needs and plans "he has too much appreciation for the volatility of psychology, and the sheer capriciousness of language, to take it too seriously" ("An Alphabet of Trees"<sup>9</sup> 34). In this light, Coetzee's strategic use of impersonality in fiction leads him to treating it "in part" as "a game" (AT 34). Moreover, like Eliot, his attraction to irony is his way of exploring and destabilising pertinent social and literary conventions in the sense that irony both affirms and undermines through its

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<sup>9</sup> "Alphabet of Trees" will be abbreviated as AT.

ability “to pull the rug from under one’s feet” (AT 34). It is through the influence of Eliot that we can perhaps view how Coetzee, explores the notion of self-presence on the one hand, and the process of impersonality with the notion of play, as in a game, on the other. Attwell also observes the later influence of Roland Barthes who together with Eliot seems to have provided Coetzee with “a language” (AT 27) for his inclination towards impersonality.

In a sense, the representation in the novels can be seen to provide a critique of what Charles Taylor defines as an “enframing theory” (434). Taylor links the enframing theory to the set of ideas emanating from Locke and passing through Hobbes to Condillac, where the ideas in the mind can be traced back to an origin in reality. The mind therefore enframes reality in its abstraction (434). As Taylor explains, “the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) form of theory tried to understand language within the confines of the modern representational epistemology made dominant by Descartes” (434). He suggests that “[i]n the mind, there are ‘ideas.’ These are bits of putative representation of reality, much of it ‘external.’ Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with reality” (434). Furthermore, “[l]anguage plays an important role in this construction. Words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the ‘ideas’ which represent them” (434). However, this reflective approach to representation attempts to connect a foundational truth to the ideas of the mind through the sign. It attempts to view ideas, objects, events and persons as existing before the instituted sign and privileges presence over absence. In other words it is the idea that meaning rises from an originary existence in reality. Katherine Hayles argues that “[i]n Jacques Derrida's performance of presence/absence, presence is allied with Logos, God, teleology - in general, with an originary plenitude that can act to ground signification and give order and meaning to the trajectory of history” (285). Furthermore, citing the work of Eric Havelock, she points out that this particular view of meaning has implications for the understanding of subjectivity.

In Plato’s *Republic* this view of originary presence authorized a stable, coherent self that could witness and testify to a stable, coherent reality. Through these and other means, the metaphysics of presence front-loaded meaning into the system. Meaning was guaranteed because a stable origin existed. It is now a familiar story how deconstruction exposed the inability of systems to posit their own origins, thus ungrounding signification and rendering meaning indeterminate. As the presence/absence hierarchy was destabilized and as absence was privileged over presence, lack displaced plenitude, and desire usurped certitude.

(Hayles 285)

The history of Western thought, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida is premised on the privileging of the positive meaning, of presence over absence, and has a stable point of origin or centre and this exists in reality. While Derrida's thought points out the inherent absence that centres these structures, it is perhaps Ferdinand de Saussure who first begins to point toward the idea that what is meaningful or of value in language is, from a linguistic sense, generated by a system of differences and oppositions and not from a natural relationship to the objects of the world.

For Saussure, "[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image," and the bond between the "sound-image" (signifier) and the concept (signified) is "arbitrary" ("Course in General Linguistics"<sup>10</sup> 178-79). However, in his chapter "The Mechanism of Language," he suggests that "[s]ome signs are absolutely arbitrary; in others we note, not its complete absence, but the presence of the degrees of arbitrariness: *the sign may be relatively motivated*" (131). Furthermore, he observes that what he means by "arbitrary" "is not that the choice of signifier is left entirely to the speaker" because the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community," but "that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it has actually no connection with the signified" ("Nature of the Linguistic Sign" 69). Indeed, Derrida picks up on Saussure's relativism on the arbitrary nature of the sign and demonstrates that Saussure's conception of the "sound-image" has lot in common with the "concept" part of his sign (*CGL* 178). In this respect there is no difference that would constitute the arbitrary nature of the sign. The difference, Derrida suggests, is between the "sensory appearing" of the sound "and its lived appearing ... mental imprint" (*Of Grammatology*<sup>11</sup> 66). In other words, it is the difference of the appearance of the sensory substance of sound and the lived experience of the mental imprint which it evokes. Derrida refers to Saussure's sound-image as a "psychic imprint" (*OG* 66) because Saussure defines it as "the psychological imprint of the sound" (*CGL* 178), and the "psychic imprint" for Derrida "relates essentially to the idea of articulation" (*OG* 66). Saussure's own argument is that "articulation designates ... the subdivision of the chain of meaning into significant units," and through this definition "we can say that what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas" ("Phonological Species" 10). Furthermore, the human mind is connected to the logos, the infinite or divine

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<sup>10</sup> "Course in General Linguistics" will be abbreviated as *CGL*.

<sup>11</sup> *Of Grammatology* will be abbreviated as *OG*.

understanding, which I discuss below. Derrida's claim is that "the logos is first imprinted and that imprint is the writing resource of language" (OG 68). It is "this imprint and this trace" which allows us to sense the "unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance," between the appearing of the substance of sound in the world and the appearance of the mental imprint in our lived experience (OG 65). "*The trace is the difference* which opens appearance ... and signification" (OG 65). It is this trace that allows us to subdivide the chains of meaning into significant units of speech or writing. In this sense Saussure's formulation of the sound-image and the concept does not really show the arbitrary nature of the sign because there is no actual difference between the sound-image and concept, they both occur in the mind. Furthermore, "the faculty of constructing a language" which "is natural to mankind" (Saussure, "Phonological Species" 10) is because "the logos is first imprinted" with "the writing resource of language" (OG 68), and this allows it to sense the difference in the appearing signifier and the appearance of the signified. The proximity of human thought or understanding to the logos implies that this imprint is inscribed in us, and this would explain our natural faculty for constructing language.

Saussure's relative arbitrariness is in many ways a form of linguistic idealism in that it does not factor the world into the construction of meaning but is only concerned with the lived experience of consciousness. This can be explained if we look at Stuart Hall's construction of meaning which he suggests is two tiered. Meaning first depends on sharing "broadly the same conceptual maps" which "thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways" (18). If the conceptual maps we carry around in our heads are different from one another, we would interpret the world or make sense of it in totally different ways and, moreover, "would be incapable of sharing our thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other" (18). Secondly, "[o]ur shared conceptual map must be translated into a common language, so that we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images" (18). From this perspective "[l]anguage is therefore the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning" (18). Furthermore, conceptual maps are "different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relationships between them" (17). These conceptual maps are inscribed in us through our activities in the world and these take the form of our experiences of the objects, people and the things we interact with. It is from this point of view that Wrathall concludes that we already know the essence of things even though we do not know them. This means that, we are still able to organize, cluster and arrange these essences

from what we feel they essentially are and are not. Saussure's exclusion of the material living nature of the signifier therefore seems to point towards linguistic idealism, because his arbitrariness does not mark the difference in space or time between the signifier and signified.

While Saussure's theory proposes that "meaning" emerges in the relationship between signifiers, he also emphasizes the active role played by the mind in uniting the "sound-image" or the signifier, with the notion of an object in the world. He argues: "We have seen in considering the speaking-circuit that both terms involved in the linguistic sign [the signifier and the signified] are psychological and are united in the brain by an associative bond. This point must be emphasized" (*CGL* 178). It seems, then, that while this mental association between signifier and signified appears to mark a natural relationship between word and thing, this relationship is in fact arbitrary. As Saussure implies:

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it "material," it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.

(Saussure, *CGL* 178)

It is Saussure's separation of the sign from the "thing" and thus its assumed natural connection to reality, as well as the explicit unification of the parts of the sign, namely the (so to say) "material" or the "sensory" and the "abstract," that allows us to see what McCarthy's novel does with language. The convergence of the abstract and the sensory generates the characteristic effects of McCarthy's prose. He seems to create "the 'feeling' of an emotion" as Antonio Damasio calls it (qtd. in Hogan 16). Furthermore, it is an example of how "[e]xpressivity enters into literary works" (Hogan 14). Patrick Colm Hogan explains, "[t]his occurs in part through simulation and through subvocalization, the silent 'voicing' of a speaker's utterance. Tone of voice—including, variation in volume and pitch contour—is a very important expressive outcome" (14). Subvocalization is related to the sound-image, and to the impression of the tone of the words on the senses. As an example of subvocalization Hogan takes a line from Ben Jonson's 1616 elegy "On My First Son" and by changing certain words demonstrates the effect. For example, he asks us to consider the line, "O, could I lose all father now!" (qtd. in Hogan 14), and proposes that "[p]art of the impact of the line relies on subvocalization" (14). Through the sound image one feels the rhythm of the words: the emphasis on certain syllables; the shift in rhythm through the pause in the sentence which is



created by a comma or full stop; or, the change in volume emphasized by an exclamation mark. To illustrate the point, Hogan proposes experimenting with the line “O, could I use a frothy brew now!” (14). By changing the loss of a father for the desire of a frothy brew, Hogan tries to show us how the exclamation mark emphasizes the syllable “now!” This is because in the second example the word “brew” adds another syllable to the line. There are now four iambic feet before the stressed “now!”, whereas in the first example there are only four iambic feet including the stressed “now!” The second example therefore seems to separate and isolate the stressed “now!” from the rest of the line, making it more pronounced and the subvocal effects more apparent. For our purposes, it would seem that McCarthy’s lyrical passages are an effect of this subvocalization. In his review of *The Road*, Alan Warner suggests that “McCarthy is worthy of his biblical themes, and with some deeply nuanced paragraphs retriggering verbs and nouns that are surprising and delightful to the ear, Shakespeare is evoked” (Warner 2006, n.pag.). It is McCarthy’s lyrical passages in the novel that are “delightful to the ear” and that lead to the sensory quality of the sound-image and the affective nature of the sign.

Saussure, too, is concerned with the effects of sound on meaning, as he argues that the “signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: (a) it represents a span, and (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension: it is a line” (181). Furthermore, he observes, “[i]n contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time” (CGL 181-82). Saussure goes on to say that:

Sometimes the linear nature of the signifier is not obvious. When I accent a syllable, for instance, it seems that I am concentrating more than one significant element on the same point. But this is an illusion; the syllable and its accent constitute only one phonational act. There is no duality within the act but only different oppositions to what precedes and what follows.

(Saussure, CGL 182)

Although Saussure highlights the difference in the text, “the different oppositions to what precedes and what follows,” he also observes that the “syllable and its accent constitute [a] “phonational act” (182). In other words, “[t]here is no duality within the act ... only different oppositions to what precedes and follows” (CGL 182). It is the “subvocalization, the silent ‘voicing’ of a speaker’s utterance” (Hogan 14) in the “phonational act” that McCarthy uses to create the lyricism of certain passages. It is the accentual stressed and unstressed syllables

that produce a rhythm in the passages. By using the available diction in English, McCarthy is able to slow the pace at times and emphasize words and phrases through poetic devices such as alliteration. This allows the reader time to reflect on the meaning of the words, but it also allows him or her to feel the effect of the sound of the words, through the subvocalization of our auditory senses. Moreover, it is probably this linear nature of the signifier that helps McCarthy create the flow of events. This is significant because taken as a whole *The Road* is a simple narrative of a father and son travelling towards the South. Rhythm allows McCarthy to play with the effect of time, slowing it down or speeding it up in order to create an affect in the reader. The rhythms of McCarthy's prose commit the reader to a flow of events, however plotless, and which produce the sense of a narrative unfolding.

Another means by which “expressivity enters into literary works” is through “simulation” (14). Hogan observes: “*Simulation* is a key operation of the human mind. It involves the imagination of particulars beyond direct perception and memory. It is the process that we engage in when imagining the way things might play out if we engage in various sorts of activity” (3). In other words, simulation occurs when we imagine the events and actions taking place in the novel. Frederick Toates, for example, argues that “representations of emotionally loaded events trigger a similar set of brain regions as are triggered by the corresponding real events, though with less intensity” (qtd. in Hogan 3). Hogan, though, says that simulation “has an adaptive function because it allows us to evaluate scenarios ‘off-line,’ thus without actual risk. But it has that function only because we experience the usual emotions associated with the simulated events” (3). However, “to function adaptively, it seems that the act of simulation itself must produce some feeling of pleasure or, more technically, activate the reward system . . . , the system that governs the pursuit of pleasure and includes both ‘liking’ and ‘wanting’ components” (4). For Frederick Toates, not only does simulation allow us to imagine how events and actions in the novel might play out, but when these events are emotionally charged they trigger the same brain regions and emotional response within the reader. In this respect, Hogan suggests that

the apparent paradoxes<sup>12</sup> of fiction-inspired emotion and tragedy-based enjoyment may be resolved simply by recognizing that literature is a form of simulation – a

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<sup>12</sup> As Hogan observes: “Tragedy rewards us, even as we weep compassionately—a result that many writers have found almost paradoxical. In fact, there are two problems here. First, we grieve over fictional events, thus events we know to be unreal. Second, we enjoy experiencing that grief. Before going on, it is worth considering these apparent paradoxes as they illustrate the centrality of emotion to literature and the importance of emotion study for understanding the nature of literature and our response to it” (3).

fundamental, evolved operation of the human mind – and that the functionality of simulation is inseparable from emotion.

(Hogan 4)

The emotional effect of what occurs to the father and son in the course of McCarthy's novel, is felt to some degree by the reader while participating in the act of reading. The portrayal of fictional events in the course of the narrative therefore allows the novelist to produce the tone and atmosphere of the work, and thereby generates affect. By producing an emotional response to his work, McCarthy complicates what he does at the level of abstraction. While McCarthy demonstrates how meaning can be refigured by removing a preconceived notion that it is connected to an origin in reality, Coetzee does the same by making it impossible to pin down some original or inviolable meaning. Furthermore, both writers etch our emotions onto the lives and events of their characters.

Affect, then, is encompassed in the narrative and is inherent in the choice of words, their tone. It is produced through the sensory quality of the sound-image that creates a psychological affect. Niko Besnier suggests in his article "Language and Affect" (1990) that:

Illustrated here is the wide variety of affective devices available in the structure of different languages and speech communities, and the prevalence of affect in all aspects of linguistic structure. In essence, the task of writing a "grammar" of affect is equivalent to describing the structure and use of a language.

(Besnier 422)

This "prevalence of affect in all aspects of linguistic structure" seems to hark back to the part of the sign Saussure defined as the "sound-image" and "the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses" (CGL 178). For Saussure,

in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it. Proof of this is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighbouring term has been modified.

(Saussure, CGL 182)

For example, someone might be "a player" in a game but if you describe him or her as a "non-player," he or she is still a player in that game but one that has not played an active part in the proceedings. The value has been modified because of the signs that surround the word "player," while the meaning and the sound of the words have not been affected. However, although Saussure emphasizes the lack of positives and the differences between the elements



of the sign, he also posits the formation of oppositions in Western thought and its desire for positive, nominal words or terms. For, he observes:

When we compare signs – positive terms – with each other, we can no longer speak of difference; the expression would not be fitting, for it applies only to the comparing of two sound-images, e.g. *father* and *mother*, or two ideas, e.g. the idea “father” and the idea “mother”; two signs, each having a signified and signifier, are not different but only distinct. Between them there is only *opposition*. The entire mechanism of language, with which we shall be concerned later, is based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply.

(Saussure, *CGL* 183)

It is this desire for positivity, for a stable presence in our system of signs that leads to the formation of oppositions. Although Saussure foregrounds difference and the arbitrary nature of the sign, he also suggests that a sign as a whole, including a signifier and a signified, has a positive value and therefore when you compare two signs, “there is only opposition” (*CGL* 183). In other words, we have “a system of oppositions of places and values” which is the structure of language, and through which meaning is made present (Derrida, *OG* 216). The history of Western thought which finds its apposite expression in the Enlightenment, is premised, as Jacques Derrida points out, on the privileging of presence over absence, and thus on a notion of meaning that resides in a stable origin.

However, an alternative vision of the Enlightenment, and one that is most true to the Enlightenment spirit is to be found in Kant and his understanding of the “Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority” (Foucault 38). This understanding is perhaps necessary for, and inescapable from, the logic of the Enlightenment. Interestingly, Derrida commenting on his antihumanist contemporaries like Lacan, Foucault, and Althusser who were “affirming an absolute break and absolute difference” from the anthropocentric thought of humanism, suggested that “simply because thought always takes place within a certain tradition, thought itself is bound to bare some trace of that tradition” (Badmington 13). In light of this, he suggests that “No one can think (himself or herself) entirely without,” that tradition (13). Indeed, freed to question “assumptions” (Singer 00:19:29) along with universal truths based on “scientific classification” (Rabinow 8) reason is perhaps, the very function of “the age of the critique” (Foucault 38). Every assumption and every universal truth should be subjected to man’s reason without the fear of any authority, but the way reason is used should also be subjected to reason in order for it to have legitimate principles and to guarantee the freedom of its use. Reason itself is subject to reason through a critique of its principles. Foucault, for example,

argues that critique is necessary because its role is to define “the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped,” because “when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles” it is then “that its autonomy can be assured” (38). This is why Foucault argues that “[t]he critique is, in a sense, the handbook of reason that has grown up in Enlightenment; and, conversely, the Enlightenment is the age of the critique” (38). For this reason, according to Foucault, the critique is bound to the use of reason in the Enlightenment. Furthermore, Foucault’s definition of the Enlightenment “shows how, at this very moment, each individual is responsible in a certain way for that overall process” (38). In this sense the critique is not just a critique on the era’s use of reason, but it is a critique for the individual’s use of reason as well.

It is this critique or self-critique of the age that defines it as different from other eras and as such forms the beginning of what Foucault calls “the attitude of modernity” (38). By defining modernity as an “attitude,” Foucault means “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task” (39). Furthermore, he suggests “the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is” (41). This, I suggest, is the attitude that sets the conversation on *posthumanism* in motion. Conceptually, posthumanism calls for a mode of thinking and being that does not manifest privilege or inequality through difference. It is an attitude based on perceiving the human as just one species among many, who all share the same planet. In Donna Haraway’s work, for example, cyborg imagery is not used as an apocalyptic device but rather serves to suggest “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 39); it becomes a way of imagining our present other than it is, without destroying it. Donna Haraway critiques our present understanding of ourselves based on dualistic thought (thinking in binary oppositions) by imagining another mode of being through the image of the cyborg. In other words, it is an image that is not bound to the oppositions of male and female, or human and machine. Moreover, it is the freedom to reason, operating beyond the bounds of any authority, which allows us to critique ourselves and that then provides the possibility for imagining other conceptions of the human. It is this view of the Enlightenment alone that provides the very ground for conceiving posthumanist

thought and not through establishing an absolute break and difference from the Enlightenment centring of humanity, but by freeing the very quality we have used to define ourselves as different and superior to other species, namely, rethinking what it means to reason.

In Foucault's tracing of the complex process involved in the conception of the Enlightenment, he focuses in particular on the importance of reflection as a mode of philosophical thought and the basis for his reflective relation to the present. He suggests that:

We must never forget that the Enlightenment is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word, even if many of these phenomena remain important today. The one I have pointed out and that seems to me to have been at the basis of an entire form of philosophical reflection concerns only the mode of reflective relation to the present.

(Foucault 43-44)

What seems to stand out in both Andy Miah's description of posthumanism and Foucault's critique of the Enlightenment is this mode of reflection. Both Miah's posthumanism which often involves "a reflective stance on humanity's distinct and special place in the world" (2), and Foucault's critique as "the basis of an entire form of philosophical reflection" which "concerns only the mode of reflective relation to the present" (44), involve self-reflective critiques. For as Foucault suggests "[t]his permanent critique of ourselves has to avoid the always too facile confusions between humanism and Enlightenment" (43). Furthermore, he expands on the difference between the Enlightenment and Humanism by saying: "From this standpoint, I am inclined to see Enlightenment and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity" (44). This tension is evident in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Coetzee, for example, in his notebook of the novel on the 18 of November 1981, writes that: "K struggles to exist between the Scylla of Representativeness (the Historical Novel) and the Charybdis of Individuality (the Modern Novel)" (qtd. in Attwell, *SB* 145). Furthermore, Attwell suggests that Coetzee seems to have struck upon his title soon after coming to this realization. He observes that the title appears in his notebook for the first time on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1981, almost a month after Coetzee's reflection (145). The title, *Life & Times of Michael K*, Attwell argues, "implies that he was anxious to preserve the historical representativeness – 'life and times,' with no definite article 'the' – but in a way that set this mode in tension with

modernist individuality” (145). Michael K’s existence is thus a struggle not to be a representative of his times while the representation of his individuality is contained within and influenced by the representation of the times he lives in.

Foucault’s emphasis of the Enlightenment as the beginning of a “mode of reflective relation to the present,” seems to support Miah’s suggestion that a posthumanist approach should focus on a critique of a human normative subjectivity that excludes other species and people with disabilities, because this suggestion develops from “a reflective stance on humanity’s distinct and special place in the world” (2). However, Miah’s view dismisses Foucault’s view of the Enlightenment as the leading edge of reason and focuses on its anthropocentric worldview. He argues that as a starting point, posthumanism should rather “attempt to understand what has been omitted from an anthropocentric worldview, which includes coming to terms with how the Enlightenment’s centring of humanity has been revealed as inadequate” (2). From this perspective it ignores the Enlightenment’s view, particularly articulated by Foucault, as the beginning of a self-critique which takes the form of an “attitude” towards modernity in which the modern man “is the man who tries to invent himself” (Foucault 42). Furthermore, this “modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (42). It is through the very function of attempting to both invent and produce himself that the possibility for posthumanism opens up. For as Foucault proclaims “I have been seeking to stress that the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era” (42). In other words, he points to the need for the permanent self-critique of ourselves as human.

The modern man who “tries to invent himself” (42) or who faces “the task of producing” himself (42), is thus always a person who is becoming and is not a person who is liberated “in his own being” (42). Indeed, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, K seems to be someone who is involved in the task of producing himself. He develops from a person who is always told what to do, to one who questions what he believes in and finds his true nature through a self-reflective critique of himself. However, although K develops a self-reflective capacity, his development seems to be more like an uncovering of an essential or atavistic nature, a way of being: “I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature” (Coetzee 59). It would appear that K’s development is centred on discovering an essential nature, or on a becoming that

allows him to be liberated into his own pure being, rather than a being which allows him to keep on endlessly producing himself.

The father in *The Road*, however, does not want to become a clearly defined person like the other humans he encounters. He applies the same wish for his son to remain obscure or not fully formed, too. Instead he tries to promote the idea of human value, of the human's capacity to be good and to carry the torch of civilization, as their common refrain goes: "Because we're the good guys ... And we're carrying the fire" (McCarthy 136). However, being such a moral agent is almost impossible in the apocalyptic world of *The Road*. The father's ability, for example, to protect his son depends on him committing violent acts in order to protect his son. He is therefore unable to become the moral person he professes or desires to be. It is the son, however, who actualizes the embodiment of conscience and the expression of goodness. This can be seen when the father catches the thief who stole their cart. The son pleads with his father to help the thief rather than punishing him by leaving him naked, which would surely have signalled his death. Furthermore, in both novels, this attitude of producing oneself, of becoming one's own invention, is based on a conception of becoming human that is part of, but also precedes, the long tradition of humanism. Moreover, this conception of the human is inherently based on a sense of being rather than becoming in that the human contains an essential value or a clearly defined and settled reference point. The human created in the image of God has value, or simply *is*. He or she does not have to produce these qualities. He or she has to adapt to fit into an already established moral and semiotic framework. And central to this conception of the human is the willingness to take responsibility for the other, and which manifests itself as the benevolent desire to help one another, because the value of the human is based on being created in the image of God. This conception determines "the *res* as a thing created from its *eidōs*, from its sense thought in the logos or in the infinite understanding of God" (Derrida, *OG* 11). In other words, our willingness to take responsibility for the other is determined by the human essence, the mind or the soul, being created from the logos or the "infinite understanding of God" (*OG* 11). This human essence also signals the conflation of ancient Greek philosophy and theology. The immanence of rationality, thought and the mind (in the human), provide evidence of the divine because "[t]he feelings of the mind" (*OG* 11) are thus a product of this infinite understanding, which is produced by God. God or the logos assures and underwrites the human's value. Both Coetzee's K and the father and son in McCarthy's novel, thus represent a becoming based on a recuperation of this being. They are moral touchstones in a fallen



world, while K is closer to the son in his actual recuperation of this being. This is because all three characters ultimately believe in being humans (in the case of the father and the son), or falling into the role of a person (in Michael K's case), by taking responsibility for others. This care in K does not seem to run that deeply, and he is equally able to forget about others. Instead, his willingness to care for others seems to be an uncomfortable mode of being which he questions and struggles with through the course of the story. It is perhaps only in the final image of the novel that this question is answered. The father and son though try to be the kind of humans who value the conception of the human based on being, or on the human being that contains qualities that stem from God or the logos, and are accordingly entitled to this responsibility. The question of human care that K struggles with is not resolved by him finding value in human qualities that stem from God or the logos, but perhaps from his belief in a mode of being that is based on nature to live and on the desire to nurture and protect all living things. This mode of being will be discussed in the chapter on Michael K below.

Derrida's critique of Western thought places him at the forefront of reconceptualising the human. The logos for Derrida is a foundational truth based on reason and is one which has an originary presence, and yet serves as an example of an idealized claim to an unmediated relationship to meaning, being and knowledge (OG 12-13). In other words, the truth of the logos is present and has a direct (without any form of mediation) hold on meaning, being, and knowledge. This is because medieval theology assumed that the "absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity," and that "the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God" (OG 13). However, Derrida argues that this search for an absolute truth in reality or in a stable abstract or idealistic system is an illusion. Instead, certain terms in language and philosophy are privileged over others because of their proximity to the ideal of the "logos." And this means that they take up a central position of advocate of what conceptions are normative, while the less sanctified terms are placed on the margins. The example Derrida gives is that of speech and writing. Speech is privileged over writing in Western thought as speech is the sign of thought and writing is the sign of speech. More to the point, thought is made present through speech while writing is just a sign of speech, and in this respect, just a sign of a sign. The proximity of speech to thought and therefore to the "logos" means it is favoured over writing. In short, speech has a direct and unmediated link to true knowledge, being and meaning. This favouring of speech over writing and by implication of certain terms over others, leads to a process of "normalization" (Rabinow 20-21) and which in turn explains how an object of thought is given an essential

meaning. In Descartes's mind/body divide, the mind is favoured over the body and the normative conception of the human becomes that of the rational being. This normative or essential definitive meaning produces binaries and stereotypes that excludes the complexity and variety present in the objects of thought, or in the very words or ideas themselves.

Furthermore, Derrida's critique of the self-presence of speech and auto-affection of the voice unsettles the stability of Western philosophy which stems from ancient Greek philosophy and the privileging of speech over writing. Western philosophy sees speech as evidence of the self-presence of the individual, and where the speech act provides evidence of one's essential existence. Furthermore, the auto-affection of the voice is premised on the idea that by hearing one's voice the individual affects himself or herself and this in turn is taken to be a sign of consciousness. Thus, the sound of one's voice affecting oneself and because it seems that the thought and voice occur at the same time, one is inclined to conflate the voice with consciousness. (Derrida, "The Voice That Keeps Silent" 65-66).

However, Derrida provides a variety of readings to disarticulate this premise, and the simplest one being that of time in relation to the experience of auto-affection. Indeed, access to K's consciousness is given by narrating his thoughts in both the third person and first person. Whether his thoughts narrated in the third person are his own thoughts is put into question by his ability to narrate certain thoughts in the first person. This seems to challenge the narrator's authority and ability to read or to know his thoughts, because if K heard exactly what he was thinking from the narrator there would be no reason to narrate his own thoughts. Similarly, Derrida's critique of the auto-affection of the voice demonstrates that just because one hears oneself speak, this is still not a sign of consciousness. It follows that the experience of auto-affection can be considered to be an event, and while all events occur in time (a present). If one is truly hearing what one is thinking there should be no difference between the thought and the hearing. The thought then would occur simultaneously as the sound of the voice, which would suggest that there would be a singularity of thought and voice. However, based on the conception of time alone, Derrida is able to deconstruct the idea of thought and voice occurring simultaneously and thereby the stability or solidity of this belief in consciousness arising out of the voice. For if, hypothetically speaking, one did hear what one was thinking it would have to happen in the present in order to be an event, and an event necessarily implies a singular, unpredictable and spontaneous experience, in that it is not repeatable (Hill 54). However, the present also consists of a memory of the recent present and

because it is a memory it is a repetition of what happened in the recent present. Furthermore, one anticipates the future based on the memory of the recent present. In this way, memory and anticipation consist of repeatability and as such the 'now' of the present is no different from the 'now' of the memory of the recent present, or the 'now' anticipated in the future and, therefore, no different from every other now one has ever experienced. However, the present experience is at the same time an event and an event is singular, unpredictable, spontaneous and never repeatable, as I have just said. Furthermore, because this now occurs at the same time as the repeatable 'now' without difference, there is no experience that is separate from either the event or its repeatability. It follows then that because the present always folds the memory of the recent past back into itself in order to anticipate the future or perceive it, there is a "difference" in the centre of it (Derrida, "The Sign and the Blink of an Eye" 56). In other words, a gap that occurs, and a miniscule time away, leads to the differentiation between speaker and hearer. The "I" in any self-reference implies a difference between the self, as other, and the person who is speaking. This, then, posits an "irreducible hetero-affection" at the heart of the event, as opposed to an autonomous auto-affection (Derrida, "But as for me, who am I (following)?" 95). For example, in the sentence, "I [that is, Sasha Welsh] have tried to demonstrate" earlier in this essay and in another essay (and as such elsewhere) the importance of difference in Derrida's work (95), the "I" is implicitly an "other that must welcome within itself some irreducible hetero-affection" (95). Accordingly, there is always some temporal difference between thinking and speaking (between thinking the difference between which "I" you are referring to). It would seem then that one cannot truly say, even hypothetically, that one hears exactly what one thinks. Even though this may seem to occur at the same time, because of the irreducible temporal (differentiating between the one speaking and the one hearing), speech and hearing are always slightly different and there can never be the pure or autonomous 'you' or I that auto-affection implies (Hill 61). In order to prove that there is a singularity of thought and speech and which would leave no room for doubt that the voice is proof of consciousness, one needs to equate the thought with the word being heard at exactly the same time, and moreover, it would have to be precisely the same word and by the same particular self that the 'you' refers to. In this way Wolfe suggests that Derrida disarticulates the automatic connection between communication (in which speech or voice would be one form) and the psychic system (in which consciousness or mind would be another form). By demonstrating the difference between these systems he is able to drive a wedge into the solidity of the foundational connection between voice and consciousness upon which Western philosophy is premised.



It is these semantic and temporal difficulties that Coetzee explores in *Life & Times of Michael K*, particularly in the way that the narration communicates K's consciousness to the reader. The first section of the novel is narrated in the third person, or by a narrator who observes K's thoughts, as I have said. At moments, however, K appears to speak for himself or at least relate his own thoughts, and thereby challenge the authority of the narrator to explicate his consciousness. In the second part, a first person narrator attempts to define K, but in a way which is never sanctioned and authorized by K. As David Attwell observes:

The problem of accessing K's consciousness was solved finally by the use of multiple voices, and by having different perspectives being played off against one another. Critics have noticed this subtle feature of the point of view of the novel, the fact that the narration shifts between K himself and an observer, puzzlingly located inside K's consciousness.

(Attwell, *SB* 140)

However, in the second part of the novel we are denied all access to Michael K's consciousness. It is perhaps for this reason that K's meaning becomes so elusive, and this is because the meaning that the medical officer formulates is never confirmed by K. Coetzee highlights this separation between consciousness and voice by demonstrating what we can never truly know about another person's consciousness, let alone our own. We can only know and interact with what is communicated to us. Indeed, K himself is never sure if he knows himself. In the first section of the novel, the free indirect style frequently allows the narrator, appearing to emulate K's voice, to question his own beliefs and values. From this point of view, K's meaning is thus fluid, elusive and perhaps even indeterminate.

The important question, then, is: how does our thinking need to change if meaning is not certain?<sup>13</sup> Cary Wolfe argues that the nature of thought itself needs to change and in order to do so it would need to become posthumanist. He suggests that "when we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about the thematics of the decentering of the human in

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<sup>13</sup> Katherine Hayles, suggests: "Although pattern has traditionally been the privileged term (for example, among the electrical engineers developing information theory), randomness has increasingly been seen to play a fruitful role in the evolution of complex systems. For Chris Langton and Stuart Kauffman, chaos accelerates the evolution of biological and artificial life; for Francisco Varela, randomness is the froth of noise from which coherent microstates evolve and to which living systems owe their capacity for fast, flexible response; for Henri Atlan, noise is the body's murmuring from which emerges complex communication between different levels in a biological system. Although these models differ in their specifics, they agree in seeing randomness not simply as the lack of pattern but as the creative ground from which pattern can emerge" (Hayles 285-286).

relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates,” but also to “*how* thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges” (xvi). In other words, Wolfe asks: how would it be possible to think our relation to the evolutionary, the ecological or the technological coordinates without inscribing our difference and our privileged position? How do we do this when our very language inscribes difference in order to create meaning and, moreover, favours certain terms over others. The novel in general seems to create this space where a change in thinking can be explored in that it puts on display the way it functions as an artefact of representation, a novel. A novel made up of language and writing and which give us the resources through which all the various levels of meaning can be identified, and thereby studied. It is the fictional nature of its format, perhaps, that allows both Coetzee and McCarthy to juxtapose being with becoming, and abstract ideas with affect, and which I will take up more fully below.

While Wolfe suggests that humanist thought seems to limit us to an anthropocentric worldview, he is not arguing that humanism should be avoided altogether. Certainly there are points of value aspired to in the ethos of humanism. However, what he is suggesting is that the aspirations of humanism are compromised by a way of thinking in which inequality is foregrounded and privilege normalized. For example,

most of us would probably agree that cruelty toward animals is a bad thing, or that people with disabilities deserve to be treated with respect and equality. But as we will see, the philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to try and make good on those commitments reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity – a specific concept of the human – that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place.

(Wolfe xvii)

In other words even though humanism is concerned with the treatment of marginalised groups and therefore extends its consideration to include them, it still does not mean that “we are not continuing to be humanist – and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric” (Wolfe 99).

Elaborating on this point Wolfe suggests that

one of the hallmarks of humanism – and even more specifically that kind of humanism called liberalism – is its penchant for that kind of pluralism, in which the sphere of attention and consideration (intellectual or ethical) is broadened and extended to previously marginalized groups, but without in the least destabilizing or throwing into radical question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralization. In that event, pluralism becomes *incorporation*, and the projects of humanism (intellectually) and liberalism (politically) are extended, and indeed extended in a rather classic sort of way.

(Wolfe 99)

What Wolfe seems to be suggesting here is that although humanism and liberalism attempt to extend their attention to marginalized groups they do not destabilize what is at the heart of these systems. What is at the heart of these systems is a “schema,” a way of thinking that is based on inequality and privilege. In this sense no matter how noble and generous their intentions are towards marginalized groups they are unable to escape inequality because of the nature of logocentric thought itself. Furthermore, liberal humanism’s aspiration for the rights of animals and marginalised people are undercut by

a model of subjectivity and experience drawn from the liberal justice tradition and its central concept of rights, in which ethical standing and civic inclusion are predicated on rationality, autonomy, and agency. That agency, in turn, is taken to be expressive of the intentionality of one who is a member of what Kant called “the community of reasonable beings” – an intentionality that is taken to be more or less transparent to the subject itself.

(Wolfe 127)

The subject as it is modelled in liberal humanism is limited by the philosophical and ethical framework that underpins its conceptualization, and though marginal groups may be included as subjects here they are still defined under the banner of, or in relation to, a “normative subjectivity – a specific concept of the human” (Wolfe xvii) and therefore as different and thus separate from the “human.” For example, if one looks at the political correct reference of people with a disability, the word itself contains within it the trace of the “normative subjectivity,” namely, people with ability. This is true even for such loaded terms as “colonization” and “de-colonization” in the context of South Africa. The erasure of colonization through a process of de-colonization contains within the latter term the trace of the process of colonization, perhaps, even its memory too. It is this schema that underlies (and undermines) our thinking, and which puts into question the ability of the human, who undertakes pluralisation to create levels of equality. In order for “new lines of empathy, affinity, and respect between different forms of life, both human and nonhuman” (127) to form, the philosophical and ethical framework needs to change. In other words, the nature of thinking itself needs to shift by moving away from the inherent privileging of terms by defining them in opposition to each other.

It is perhaps R. L. Rutsky<sup>14</sup> who points out the way that thought needs to transform itself in order to become truly posthuman. He argues that:

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<sup>14</sup> R. L. Rutsky, “Mutation, History, and Fantasy in the Posthuman,” in “Posthuman Conditions,” ed. Neil Badmington, special issue, *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communication and the Self* vol. 3, no. 2-vol. 4, no. 1 (2007): 107.

The posthuman cannot simply be identified as a culture or age that comes ‘after’ the human, for the very idea of such a passage, however measured or qualified it may be, continues to rely upon a humanist narrative of historical change. . . . If, however, the posthuman truly involves a fundamental change or mutation in the concept of the human, this would seem to imply that history and culture cannot continue to be referenced to this concept.

(Rutsky qtd. in Wolfe xvii)

Furthermore, Rutsky argues that to be truly posthuman requires more than merely extending the idea of the human to other forms of being; rather, he suggests, that “to move beyond the dialectic of control and lack of control, superhuman and inhuman, must be premised upon a mutation that is ongoing and immanent” (qtd. in Wolfe xvii). It requires the uncovering of an operation of thought that is equal to “processes which can never be entirely reduced to patterns or standards, codes or information” (qtd. in Wolfe xviii). One mode of thought is Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive reading through which an undoing of essentialist notions of the truth can be seen. As David Wills<sup>15</sup> observes, deconstruction acts “[w]ith the force and effect of a virus” (qtd. in Wolfe xix). It “has its invasive parasitic impact precisely there where the border lines are drawn between and among nations, religions, systems of thinking, disciplines, within and between the ontological pretension of an *is* and the thetic possibility of an *in*” (qtd. in Wolfe xix). In other words, Wills seems to be suggesting that Derrida’s deconstruction intervenes precisely where the landscape between systems, disciplines and things becomes blurred and where processes are unable to be “reduced to patterns or standards, codes or information” (xix), and this is so even within and between things that have an ontological existence or a theoretical existence. Derrida’s deconstructive reading thus seems to be an operation of thought equal to these irreducible processes.

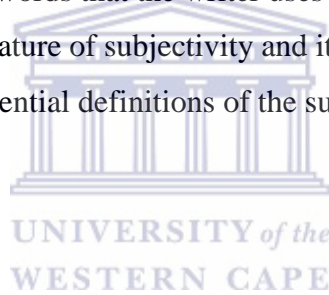
Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *I* will suggest, challenges the “originary” definition of the human by demonstrating how it is still possible for words and language to have meaning even though they are under an apocalyptic threat and are about to be cast aside. By challenging the presumption of a material basis for the meaning of language, he challenges what we have understood as the originary experience of being. Furthermore, in J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Michael K* cannot be pinned down to any originary order or to a stable definition. In fact his character symbolizes the slippage of meaning itself. However, both novelists still figure another meaning that may be foundational in the formation of human communities and perhaps older than the theoretical conceptions of the human and the ability to use language.

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<sup>15</sup> David Wills, “Jaded in America,” in *Matchbook: Essays in Deconstruction* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 13.

They trigger the affective response of responsibility for the other through acts of compassion and empathy that may be the basis for the formation of all civilization.

In this thesis, I propose to explore the ways in which these two novels conceive of the relationship between human “consciousness” and language. I will ask how each author presents the problem of “meaning” for their protagonists, given the way in which the absence of a stable knowable self is represented within the novels, along with an awareness of a reality devoid of the signifiers’ referents. In a world such as that depicted in *The Road*, with an overabundance of signifiers, or in *Life & Times of Michael K*, in which signifiers fail to represent the protagonist to himself or to the world at large, the question is whether language has the ability to define human culture or human subjectivity per se. However, I will argue, that both novels demonstrate how language can give voice to the experience of being, and of being not just reflected in the signified, the conceptual part of the sign, but in the signifier as well; that is, in the experience of words that the writer uses to create affect. Finally, both novels pose questions about the nature of subjectivity and its relationship to language, particularly when there are no essential definitions of the subject, or for the subject, to hang onto.



## Chapter 1: Envisioning the “human” in the post-apocalyptic world of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

This chapter argues that even if the world gives us no basis for creating ideas through our experience of the objects of the world, language is still meaningful. This is because language has the ability to create an affective meaning through the phonic quality of words, which I argue is a feature of some of the more lyrical passages of *The Road* (2006). Another way meaning can be created is by being socially constructed where one builds a shared culture of meanings through our use of a common language in the practices and activities of our culture. It is these shared cultural meanings that McCarthy reconfigures in his representation of cultural symbols, and through which he creates an affective response in the reader. One shared meaning of what it means to be human, found in a range of cultures, is the idea that all humans are endowed with human dignity. We are enjoined to protect this dignity by being responsible for one another. The chapter explores how McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world envisions this interaction, and argues that this command is manifest in the figure of the son in McCarthy’s novel.

In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, a nameless father and son travel along a road moving south towards the coast, through a post-apocalyptic world. Life, botanical and zoological, has ceased to exist, and they travel south as they will not survive another harsh winter in the North. Travelling with nothing but a cart, scavenged food, the clothes on their backs and a gun with two bullets, and danger and the threat of death never too far from their thoughts. Moreover, cannibalism has become a reality, as they battle starvation, the elements, and the dangers posed by other desperate men and women travelling along the road.

The narrative is intercut with flashbacks from the father’s point of view. These flashbacks, which are mixed up with nightmares, and memories of their lost world, serve to intercut and divert the linear progression of the journey narrative. However, the events leading up to the story are fragmentary, while the cause of the apocalypse remains uncertain. All we learn is that “[t]he clocks stopped at 1:17,” accompanied by “[a] long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy 54). These flashbacks delay the action of the novel, namely, the inevitable daily hike that needs to take place, the search for food, the scanning of the road for people they need to avoid, and the search for an evening campsite concealed from the road where they may build a hidden fire and eat whatever meagre rations they have left.



Every morning another ritual scan of the road must be made, before they set off, searching for signs which may indicate the presence of other humans, a danger they would like to avoid.

The father's flashbacks, nightmares and memories of their lost world, break the monotony of a fairly repetitive and ritualised activity that begins each day, by adding to the variety of events that occur.

These passages are mostly comprised of the father's memories and the haunted world in which they find themselves, and this allows McCarthy to vary his style of writing to suit the moment. The writing, changes as the narration recounts their daily rituals, the sparse dialogue between father and son, or the passages of prose that at times seems influenced by The King James Version of the Bible. The lyrical nature of these passages creates an atmosphere of gravity and despair, which may best be described as apocalyptic. In particular, a distressing sequence of narrated memories, in which the formation of "bloodcults" (15) and the establishment of cannibalism as a norm, is written in a poetic register that helps us feel the "physical and metaphysical" (Warner 2006, n.pag.) nightmare of the wasteland they are travelling through.

Furthermore, the novel begs the question of whether humanity or the concept of humanity is possible in a world in which the essential elements for survival have been removed, and where the referents to a cultural past have all but disappeared. However, in what seems to be an existence without the prospect of a future there still seems to be some trace of humanity, as we discover love, compassion, kindness and empathy between men and women, most notably registered in and by the son.

What does it mean, then, to be human in the dystopian, post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*? This question is made all the more relevant by the absence of any other form of biological life capable of conveying subjectivity, apart from humans. The lack of any other species that could challenge the centrality of the novel's human actors means that the focus sits squarely on human meaning. This is apart from the spectral figure of a dog that haunts two brief passages in the novel, and whose apparent presence hovers between the boy's traumatic imaginings of a dog, and the assumed sound of its barking. However, the singular presence of human agents is a narrative theme, as Hannah Stark suggests. She comments that "[t]his anthropocentrism pervades McCarthy's text, in which humans are the only form of life that remains: the last witnesses to the end of the world" (72). This means that the perceived

relevance of the question, of what it means to be human, seems solely to hinge on the presence of the human as the only measure or barometer in the novel. For these humans inhabit an earth that is all but dead. It is a world that has been devastated to such an extent that the only remnant of organic life, evident in the narrative, is a “small colony of ... shrunken, dried and wrinkled .... morels ... a kind of mushroom” (McCarthy 40), and “[h]ard and brown and shrivelled” (127) apples. It is an earth unable to sustain or nurture organic life, and the father and son witness not one bird, beast or insect in the course of their journey to the south coast. All that remains in this aftermath of an apocalyptic event are dwindling stores of food the survivors scavenge from the rubble of their ruined cities with their ravaged suburbs and derelict buildings.

The only other form of nourishment is human flesh. Human subjects have two choices for their continued survival; they either manage to scavenge enough to survive, or turn to cannibalism with the implication of embracing an action opposed to the procreation and sustainability of one’s own species. In which case, they become the devourer of one’s own kind, and an active agent in the demise of the human species. In this setting, the question of what it means to be human is most pressing while at the same time it seems predestined to reveal nothing but the primal instincts of men and women, who in a drive to survive have broken the prohibition of both nature and culture by feeding on the flesh of their own kind.<sup>16</sup> In a world such as this, the relevance of what it means to be human hardly seems to touch on moral or ethical beliefs grounded in the idea of *humaneness* or of having a *humanity*. In this regard, Peter Singer’s rather unromantic notion of humans as simply a species of animal (*Homo sapiens*), whose single concern, as with all animals, is primarily with survival seems to ignore this situation, of what it means to be humane in such dire circumstances.

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<sup>16</sup> The incest prohibition that Lévi-Strauss encounters and Jacques Derrida explores in his article “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” may also be viewed from an evolutionary or biological perspective, as increasing the gene pool. Nature thus attempts to create more variety within the species in order to ensure the species’ continued survival in the event of a change in the environmental conditions. In this respect nature can be associated with the creation of more, and more complex life within the species. Culture, too as a system of norms which regulates society allows for the formation of large groups of people through a shared set of beliefs, values and practices, which regulates the group and binds them together through a shared cultural identity. Thus, to devour one’s own, in order to survive seems opposed to the creation of complexity and variety within the species. Culturally, too, rather than establishing a system of norms which facilitates the formation of large groups of people, cannibalism separates and distances members of the same species, in order for some members to be viewed as food.



However, both protagonists, father and son, refuse this vicious mode of existence and battle with starvation instead; perhaps realizing that an existence bound to the killing of one's own kind has no place in human existence at all. Their willingness to suffer the consequences of starvation for their beliefs allows them to assume the ethical and moral mantle of the "good guys" (136). This forms the basis of a problematic for the father who tries not to harm the antagonists and thereby living up to the constant refrain he has designated for himself and his son, as the "good guys" who are "carrying the fire" (136). The fire perhaps signifies the founding principle and technology of civilization. It literally allows humans to bring light and warmth into the cold and dark, and this perhaps provides its symbolic value, as the site around which men and women can gather and come to share a common set of beliefs, values and practices. The father simultaneously has to deal with men and women who would just as soon make a meal of them while instilling his set of beliefs and values in his son. Julian Murphet suggests that "the narrative universe of *The Road* can and must be taken as one sustained conservative 'emblematic' of the essential fallenness of human nature, its innate depravity, into which the boy's radiance falls, meaninglessly, like Grace itself" (122). Murphet's description of the "boy's radiance" (122) exemplifies a familiar theme of "the child's holy nature" (Kunsa 65). The "boy serves as an Adamic figure, a messiah not unlike Christ himself" (65). This becomes evident when the father says: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 3), and again, while tousling the boy's hair by the fireside, after washing the scavenger's brains out, "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it" (77). The image of the boy's holiness is reiterated in the description of his hair as a "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (78). It seems evident that the father sees the son as a pure or blessed character, and fashioned on the figure of a Messiah.

It is the father's vision of the son's holiness that forms the true basis of the predicament he finds himself in. The problem does not stem from the impossibility of trying to act with empathy towards the antagonist, because the antagonist does not reciprocate the idea of mutual responsibility. The problem it seems lies in the father's affirmation that his son's holiness "falls *meaninglessly*, like Grace itself" (Murphet 122; emphasis added). The father is unable to fully embrace the role of "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire" (McCarthy 136), because his role as father requires him to commit violent acts, when necessary, and in order to protect his son. He is also aware that the good has failed miserably and not triumphed as the blighted landscape confirms. Moreover, he cannot always act morally, or follow the example of his son's virtue. So even for the father the son's saintliness cannot

sway him from committing certain immoral acts, and the son's holiness "falls meaninglessly, like Grace itself" (Murphet 122). The father's reluctance to review other people through his son's nature affirms the meaninglessness of his son's holy nature, because for the father, it seems, that to be good is not enough to change the situation. It is the son who is the moral compass, who pleads with his father to help the antagonists, but the father is not always willing to provide help. This is largely as a result of a narrative set in the aftermath of an apocalypse, where resources have run out and where cannibalism is rife. Here the danger of living up to the values of a saintly figure could make them more vulnerable than they already are.

In McCarthy's depiction of the aftermath of the apocalypse, language itself seems to suffer a similar disaster and is equally threatened by the prospect of dying out. In this sense, *The Road* is a novel that explores the very nature of words and consequently the implications of language itself. Furthermore, within a narrative that depicts the loss of a multitude of things in the world, the examination of the rigor mortis of language itself is explored in a world overflowing with empty signifiers. It is in this landscape, with the minimal reference to material objects, that McCarthy attempts to recover a renewed relationship between language and the things that language names, while interrogating the very meaning of language itself. As Holloway suggests, the idea behind McCarthy's style is "to recover (or to simulate) a renewed transparency in the relation between language and the things that language names" (qtd. in Jarrett 46). Consequently, the narrative then provides the space and the context where McCarthy's fiction can explore the idea behind his style. Furthermore, as Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder observe:

In *The Road*, representing the unplugged, stripped-down acoustic version of his style, McCarthy interrogates the very meaning of language in a world full of empty signifiers – that is, a world with names for a multitude of things which no longer exist outside of memory and books – a world on the literal verge of the posthuman, never mind the postmodern.

(Snyder and Snyder 36)

In this sense, the narrative depicts a dystopian world that has already witnessed the collapse and disintegration of the social structures that regulated human life, previously. In the context of the novel, the very opposition between nature and culture is erased. Nature as we know it, no longer exists. Similarly, the collapse of social institutions, and the erosion of cultural symbols, along with the disintegration of cultural practices, equates to the loss of the material substance that characterizes our understanding of culture. The material presence of state

buildings, cultural monuments, and cultural spaces like markets, squares, schools or churches, emphasize culture's material distinctness from the natural world. In this way certain features become salient and mark the difference between the constructed and natural world. However, the material substance of both environments have either been destroyed or are about to fade from existence. The narrative, then, is based on a world such as this, and where the space of our contemporary understanding of language is thrown into relief by McCarthy's story. This is done through a process which interweaves a construction of meaning with the texture or surface of the text. Furthermore, this construction attempts to re-create a language in which "a renewed transparency in the relation between language and the things that language names" (Holloway, qtd. in Jarrett 46) is recovered. In an interplay between linguistic theory, philosophical understanding, the grammar of language, and the sensory experience of words themselves, the novel allows us to read the text for both surface and depth, for what it both denotes and connotes with a sensory experience bordering on the material. In this way, it demonstrates how the writer's work can use the space of the novel as a canvas to explore philosophical ideas, critical theories, aesthetics, and the like, which hopefully extends our conception of what it means to be human.

Moreover, in this depiction of the aftermath of the apocalypse, language in both its substance and structure seems to be dying. After the father shoots a man who threatens to reveal their presence to a group of cannibals, the father and son flee. They leave behind their cart and the bulk of their supplies in their effort to escape. When they finally retrieve their cart it is empty and they are forced to start from scratch by scavenging again. As they slowly come face to face with starvation, the father's thoughts are narrated as follows:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would of thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.

Extract A. (McCarthy 93)

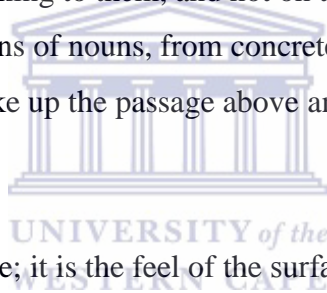
On the surface, the passage speaks of the loss of both signs and "referents," and as such the idiom's lost "reality" (93). McCarthy "names ... things" like "colors," names, and concepts which "one believed to be true," but which are being cast into "oblivion" (93). The passage seems to emphasize a particular constituent of language, that is, nouns and which include the names of objects, qualities and ideas. They are also given emphasis in the context of the

passage. Here the surface of the text, the syntax of phrases and sentences, illustrate how words are used as the building blocks of the text. In fact, the text illustrates the various components of the sentence and their syntactic or grammatical function by emphasizing the verbal form that names things, namely nouns. By focusing on a particular constituent of the text, McCarthy seems to be foregrounding the texture of the text, which includes how the various forms of words function and how they are in turn woven into the sentence to realise meaning by referring to objects in reality. The emphasis on the material roots of words seem to draw on John Locke's empirical approach to meaning, which I will turn to now.

According to John Locke the "MATERIALS of reason and knowledge" come from "EXPERIENCE" (71; 2.1.2). Furthermore, he suggests that it is from experience "that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself" (71; 2.1.2). He goes on to state that "man being conscious to himself that he thinks; and that which his mind is applied about whilst thinking being the IDEAS that are there" (71; 2.1.1), and that these ideas are formed from the objects of the material world. In other words what he is suggesting is that "IDEAS" form the material basis of reason and knowledge apart from being the tools for the object of thinking. Furthermore, as he emphatically states earlier, it is through experience that we come by these ideas. It is this experience of "external material things" (72; 2.1.4) or in a more specific sense, "from bodies affecting our senses," by what he defines as "external objects," that "conveys into the mind what produces there those perceptions" (72; 2.1.4). Here he states that "[t]his great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION" (72; 2.1.3). In this regard, for Locke, ideas are formed through our experience of objects in the real world. Ideas such as colour, form, quantity and texture begin with our perception of them in the world. These ideas are reflected on and then extrapolated further so as to create other ideas. It is through this understanding that ideas are connected to an origin in reality. This is the basis of Charles Taylor's "enframing theory" (434) which structures reality in the abstraction of words through the set of ideas emanating from Locke through Hobbes to Condillac, and where the ideas of the mind can be traced back to an origin in reality.

McCarthy's illustration in the quotation above draws our attention to words that name and that have a direct material reality, as in the case of the "names of birds" and "[t]hings to eat" (93). The passage then progresses to words which name the more abstract qualities of things such as "[c]olors" (93). It would seem that the passage traces the progression from the

material reality of an object as the referent to the gradual abstraction of the object through the quality of colour. Other qualities such as size, texture, shape and of course colour divide the object into its essential components or into its salient characteristics that may then be used to describe it or name it. These individual components or characteristics may also be used to imagine other objects without having to see a material referent. However, the components and characteristics can never fully represent the reality of the object. There will always be something missing. As Locke suggests, the object's representation becomes abstracted from its material referent. McCarthy's passage seems to allude to this abstraction of the objective material world in several ways. Firstly, the word "Finally" (93) literally signals the end of a linear progression from material object to abstracted conceptions. Secondly, the "names of things" that follow the actual material objects and their qualities into "oblivion" are the names of things "one *believed* to be true" (93, emphasis added). In other words, the truth value of these things depend on belief or on the common consensus of members of a particular culture who assign meaning to them, and not on their actual material presence in the world, as truth. These variations of nouns, from concrete objects to abstract concepts are woven into the sentences that make up the passage above and through their layered use a texture emerges within the story.



Texture is analogous to the surface; it is the feel of the surface. Indeed, the word "idiom" (93) used later in the passage above speaks of another formation of language that "is different from the meanings of the individual words" of the sentence, but refers instead to a "form of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place" (*Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>17</sup> 452). The passage seems to demonstrate, through the use of the word "idiom," that language itself is woven into the fabric of a culture, which means that it is embedded as the material of a "particular people at a particular time and place" (452). Moreover, McCarthy uses the verb "shorn" to describe how the "idiom" is cut off from its source, namely its referent (93). In other words "shorn" is a material image for an abstract metaphor, of how the qualities of shearing, to cut wool from a sheep (*POED* 839), can extend a material quality to the idea of disconnecting the sign from its referent. The material of wool or fabric being cut from the body emphasizes the materiality of the passage. It is perhaps in this relation that the passage is closer to what Sarah Nuttall refers to as the surface. It is a focus on the words of the text and not their underlying or hidden meaning that counts here,

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<sup>17</sup> Abbreviated as *POED*, for *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*.



and yet one that is “capable of producing effects of its own” (Nuttall 410). It is these effects that seem to express the textured materiality of the passage, and its interwoven feel, which equates the loss of arbitrary signs with the material loss of a culture.

The passage also demonstrates the metalingual function of language, in the sense that it uses language to speak about language. The ability to use language “proper” or “meta-meta communication” (to take a linguistic distinction from a linguistic meaning) is considered to be specific to humans. In his book *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), Cary Wolfe, citing the work of Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, points out how the ontological category of subjectivity depends solely on participation in the meta-meta communicative frame. Moreover, Maturana and Varela declare that self-consciousness, which is awareness and mind, are phenomena that takes place in language. Although based on experimental evidence they do note that some nonhuman animals “are capable of interacting with us in rich and even recursive domains” (qtd. in Wolfe 37), they still insist that language proper is only available to humans. McCarthy’s passage seems to be framing a similar anthropocentric view point, by focusing on the difference between humans and other species; a difference which highlights both our uniqueness as a species, and our centrality with the emphasis on our special attributes. Furthermore, Wolfe points out that Maturana and Varela make “the ontological category of subjectivity depend solely on this last attribute” (Wolfe 37), that is the participation in the meta-meta communicative frame. However, the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann points out that to claim that consciousness and “self-consciousness . . . are phenomena that take place in language, is to make a statement that, if true, is self-refuting” (qtd. in Wolfe 37). In other words the statement is unprovable, in that it is based on an aporia or an endless contradiction. Firstly, because one would necessarily need language to express the occurrence of these phenomena, and secondly, without the phenomena of “self-consciousness, awareness” and “mind” taking place in another space outside of language, it would not be possible to identify its presence in language, as one would not be conscious or aware enough to identify it independent of language. As Niklas Luhmann cited in Wolfe, would have it, “only *language* takes place in language – which is to say in a domain *external* to the ‘self’ of ‘self-consciousness’” (37). Both Luhmann and Jacques Derrida separate the psychic system (the mind) from the social system (communication). As we have seen in the previous chapter Derrida illustrates this separation in his critique of the self-presence of speech and auto-affection of the voice where the fact that we speak does not necessarily provide evidence of consciousness.



Indeed, communication and consciousness are too easily confused, because they are both intricately linked with the production of meaning. Our conceptual system of the things in the world, the people, objects, and events, real or fictional, are expressed and shared through a common language. Language or communication thus necessitates the sharing of “broadly the same conceptual maps” (Hall 18), while meaning resides in the relationship between the world, real or fictional, and our conceptual maps of it. Meaning then sits at the juncture of social and psychic systems. As Luhmann argues, “[m]eaning enables psychic and social systems to interpenetrate” (qtd. in Wolfe 21). And he goes on to suggest that “meaning simultaneously enables consciousness to understand itself and continue to affect itself in communication, and enables communication to be referred back to the consciousness of the participants” (21). More importantly, “the medium that allows this interpenetration via the form of meaning to take place is ... *language*” (21). This would mean that language does not determine consciousness, as Luhmann suggests, and “psychic processes are not linguistic processes” (qtd. in Wolfe 21). For Luhmann, the place of language is in the role it plays in “the coevolution of psychic and social systems” (21). As Wolfe observes, Luhmann’s view is that on the one side “the evolution of social communication is only possible in a constantly operative link with states of consciousness” (21). Language, in other words, is the medium that provides this operative link, while on the other side, language “transfers social complexity into psychic complexity” (21). And this is achieved in a “process generically referred to in contemporary theory” as “subjectification” or “subject formation” (21). It therefore seems that language is the “operative link” between “social communication” and “states of consciousness” (21). Furthermore, as David Blair demonstrates, it is through the emergence of meaning from our “*use* of language in the conduct of day-to-day activities and practices” (8) that enables the interpenetration of these systems. In other words, through our cultural practices and activities (in language) new meaning emerges, and this manifests in social complexity, and this in turn transfers to psychic complexity (through language again) in a process of subject formation.

On a symptomatic level, McCarthy’s passage cited above seems to question, a) the value of language as a fundamental element of what it means to be human, and b) its ability to create meaning as such. This is evident in the reference to the “sacred idiom shorn of its referents” and as such “of its reality” (93). From the “traditional realist point of view about language” (Marshall 54), it is assumed that the “writer and her words are... a mirror, reflecting a solid

truth ... a knowable real world that may be directly mediated through the mirror of words” (53). Furthermore, Fredric Jameson puts forward the idea that representation is fundamentally grounded in a realistic theory of knowledge, and that representation “projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself” (qtd. in Marshall 49). In other words, “there is a real world directly apprehensible by our consciousness, and through our language we are able to represent the truth of that world” (49). However, in the McCarthy extract above the “Truth” and “accuracy” of these “referents” (93) are put into question. They have been “shorn” or cut from the “sacred idiom,” or from a language that is no longer able “to represent the truth of that world” (Marshall 49) because these referents no longer exist. More than this, they have been “shorn” from the “sacred idiom” (93) or from expressions peculiar to a “language and grammar used by a particular people,” and from “expressions that are natural to a native speaker” (*POED* 452). In short, McCarthy’s language is cut off from the type of language that evokes the culture of the people that use it. The importance of a language embedded in the culture of a people, which defines the character of a country or nation, is perhaps suggested in the adjective “sacred” (McCarthy 93). It refers to a thing of holy import that needs to be safeguarded. The sacredness of the idiom is emphasized by juxtaposing it with the loss of the material referent contained in the idiom itself. For example, in the dialogue where the boy asks the father if he knows where they are, the father begins by saying:

Well. I think we’re about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies.  
As the crow flies?  
Yes. It means going in a straight line.  
Are we going to get there soon?  
Not real soon. Pretty soon. We’re not going as the crow flies.  
Because crows dont have to follow roads?  
Yes.  
They can go wherever they want.  
Yes.  
Do you think there might be crows somewhere?  
I dont know.  
But what do you think?  
I think it’s unlikely.

(McCarthy 166)

The literal meaning of the idiom does not equate to the contextual meaning in which it is being used, as the father has to tell the boy what it means. Nor is the meaning deducible from the words of the phrase, “[a]s the crow flies” (166). In this case, its meaning is figurative and only becomes available through participation in the culture, or through conversations between members of a particular culture, as in the case of the boy questioning his father. The idiom

demonstrates how language is embedded in a particular world view or culture. It seems that the passage not only describes the loss of naming words but the possible loss of the distinguishing features of culture. The passage questions what language needs from the world so as to function and to create meaning, and raises the possibility that there is a meaning without it. As Brenda Marshall asks in a rather pithy way, citing Alan Thiher, “whether the world articulates language, or language articulates world” (55).

However, coming out of this question and answer session above, the dialogue extends the boy’s imagination to wonder about the crow’s capabilities of flight. The narrator observes,

They sat for a long time. They sat on their folded blankets and watched the road in both directions. No wind. Nothing. After a while the boy said: There’s not any crows. Are there?

No.

Just in books.

Yes. Just in books.

(McCarthy 167)

From the perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure who as we have seen “separated the referent from the sign, and posited an arbitrary and differential relationship between the sign’s constituent parts” (Marshall 49), the origin or truth of a referent present in reality is not “the condition for signification” (74). In other words, there is no mirrored reflection between “the graphical or acoustical image” and the referent, or between “the graphical or acoustical image,” the signifier, and “the concept – the signified” (49). As Brenda Marshall points out, it is “the principle of difference as the condition for signification at the foundation of structuralism” (74). For Saussure, as we know, “meaning is based on difference,” and “that meaning is arbitrary: c-a-t doesn’t naturally correspond with that whiskered, four-legged animal asleep in the sun. We distinguish what is c-a-t because it is not b-a-t or c-a-p, and we speak of the same animal regardless whether we use the words cat, chat, or gato” (79). The loss of the referents of signs does not entail a loss of meaning to the boy. Indeed, through his communication with his father he is able to deduce the meaning of the idiom. Furthermore, “crows” can still be found “in books” (McCarthy 167), that is between other words in which “the play of difference” still occurs and is “the possibility and functioning of every sign” (Derrida, “Différance” 5).

What McCarthy’s passage does posit, through the loss of naming words, is the absence of a foundational truth based in reality which may be explored through Derrida’s conception of *différance*. Derrida’s formulation of *différance* consists of “two vectors: to differ (‘to be not

identical, to be other, discernible') and to defer ('the action of putting off until later'), and therefore "within the paradigm of representation the sign is 'put in the place of the thing itself ... The sign represents the present in its absence.... The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence'" (qtd. in Marshall 73). However, as Marshall goes on to suggest, "[a]ccording to the representational paradigm, although the sign defers presence, the sign may be thought about only on the *basis* of the presence that it defers as it *moves toward* the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate" (73). In other words, the sign stands in for the material referent that is no longer required to be present, hence the meaning of "[l]anguage functions in the space of absence" (69). However, because of the "representational paradigm" (73), in which the "writer and her words are... a mirror, reflecting a solid truth ... a knowable real world that may be directly mediated through the mirror of words" (53), the sign that stands in for the absence of the real object "*moves toward*" (73) appropriating the presence of the deferred material object because it is "thought about only on the *basis* of ... presence" (73). For Derrida, *différance* is not only what is different, other or discernible, it also defines a movement of a sign that represents an object that is absent but that it wishes to make present through "the mirror of words," which in essence is a deferred presence. In contrast to this, Derrida argues, that by separating the signified and signifier, which Marshall notes is "crucial," it "ultimately privileges the closure of the structure" (68). In Saussure's estimation

the relationship between signified and signifier may be arbitrary, but it is a stable affair within a synchronic moment. Saussure, thus, assumes a place where meaning rests, if only for a hypothetical moment. For Derrida, this does not acknowledge the 'play', the movement, the slippage between signifiers, that is, the movement by which each signifier's signified becomes itself a signifier.

(Marshall 66)

Marshall suggests that the "history of Western metaphysics may be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center which receives different forms and names, all of which have designated an invariable presence" (66). Some of these substituted centres are conceptions such as "essence, existence, substance, subject, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" (66). In this sense, even though "meaning is based on difference" (79), and as for Saussure it occurs within a system or a structure with a substituted centre, it does mean that as these centres are substituted they freeze time, momentarily. They do not show the slippage, or the movement of the substitution of centres within the social, cultural or historical systems. It is for this reason that Marshall states that Saussure's structuralism "is a stable affair within a synchronic moment" (66). Whereas for Derrida the concept, the signified part of the sign contains within it the absence of the other, that which is different.

You cannot understand what *good* is without seeing it in relation to *evil*. Within every signified is simultaneously the absence of the other. Furthermore, in Derrida's estimation, "language and a finite language – excludes totalization" (Derrida, *SSP* 236), not because it is part of "an inexhaustible field, as is traditionally assumed," but because "there is something missing from language" (Marshall 68), namely, a transcendent signified or a foundational term that would provide closure for meaning. The field of language, for Derrida, "is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble" (Derrida, *SSP* 236). Derrida argues that:

This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions.

(Derrida, *SSP* 236)

He suggests that this "movement of the freeplay," which is allowed "by the lack, the absence of a center, or origin," is what he refers to as the "movement of *supplementarity*" (236). Derrida also says that you "cannot determine the center, the sign which *supplements*<sup>18</sup> it, which takes its place in its absence – because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a *supplement*" (*SSP* 236-237). Through this "movement of signification" something is added, "which results in the fact that there is always more" (*SSP* 237). He goes on to describe this "addition" as "floating" because it performs the "vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified" (*SSP* 237). Thus Derrida emphasises "the two directions of meaning which are so strangely compounded within it" (*SSP* 237), the supplement as addition, and as the supply of a deficiency in the absence of "a point of presence" or "a fixed origin" (*SSP* 224). Furthermore, Derrida cites the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to clarify what Marshall suggests is the "self-creative potential of language" (57) and how a "finite language – excludes totalization" because of an "infinite richness which it can never master" (*SSP* 236). Lévi-Strauss refers to the "superabundance of signifier, in relation to the signifieds to which this superabundance can refer" (qtd. in Derrida, *SSP* 237). Lévi-Strauss also suggests, that "[i]n his endeavor to understand the world, man therefore always has at his disposition a surplus of signification," which "is absolutely necessary in order that on the whole the available signifier and the signified it aims at may remain in the relationship

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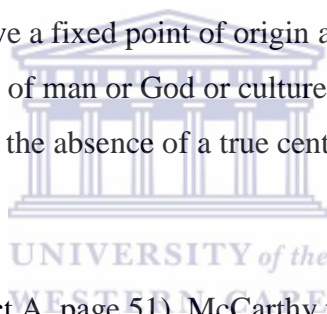
<sup>18</sup> Cited from Jacques Derrida's account of the meaning of the word *supplement* in his chapter, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Here, Derrida suggests, that "the word, both in English and French, means 'to supply a deficiency,' on the one hand, and 'to supply something additional,' on the other" (Derrida, "Notes" no 9, 242).



of complementarity which is the very condition of the use of symbolic thought” (qtd. in Derrida, *SSP* 237). Consequently, as Marshall says:

Language functions in the space of absence. That is why the “movement of supplementarity” is both in addition to *and* a substitute; it means to add to (to be superfluous) and to replace (to be necessary). When discourse enters the picture, that is, when the center – the transcendental signified – is never present, then language becomes movement. Language becomes a slippage from signifier to signifier, rather than from signifier to absolute signified. This is the “overabundance of the signifier” of which Derrida speaks. The signifier’s “*supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented.”  
(Marshall 69)

In Western thought the system or structure that surrounds these substituted centres is held together because the centre is always seen as presence and therefore positive, and not as an absence and therefore compromised by lack. Examples of such presence would be God’s place within the structure of monotheistic religion, or man’s within the structure of history, or culture in the structure of ethnology. These presences are both centred and therefore positive. However, these centres do not have a fixed point of origin and therefore there is no absolute signified, no originary conception of man or God or culture. These centres therefore supplement or attempt to stabilise the absence of a true centre, which results in the superabundance of signification.



In the passage cited above (Extract A. page 51), McCarthy frames the loss of a fixed origin of signification within the world of the novel. He highlights the absence of the referent, which in turn draws our attention to the absence at the heart of all signification, the absence of a transcendent signified or a foundational term, which means that the signifier (the word) always stands in for something that is not there. In McCarthy’s narrative it is doubly so: not just because the word stands in for something that is not present, but because in the reality of the novel the actual referent no longer exists too. This absence seems to imply that the signifier is inherently empty, while at the same time creating an overabundance of signification or meaning. There is no accuracy or truth to the word as it is based on an absence which is also an excess rather than depletion or exhaustion. Moreover, the endless substitution of centre for centre and the slippage from signifier to signifier means that both language and meaning are moving simultaneously, but not in synchrony. It is in flux, ever changing, through the lack of a fixed point or origin for the signifier.



What the passage hints at and what the novel frames, is not only the absence of an origin, but the very dissolution of the structure that surrounds these centres. This means that not only is the very presence or existence of God called into question but nature and culture have also been obliterated and we are left with an image of man standing fretfully alone on the precipice of extinction. Not only is there a loss of God but now an absent God has lost man too. After the apocalypse, then, there is no religion, no history, and, for that matter, no culture as the very concept of presence, of ontology, of man too is called into question; as Alan Warner suggests *The Road* is “[s]horn of history and context” (Warner). It would seem then that a postmodern novel which is informed with poststructuralist theory, ends up becoming meaningless because it cannot settle on one definitive meaning. Furthermore, “neither the observer (the subject) nor the observed (the object) are autonomous entities, [but] are culturally constituted, culturally interpreted, and mutually referential” (Marshall 49). In other words, “reality isn’t mirrored by the words of the storyteller, but is, rather, brought to be by the teller” and that this “brings together two moments of critique within the postmodern moment: that our perception of reality takes place first within language, and second, within the particular social, cultural, historical positions of the teller” (54). Or that “both world and language may be meaningful, and their meaning apprehensible, [but] only in relation to one another” (55). Furthermore, language is not just “shaped by a teller” it is also “reshaped by an audience” (60). By positing the loss of the social, cultural, and historical, the novel questions the very possibility of an overarching meaning. All that is left, it seems, is language, or possibly just sounds and words.

In relation to this loss of a foundational origin and therefore a foundational meaning it is probably through Derrida’s conception of language as an instrument with which we can navigate this impasse. Derrida suggests that we cannot exit a logocentric universe and that at best we have to find a way of coexisting alongside it. This is because the reflex of our thought and our language, based in the tradition of Western thought, is to seek centres, solutions, and fixed answers. Language is therefore bound to present both an affirmation and exposure of the traditions it is embedded in. However, although language is unable to escape the logocentric system, Derrida proposes “to use all the old concepts of language within the domain of empirical discovery while denouncing their limits, treating them as tools” (Marshall 67). In other words, the point is to think outside the system of language while still being inside it, and to use language as an instrument to accomplish this. In relation to language, Derrida suggests that although we cannot escape the conceptual level through

which language defines meaning, we can still use language as a critical tool to question its assumptions. His premise is that by regarding language as tool and a marker of difference and instability (and not as a beacon of truth), that we are then able to presume its unnaturalness and think of it instead in terms of function and ways to use it as an instrument (Marshall 67). In McCarthy's extract above, where he depicts the loss of naming words and the things it names, where by premising the "oblivion" (McCarthy 93) of referents situated in a reality, the extract and the novel, in fact, structures the loss of an origin of a sign found in the physical world. I have copied the extract from above, below, once more.

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would of thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.

Extract A. (McCarthy 93)

However, the loss of an origin does not jeopardize the novel's ability to contain meaning. Instead, by framing these "parsible entities" (93), these variations of nouns, from concrete objects to abstract concepts, it draws our attention to how even signifiers placed in the same category with the same function, may still demonstrate difference. McCarthy's extract uses language to speak about language, or to demonstrate the function of language, particularly in the way it is used "as an instrument" even while its "truth-value is criticized" (Marshall 67). McCarthy's extract uses language to question its own truth-value, which, as Marshall suggests, is also "to refuse the idea of the naturalness of language" (67). It is here that *The Road* appears to work against Derrida's thinking. McCarthy uses language as a tool or instrument to think outside the system of language while still being in it. In other words, he uses the function of language to convey meaning. Furthermore, the creation of a fictional world, stripped of any connection to culture, nature, God, and eventually to man means that the truth-value of the medium is called into question, and which also points to the unnaturalness of that medium. However, McCarthy re-connects his words, the two parts of the sign, the signifiers and signifieds, to affect, and as such, it possibly becomes more natural because it is the same emotion that is evoked and shared by all of us, and is therefore true because it is self-evident. Furthermore, he evokes this affective response in the reader, through his use of language and through the narrative of the novel.

McCarthy's re-connection of language with feeling, appears to create a naturalness to the work. Furthermore, it is also possible that it is the type of emotion he connects it with that best describes the work. It is an emotion that can be understood as operating differently to Jacques Derrida's emotion in his notion of freeplay that he ascribes to the "Nietzschean affirmation" (SSP 240), and which is attached to what he defines as the second "interpretation of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay" (SSP 240). Derrida suggests that there are

two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, through the history of all of his history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.

(Derrida, SSP 240)

McCarthy seems to be concerned with the second interpretation of interpretation. His extract is not "turned towards the origin" with its mimetic understanding of representation, but, in fact, depicts its loss. What the extract lacks, however, is the feeling of freeplay that Derrida, as I have just said, ascribes to the "Nietzschean affirmation" (240). The extract lacks "the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation" (240, emphasis added). It lacks the feeling of joy in its depiction of a world "without truth, without origin" (240). Derrida goes on to say that, "*This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center*" (240). In other words, the feeling of joy is applied to the "non-center," which would be "otherwise" than the feeling of despair for the "loss of the center" (240). Indeed, the father's narrated thoughts in the passage above (Extract A. page 61) begin as follows: "He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair," and later, at the end of that passage, "Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever" (McCarthy 93). The father's thoughts begin with a "feeling" that encompasses the opposite feeling of the "thinking of freeplay" (SSP 240). Although the "feeling" is represented as distinct from the "numbness and the dull despair," through the word "beyond" (McCarthy 93), it is the mood these words create through their imagery that generates the "feeling" of "despair" (93). It is the imagery of death and the extinguishing of life implied by the phrase, "[i]n time to wink out forever" and the coldness that is attributed to the process of dying contained in the simile, "[d]rawing down like something trying to preserve heat" that creates the feeling of despair through loss in this passage. McCarthy's

lack of celebration at the loss of the world, even its despair, seems to be a lament for a world that has forsaken a coherent structure and a system of values based on the sure foundations of reason and logic. However, it also works to intensify the feeling of hopelessness contained in the father's predicament.

Interestingly, the lament for a lost and abandoned world echoes another project, which laments the death of purpose found in the world, namely, the modernist project. Through the feelings of living in a wasteland, with the feeling of despair, exhaustion, loss, and hopelessness, McCarthy seems to echo the lament of modernists like T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. Jürgen Habermas argues that the modern period begins with the Enlightenment and the age of reason and the new call for individuals to have the courage to think rationally and independently, to think for themselves and not rely on the authority of others (Barry 85).

Furthermore, Peter Barry suggests that for Habermas the

so-called Enlightenment 'project' is the fostering of this belief that a break with tradition, blind habit, and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibitions, coupled with the application of reason and logic by the disinterested individual can bring about a solution to the problems of society.

(Barry 85)

Barry observes that this "is what Habermas means by 'modernity'" (85). For Habermas, then, "[t]he cultural movement known as modernism subscribed to this 'project', in the sense that it constituted a *lament* for a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, a lost system of values" (85, emphasis added). In this way, the "feeling" of "despair" (McCarthy 93) evoked in the novel seen in conjunction with a narrative that frames a world with "a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, a lost system of values" (Barry 85), seems to echo the loss of the principles of the modernist project. In many ways, *The Road* like his other novels, *Blood Meridian* (1985), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), *Cities of the Plain* (1998) and *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), can be viewed in the light of the failure of the modernist project because the novels seem to present anxieties "about literary narrative's inability to represent the world in the novel," or "about historical narrative's inability to represent the historical," or "about language's inability to represent the material" (Jarrett 44-45). Furthermore, David Holloway suggests that these anxieties come from "the collapse of the Modernist project" (qtd. in Jarrett 45). And from a literary perspective, Holloway suggests that "the Modernist project" was the "project of literature building a refuge for itself, through language and literary form, outside of the larger, fallen world" (qtd. in Jarrett 45). In many ways, *The Road* seems to display some of the anxieties associated with the collapse of this project, and which is similar to the

anxieties expressed over “literary narrative’s inability to represent the world in the novel” and with “language’s inability to represent the material” (45). These are two anxieties probably best evoked by McCarthy’s depiction of the collapse of our world and with it our existence and the presence of material objects, as well as a language that is now littered with empty signifiers. Furthermore, *The Road* also appears to mirror the modernist project because it stands outside the depiction of our world. The novel is set outside our history and does not name any place on the father and son’s journey south. In this way the novel can be seen as an attempt to disconnect it from the history and the specific location of the larger world. Instead, McCarthy’s focus is on language and the literary form itself, and in this way, he seems to build a refuge for his work outside the larger world.

McCarthy works within the system to demonstrate the inherent absence at its centre. He uses the narrative of the novel to frame this loss of this core structure. Language is used as a resource to both hypothesize a breakdown of the structure as well as to demonstrate language’s ability to create meaning in spite of everything. Furthermore, this meaning is not only premised on theoretical ideas, such as the arbitrariness of the sign and a narrative structured on the loss of the opposition between nature and culture, but as I have suggested, it is also creates meaning through affect. The novel has an affective meaning that can generally be equated to a feeling of despair. However, the meaning is more complex than this. McCarthy’s use of language and narrative demonstrates the multiple levels that meaning functions on. In the midst of a feeling of despair due to “a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, a lost system of values” (85), the narrative nevertheless promotes a feeling of hope for the reader.

One example of this is where the father and son stumble across a room in a basement which is used to store humans as food. In the context of the story the father and son have had no food and very little sleep for five days. In this condition they “came upon a once grand house sited on a rise above the road” (McCarthy 111). In an effort to stave off hunger they search the house for supplies. The house seems unoccupied but there is evidence that it is being lived in: “Piled in a window in one corner of the room was a great heap of clothing. Clothes and shoes. Belts. Coats. Blankets and old sleeping bags” (113). While searching the kitchen they find an “adjoining small room, perhaps a pantry,” and in this room is a “hatch” in the floor which is “locked with a large padlock” (114). The father breaks the lock and enters down “rough wooden steps” (116) in the dark. He then,



flicked the lighter and flung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.

Jesus, he whispered.

Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.

Christ, he said. Oh Christ.

He turned and grabbed the boy. Hurry, he said. Hurry.

(McCarthy 116-17)

The feeling of despair in this passage is self-evident. It is mainly brought about by the narrative which recounts the doomed set of circumstances in which these people find themselves, and which gives a description of the condition in which the victims have been found. However, in the description is an image of a man with his “legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (116). As disturbing as the image may be it also contains an element of hope, because the other captives still have enough empathy to place this man, who must obviously be in severe pain, “[o]n the mattress” (116). The flicker of hope is in the comfort they offer to this victim despite their own distress. The fellow captives are able to feel for someone who is in greater distress than themselves.

The affective meaning, here, is created by the narrative through a process of what Hogan refers to as “simulation” (14). Drawing on Frederick Toates’s observation, which I have explored in the introduction, he says that “representations of emotionally loaded events trigger a similar set of brain regions as are triggered by the corresponding real events, though with less intensity” (qtd. in Hogan 3). This is because simulation “allows us to evaluate scenarios ‘off-line’ ... But it has that function only because we experience the usual emotions associated with the simulated events” (3). It is for these reasons that Hogan suggests “that literature is a form of simulation – a fundamental, evolved operation of the human mind – and that the functionality of simulation is inseparable from emotion” (4). The image of humans living in this dehumanized condition and being stored as food or stocked as supplies as if in the larder, is an intensely disturbing scenario. Apart from their obvious fear, the inability to process this scene is perhaps another reason for the father and son’s hurried escape. The reader, too, in processing the simulated event turns away in horror and it is perhaps for this reason that the mattress remains unnoticed, and hides the hope contained in this ghoulish scene.



The creation of affect through narrative simulation is not the only way affect is produced in the novel. McCarthy's style of writing plays its part here too. In a 2006 interview with Bryan Garner, the late novelist David Foster Wallace described McCarthy's writing as "an English very remote from our own," that uses an "archaic diction," much "like the King James Bible on acid" (qtd. in Thompson 6). What Lucas Thompson suggests about this particular style is that it lends "moral gravity and seriousness" (4) to the narrative. A close reading of the passage below begins to illustrate how this "archaic diction" (6) helps to create another level of affective meaning in the novel.

They began to come upon from time to time small cairns of rock by the roadside. They were signs in gypsy language, lost pattered. The first he'd seen in some while, common in the north, leading out of the looted and exhausted cities, hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead. By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell. The soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor and the cold crept down and the dark came early and the scavengers passing down the steep canyons with their torches trod silky holes in the drifted ash that closed behind them silently as eyes. Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond.

Extract B. (McCarthy 192-193)

The use of the preposition "upon" in the first sentence of the passage is "itself an archaism in US usage" (Thompson 12), which originates in Middle English, a period which John Algeo and Carmen Acevedo Butcher place between the years 1100 to 1500 (*Reader's Digest Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*<sup>19</sup> 916; Algeo and Butcher 121). However, it is perhaps the prepositional phrase "from time to time," a phrase still in common use and a seemingly unstrained reference to the word occasionally, that allows us to see the "archaic diction" (Thompson 6) or what Wallace describes as "an English very remote from our own" (6). The phrase "from time to time" although common, has its roots in Old English (*RDIOD* 324), the period stretching from 449 to 1100 (Algeo and Butcher 84) and as such precedes the use of the word "upon." It is perhaps this phrase inserted in the middle of the sentence and taken in conjunction with the preposition "upon," which allows us to glimpse the "incongruously archaic phrasing" here (Thompson 12).

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<sup>19</sup> The *Reader's Digest Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*, will be abbreviated as *RDIOD*.

Thompson also points out that “scholars such as Robert Alter have mapped McCarthy's prose with reference to the particular rhythms and grammatical structures within the King James Bible” (4). In his article “American Literary Style and the Presence of the King James Bible”, Robert Alter suggests that

the sheer dissemination of the King James Version created a stylistic precedent for the American ear in which a language that was elaborately old-fashioned, that stood at a distance from contemporary usage, was assumed to be the vehicle for expressing matters of high import and grand spiritual scope.

(Alter 62)

This may explain Thompson's reference to McCarthy's style of writing in which a sense of “moral gravity and seriousness” (4) is evoked in the narrative. Alter goes on to argue that “[a]t a cultural moment when the biblical text, verse and chapter, was a constant presence in American life, the idioms and diction and syntax incised in collective memory through the King James translation became a wellspring of eloquence” (64). Alter does point out that eloquence is usually attributed to oratory, and not usually associated the novel. However, his article considers “whether the language of the English Bible made a difference in the *texture* of the prose, enabling crucial shifts or heightenings of perspective” (64-65, emphasis added). He also points out that style has been neglected by critics since the 1970's, largely because it has been replaced by the notion of “discourse,” a notion that he suggests “chiefly derives from Michel Foucault” (65). Furthermore, he highlights the intrusion of discourse into the “circuits of society” not only “manipulating individuals and groups in the interests of the powers that be,” but also manifesting itself in everything from fiction and poetry to “manuals of mental and physical hygiene” (65). From this standpoint, with discourse's predominance in our cultural circuit and critics' neglect of literary style, it may seem that Alter is calling for a separation of languages into the literary and non-literary in an attempt to keep the language of literature pure and unsullied by the political and historical. However, he suggests that:

The claim I am making here for the importance of style is not an attempt to cut off literature from its moorings in history and politics but rather an argument that we will be better served by looking with a finer focus at the very linguistic medium writers use to engage with history and politics and perhaps in some instances to transform our vision of both those realms.

(Alter 66)

In fact, Alter believes that the analysis of style could in fact illuminate ideology in a text (66). More importantly, he argues that “it is *literary style* that might make available to us certain precious *perceptions of reality* and certain distinctive pleasures not to be found elsewhere” (66, emphasis added). It appears that Robert Alter seems to be validating Sarah Nutall's view

that “we must increasingly read both down and across, underneath and surface” of the text (410), by giving literary style the recognition it deserves. In this way even though McCarthy figures the loss of a stable coherent meaning in his novel while its apocalyptic atmosphere creates the perception that meaning itself is under threat, his style nevertheless works against the loss of meaning by establishing a reconnection between words and things with meaning through a shared literary tradition.

The effects of literary style are particularly evident in the process of translating novels. Even though Alter points out that “[n]ovels are famously, or perhaps notoriously, translatable,” he nevertheless suggests that “[t]here is a tricky balance between the sheer weight of the represented world of a novel and the force of language in which it is conveyed” (67). Novels do not only consist of “words” but contain such heterogeneous elements as, “events, individual character, relationships, institutions, social forces, historical movements, material culture, and much more” (67). If the translator is able to direct the reader to these heterogeneous elements by using words in the translated language that signify these elements. The effect of the represented world is still produced for the reader, albeit it with a loss of the nuances and subtleties of the original language. The narrative in translation is nevertheless still made vivid (67). However, Alter insists “that lexical nuances and patterns of sound and subtleties of syntax are crucial to the sense of reality articulated in novels” (67). He also suggests that “*something* happens in novels through the elaborately wrought medium of style that resists translation, even as the large represented world of the novel is conveyed well enough in another language” (68, emphasis added). The focus of his study is to question “how that elusive ‘something’ manifests itself in the American novel through a biblical inflection” (68). In order to map the various modes of these manifestations, Alter provides us with a “partial list of attributes of style that make a difference in our experience of the work of fiction, that generally resist translation, and that are neglected in literary studies to the peril of our understanding of literature” (68). The attributes he lists include: “sound (rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and so forth), syntax, idiomatic usage and divergence from it, linguistic register (that is, level of diction), and the cultural and literary associations of language” (68).

This list serves to uncover a more complex rendering of McCarthy’s text, through a reading that perhaps “draws increasingly on notions of the literal, the surface and the skin,” and where “current aesthetic languages” (styles of writing) can be viewed as “different kinds of

conceptual vocabularies” (Nuttall 416). The tone of “moral gravity and seriousness,” earmarked earlier (Extract B. page 67), is not simply because of an archaic diction contained in the preposition “upon” and the phrase “from time to time” (McCarthy 192). Indeed, as old as the origin of the phrase may be, the fact that it is still in common use would probably have resulted in it slipping by unnoticed. However, our attention is drawn to it through its idiomatic usage and the alliteration that occurs in the phrase. The significance of the phrase is initially due to its “idiomatic usage” (68), but it is also noticeable because it is inserted in the centre of a fairly simple sentence structure and that could function, on a semantic level, without the phrase. It could just as easily be written as: “They occasionally began to come upon small cairns of rock”; or perhaps more nondescriptly as, “They occasionally began to come across small cairns of rock.” It is the positioning of the phrase in conjunction with the archaic preposition “upon” (192) that disrupts the syntactic structure and thereby draws our attention to it. Furthermore, the saliency of the phrase is emphasised through an attribute Robert Alter lists under “sound” (68). Sound can be identified in the alliteration in “time to time.” The inserted phrase results in the delayed signification of the direct object of the sentence, “small cairns of rock” (192). Furthermore, by inserting four syllables between the subject and object, the sentence is drawn out creating a more measured and weighty tonal dimension that seems to pre-empt the “cultural ... association” (Alter 68) implied in “small cairns of rock” (192). The “cairns” are nothing more than “hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead” (192). The more measured tonal quality lends an air of melancholy and gravity to the sentence, which pre-empts the tone to be associated with the cultural association of “small cairns of rock” and is later validated when these landmarks are described as “hopeless messages” (192). Moreover, the finality of the despair is echoed in the measured repetition of the soft fading sound of the “-ss-” contained in the words “hopele-ss” and “me-ss-ages” of the phrase.

It is perhaps through sound effects that McCarthy is able to create another layer of affective meaning or “the ‘feeling’ of an emotion” (Damasio, qtd. in Hogan 16), to his prose. This is partly due to McCarthy’s awareness of that part of the sign which Saussure refers as the “material,” the “sensory” or the “sound-image” (178). Furthermore, as Hogan suggested earlier, one of the ways “[e]xpressivity enters into literary works” is in part due to “subvocalization, the silent ‘voicing’ of a speaker’s utterance” (14). This would entail “[t]one of voice including, variation in volume and pitch contour” (14). It is this silent voicing of the sound-image that seems to produce the lyricism in certain passages in McCarthy’s work.

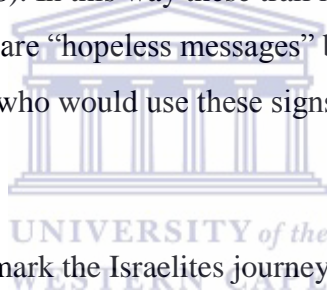
The pitch contour of the words, the fact that the pitch rises when syllables are stressed and lowers when others are not creates an almost imperceptible effect of rhythm, and emphasis through alliteration and softness of sound through assonance. In the first line of the passage (Extract B, found on page 67) there seems to be a probing anapest in “[t]hey began,” which is repeated in the beginning of the next sentence, “[t]hey were signs” (192). These anapests are followed by iambic feet of various meter that begin to create a feeling of moral gravity in the passage through a slow measured rhythm. Furthermore, emphasis is given to part of the sentence through the alliteration “time to time” and contrast through the softness of the phrase, “hopeless messages” (192). McCarthy also uses the literary technique of polysyndeton, where the conjunction “and” is used repetitively to define movement and rhythm as well, as suggested by the sentence: “The soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor *and* the cold crept down *and* the dark came early *and* the scavengers passing down the steep canyons with their torches trod silky holes in the drifted ash that closed in behind them silently as eyes” (192-93, emphasis added). The polysyndeton contributes to the sense of a mounting fear in this sinister landscape. It is carefully paced, focusing attention on the imagery and without any anticipation of an event that may interrupt the inexorable all-encompassing arrival of night and ash. Indeed, the imagery of the ash “like squid ink” closing behind the scavengers “silently as eyes” suggests a silent swallowing up of the world in tenebrous darkness. This is brought to its logical conclusion by the image of “the bleak and shrouded earth” that trundles past the sun as “any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond” (193), and which perhaps signals the finality through an image of all-encompassing darkness. McCarthy’s uses sound to create rhythm but also to emphasize and soften the tonal quality of moral gravity. Rhythm is also used to carefully pace and focus our attention on the imagery, which portrays the all-encompassing presence of darkness.

Added to this is an affective meaning which is created through the cultural associations contained in the passage. The cultural associations of the passage begin with the etymology of the word “cairn” (192), which comes from the “Scottish Gaelic *carn*” and signifies “a mound of rough stones built as a monument or landmark” (*POED* 117). However, it contains another symbolic meaning inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is associated with the building of cairns as a memorial in places where God has made his presence known. The reference to stones built as a monument to God in the Bible can be found in the books of



Genesis, Exodus and Joshua and especially in connection to God's covenant with the people of Israel. In each of the references, a monument of stone is built re-establishing God's covenant with the people of Israel and the pledge that Abraham's descendants will inherit the promised land and be as multitudinous "as the dust of the earth" (*The King James Bible*, Gen. 28. 14).

The cairns in *The Road*, though, are signs in the language of wanderers which mark routes and journeys that have been lost. They are "signs in gypsy language" (McCarthy 192), which we associate with the language of a people synonymous with the nomadic life, and it is in this mode of language that the "signs" are referred to as "lost patteredans" (192). Here, the noun "patteredan" originates from the Romany word "*patrin*" meaning "leaves, grass, stones, or twigs" (*The World Book Dictionary* 1528). Patteredans, made from these materials are used to mark the route that a person has taken so that other people may know which way they have gone, and thereby find them (1528). In this way these trail markings, these cairns, are indeed "hopeless messages" (192). They are "hopeless messages" because the ones who would care about where they have gone, and who would use these signs to follow them are "lost and dead" (192).

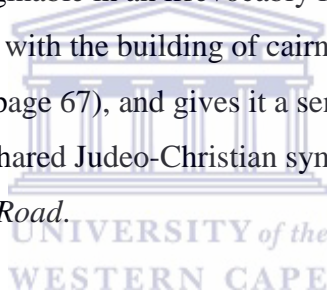


The cairns of stones in the Bible mark the Israelites journey towards the Promised Land, "flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3. 8). In contrast to their presence here, the "small cairns of rock" are "leading out of the looted and exhausted cities" (192). Away from a land of disappointment. The cornucopia of a "land *flowing* with milk and honey" stands in stark contrast to a land where "all stores of food had given out" and where men "would eat your children in front of your eyes" (192). This land is the antithesis of the Promised Land. It is a wasteland and one whose original promise now stands as a tragic disappointment. In other words, the cultural association draws attention to the loss contained in the cairns of *The Road*. In the book of Joshua the cairns are imbued with prophecy, "these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever" (Josh. 4. 7). The adverb forever written as two separate words has an emphatic effect which emphasizes the promise of the covenant between a chosen people and the Promised Land, as well as the eternal blessing of this memorial.

Furthermore, it emphasizes what Phillip A. Snyder refers to as Jacques Derrida's concept of the "messianic" which is the "notion of faith in the promise of the future" (73). Snyder



suggests that Derrida “argues that we are constantly waiting for the Messiah’s imminent coming while still deferring His actual arrival, which we may fear as much as we desire” (73). The cairns of the Bible and particularly the cairn at Gilgal, commemorate God’s promise to the Israelites and the incarnation of his responsibility in the world, as present in their entrance into the Promised Land. They therefore symbolise “faith in the promise of the future” (73), which culminates in the promise of the Messiah and his incarnation in the form of Jesus. These cairns as symbols of hope, then, highlight the despair of the cairns in *The Road* which symbolise the loss of “loved ones” and the “hopeless” (McCarthy 192) nature of the cairns themselves. They will not commemorate or document the narrative of an extraordinary journey originating from messages of promised love, for their bonds of love are “lost and dead” (192). Instead, the cairns of *The Road* will stand as a memorial for “murder” described as “everywhere upon the land,” and for a “world soon to be populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (192). The faith or hope “in the promise of the future” (Snyder 73) seems unimaginable in an irrevocably fallen world like this. Ultimately, the biblical symbolism associated with the building of cairns heightens the measured pace of the passage (Extract B, found on page 67), and gives it a sense of gravity through the contrast of meanings associated with the shared Judeo-Christian symbolism of cairns and its subsequent representation in *The Road*.



However, in this heightened sense of despair where meaning itself is incapable of the possibility of any sure foundation, McCarthy represents hope in the form of the father and the son who embody a conception of the human and the capacity to be good, as we have suggested above, as well as being endowed with empathy towards the Other. It is this quintessential idea that to be human means to be merciful and compassionate, to be *humane* and to care for others that seems unimaginable in *The Road*. The responsibility and the care of others is probably best defined through the idea of hospitality. Snyder, for example, suggests that “hospitality” could “reassert itself as a ground for human identity and relations” (69). Citing Peter J. Sorensen’s argument, he suggests

that world cultures have lost this sense of hospitality as a fundamental responsibility for the Other, figured in the Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition as the “wandering stranger” or the “stranger at the gates” whose very presence proclaims the ethical demand to be made welcome. Indeed, he references examples of hospitality as an ethical imperative from a number of world cultures and literatures with figures including, among others, the Bedouin, Abraham, Lot, Odysseus, Demeter, Hamlet, Jesus, Peter, and Joseph Smith.

(Snyder 70)

The father and son as the “good guys” who are “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 136) and who feel the pressure of their “fundamental responsibility for the Other” (Snyder 70), and which appears as an ethical commitment that seems impossible to enact in *The Road*. Furthermore, as Snyder explains, “Sorensen’s traditional model of hospitality seems inadequate ... because extending hospitality usually implies that the host is somehow master of the situation. That mastery comes very rarely in the novel and is always temporary and limited” (70-71). Instead he proposes Derrida’s conception of hospitality “especially as influenced by Emmanuel Levinas” (71).

Levinas’s model of hospitality is based on the grounds of it being “the fundamental ontological necessity” (71). He goes about this “by defining subjectivity *a priori* in terms of responsibility for the Other.” In other words, “[t]his responsibility comes before subjectivity” as the foundation of ontology or being. This is because “when one loses the sense of responsibility for the Other, one also loses one’s self” (76). Furthermore, Levinas argues that in relation to the Other, “his responsibility is incumbent on me. It is a responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in *Otherwise than Being*, that responsibility is initially *for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility” (qtd. in Snyder 71). What Snyder also reveals about Levinas’s conception of hospitality is the sacred nature of this relation with the Other, especially in how it relates to his conception of “the face-to-face” (71) interaction. Here Levinas suggests “that the face ‘orders and ordains’ us to service” (71). Furthermore, in relation to subjectivity, Levinas suggests that the “I” establishes itself as an “I” only “on the basis of its relation with the Other and, in addition, on the impossibility of its substitution” because of its “exclusive” and “unique” (71) responsibility it has for the Other. He argues that “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject” (71-72). Furthermore, Levinas makes the connection between the “Self/Other welcoming relation” to that of “God, the Divine or Infinite” (72). Here he suggests that “[w]hen in the presence of the Other, I say ‘Here I am!’ this ‘Here I am’ is the place through which the infinite enters language, but without giving itself to be seen” (72). The declaration that the subject gives, according to Levinas, “*testifies* to the Infinite”, for “[i]t is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs” (72). For Snyder, it is by means of this conception of hospitality, and the “reconfiguring of

subjectivity within the Self/Other relation which invites and testifies to the Infinite” that allows Levinas to conclude that it “represents ‘the glory of God’” (72).

With this in mind, the description from the passage (Extract B. 67) of a world “populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (McCarthy 192), seems to heighten the depravity of the act. As Snyder points out, the loss of responsibility for the Other equates to the loss of one’s self, but the fact that these men are willing to do this “in front of your eyes” (192) increases their depravity of the act through the medium of the face or eyes witnessing the degeneracy. This is because eating someone’s child is horrifying in itself, but to do so “in front of your eyes” (192), in your face so to speak, demonstrates the total loss of human dignity and thus human value. It demonstrates this by flouting the sacred “face-to-face” interaction that “orders and ordains” us to take responsibility for the Other.

Furthermore, in this context it would be impossible for the father and son as the “good guys” “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 136) to show any “gesture of openness” by declaring “Here I am!” (Snyder 71). This is particularly true in relation to their “fundamental responsibility for the Other” (70), when the Other would in all likelihood see this as an opportunity for a potential meal. Indeed, father and son spend most of the novel trying to hide from people and this is expressed in their constant vigilance of activity on the road and in their fear of their visibility to others. The following passages seem to support this view: “He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke” (McCarthy 2-3). And again in, “This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day” (3). And finally we have, “They went on. He kept constant watch behind him in the mirror” (24). The style of writing in these three passages seems to be markedly different from the earlier one where we noted its anachronistic language. The long lyrical formulations from the earlier passage (Extract B, page 67), are replaced with clipped sentences. McCarthy uses simple tenses like, “[h]e studied what he could see” (2-3), and “[t]hey went on. He kept constant watch behind him in the mirror” (24), to create an atmosphere where the threat of danger seems imminent. These passages stand in contrast to the almost reflective writing in the earlier extract where the acts described may or may not happen. In these terse formulations, however, something feels as if it is *about* to happen. It seems in a situation like this, where the danger is imminent, that it is impossible to declare your responsibility for the Other, and survive at the same time.

However, Derrida's structural reading of hospitality, although indebted to Levinas, gives us “a productive model through which we can interrogate hospitality’s ethical dilemma in *The Road*” (Snyder 71). Hospitality for Derrida centres “around the French term *hôte*, meaning at once both host and guest” (Snyder 72). For Snyder it is the “very undecidability” (72) of the term *hôte* which allows the fixed roles of host and guest to be negotiated and that makes it a suitable model for *The Road*. Furthermore, he cites Gil Anidjar<sup>20</sup> as stating that “[t]o translate this *hôte* as either ‘host’ or ‘guest’ would be to erase the demand made by hospitality as well as the violence that is constitutive of it” (qtd. in Snyder 72). The violence that Gil Anidjar refers to, according to Snyder, “stems from the unethical audacity implicit in the presumption of enunciating a welcome” (72), which Derrida points out is like “appropriating for oneself a place to welcome the other, or, worse, welcoming the other in order to appropriate for oneself a place” (qtd. in Snyder 72). What I think Snyder, through Gil Anidjar, is suggesting is that as soon as one takes up the position of host one assumes a position of power over the Other in that you assume responsibility for the Other, and even over his or her responsibility (with respect to Levinas’s conception of hospitality). This is all very well as long as the hosts’ intentions are compassionate, humane and one which values human dignity, which does not seem to be the case in *The Road*. Levinas’s shared cultural meaning of responsibility for the Other stems from “God, the Divine or Infinite” (Snyder 72), and resembles Cameron’s suggestion, cited in the introduction to this thesis, that the “human” is recognized as a reflection of the divine.

In light of Derrida’s model of hospitality it is still possible for the father and son to retain their selfhood through their “fundamental responsibility for the Other” (Snyder 70) This is despite the fact that the world of *The Road* does not operate in terms of the mutual responsibility of the Other. This is because, as Snyder suggests, the father and son relationship is the “primary Self/Other relation,” and the son is “the source of the father’s most essential and infinite call to responsibility” (75). However, he also points out that the son operates as a crucial “third” (75) Self/Other relation in his dealings with the Other. It is the son’s relationship with other people that acts as the crucial “third,” as it is here that the relationship through which his saintliness becomes evident to the father, and not through the Self/Other relation he shares with his father.

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<sup>20</sup> Gil Anidjar, editor of Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Religion*.

The passage below can be seen as a demonstration of Derrida's model of hospitality at work. It begins when a large group of road scavengers making their way down the road wake the father.

They came shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side. Some of them wearing canister masks. One in a biohazard suit. Stained and filthy. Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe. Coughing. Then he heard on the road behind them what sounded like a diesel truck.

(McCarthy 62-63)

The father and son manage to get their cart out of eyesight and put some distance between themselves and the road, and then hide from the road by crouching under a bank. However, the diesel truck's engine gives in, and one of the scavengers approaches them. Raising his head to see what is going on, the father looks directly at the approaching scavenger, who is unbuckling his belt presumably to relieve himself, and they both freeze in recognition of each other. The father cocks the pistol and levels it at the man telling him to, "[j]ust keep coming" (65). The man looks at the road and the father tells him not to look there, but rather commands him to: "Look at me. If you call out you're dead" (65).

In terms of the Levinasian structure of the Self/Other relation, the father can be seen as demanding a "face-to-face" engagement, when the man turns his head and the father commands him to "[l]ook at me" (McCarthy 65). In which case, he could be calling on the sacred nature of the relation with the other as "the face 'orders and ordains' us to service" (Snyder 71). The responsibility for the Other and the call to service present in the face seems to have no relational connection to the man, who appears indifferent if not inscrutable. Indeed, as the father later recalls in relation to this meeting:

This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word.

(McCarthy 79)

This description of the scavenger as having "cold and shifting" (79) eyes implies the lack of feeling and the constant parasitic surveillance of his environment. Taken in conjunction with "reptilian calculations" (79), it seems to imply the predatory features of a cold blooded killer. What makes the description even more disconcerting is the image of his "gray and rotting teeth" that are "[c]laggy" with "human flesh" (79). The neologism "claggy," typical of McCarthy's writing, which perhaps stems from a combination of the verbs "clog" and "cling," or the adjective "craggy," refers to his diet of "human flesh" (79). The overall image



is that of a predator of men, a successful predator at that because the flesh of his victims is still evident in the *claginess* of his teeth. The image of the man exudes a callous danger, and the description is punctuated by the ghastly sight of “gray rotting teeth” (79), which in itself reflects a diet consisting solely, of human flesh. In short, this is not the image one would associate with a person concerned or responsible for the welfare of others. Indeed, the father's declaration of: “My brother at last” (79), seems to be loaded with sarcasm, by the end of this passage. Furthermore, the bonds of love, empathy and the responsibility associated with the intimate term of “brother,” which serve the natural purpose of ensuring the survival of the family, or of extending their evolutionary line, are inverted in his figure. The interaction between him and the father culminates in the father's reflection that he “has made of the world a lie every word” (79), by turning it from a receptacle of life to a world haunted with the promise of immanent death. And this is perhaps, because of the man's refusal to recognize brotherhood. There is also a chiasmus in this line where we have a balancing and cancelling of the terms “world” and “word” against each other by crossing them over. This is foregrounded by the unusual poetic syntax. However, it is the “world” mentioned as the lie before the “word,” which signals the loss of structure in the world and as the cause for the loss of meaning in the word “brother” (79). It is through the recollection of this encounter with the scavenger that we see that the sacred responsibility asked of the face is not significant to this man a fact the father becomes aware of too.

Instead, the hospitality structure that operates in this encounter with the Other is closer to Derrida's conception of *hôte* in which both men in their negotiations play the roles of both guest and host. The father, at first, assumes control and talks first: “Just keep coming”; and instructs the scavenger from an assumed position of power; “[d]ont look back there. Look at me” (65). The father asks the questions: “Where are you going?” (65). The scavenger's response and actions position him as guest. However, his position as host is also reflected in his ability to ask questions: “Are you a doctor?” and by challenging the father's instructions; “I can look where I want to;” and finally by trying to assume the position of power himself: “I'll bet that boy is hungry. Why don't you all just come on to the truck? Get something to eat. Aint no need to be such a hard-ass” (67). The father as guest should welcome the invitation but as the host he has already revealed the lie at the heart of the scavenger's invitation, when he asks: “What are you eating?” The scavenger's reply is: “Whatever we can find” (66). The scavenger's offer of food, which he is initially unable to name or admit to being in possession of, and is generally evasive about, makes his proposal markedly



suspicious, especially given the fact that he has so easily admitted to having diesel, and can recall the precise amount, form and even its location, “[t]here's three fifty-five gallon drums in the bed” (66). The father is still willing to demonstrate his responsibility for the Other but not in his role as guest. The scavenger has revealed that he cannot be trusted and as such he demonstrates his unwillingness to be responsible for the Other as a host. Instead, the father, through his role of host takes responsibility for the Other’s responsibility by stating:

You think I wont kill you but you're wrong. But what I'd rather do is take you up this road a mile or so and then turn you loose. That's all the head start we need. You wont find us. You wont even know which way we went.

(McCarthy 68)

His invitation for the man to come with them, “[l]et’s go” (67), gives the scavenger the chance to survive but it also includes his responsibility for the Other’s responsibility. He does this by taking away the temptation to reveal their presence to the other scavengers, and thus betray his responsibility to them. This is observed in the father’s explanation: “You wont find us. You wont even know which way we went” (68). However, the negotiations end violently.

The scavenger makes a dart for the boy, grabs him and puts a knife to his throat, while the father reacts by dropping to his knees and shooting the scavenger in the forehead. This encounter with the Other demonstrates “the impossible nature of the call to hospitality and the Derridian insistence [on the inherent contradiction] that the term *hôte* signify at once host and guest to underscore hospitality as an inherent part of culture” (Snyder 80). Furthermore, as Snyder points out, by shooting the scavenger in the forehead the father “violates the prime ethical command of the face – ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ – knowingly and directly” (79).

However, as Snyder remarks, the “aporia, or dilemma” at the heart of “hospitality does not exempt the father from decisive action” because as “Derrida notes, violence can come from hospitality’s demands” (79). In other words, violence must not be considered an illegitimate response to the demands of hospitality. In fact it seems to be the legitimate outcome of the guest exerting his right as host when he clearly does not plan to be responsible for the Other.

The “cultural and literary associations” (Alter 68) of the description of “men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (McCarthy 192), which comes from an earlier McCarthy passage (Extract B on page 67) and notable for its archaic diction, can perhaps be tied to the idea of hospitality here through a shared meaning of what it means to be human. This description of the men that inhabit *The Road*, as well as the structure of the narrative itself allows McCarthy to express “the impossible, incessant, aporetic demands of hospitality that constitute Self in relation with Other” (Snyder 85). Furthermore, the motif of hospitality

seems to carry a certain weight for both McCarthy and his narrative. This is supported by Snyder's view where he suggests that "[h]uman beings and human cultures are inherently structured according to hospitality, whether or not the infinite demands of hospitality are accepted or refused or even acknowledged. Hospitality is the condition of existence" (85). It would seem that without the concept of hospitality, without responsibility for the Other, there would be no basis for large groups of people to co-exist, because there would be a lack of trust between people who do not see the importance or value of responsibility for the Other. It follows that with no trust there would be no sharing of ideas, affect, beliefs, and as such there would be no room for culture. Your existence would be called into question too, because if nobody ever looks at you, gazes at your face and makes eye contact, how can you truly be sure you exist. Furthermore, as Derrida points out in his critique of the auto-affectation of the voice, even the fact that you speak cannot be a basis for certainty in your existence.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, all we can be is a validation, a person who affirms the presence and existence of the Other by looking and being looked at. The welcome that Levinas speaks of, the "me voici" or "here I am" (71), is an affirmation in a sense that you have affirmed the presence of another, you see them and therefore they exist not just to themselves but to you too. Furthermore, it demonstrates that you are willing to announce your own presence as well as your openness towards being recognized. The welcome "here I am" can be seen in the same vein as telling another person, 'you are not alone.' Moreover, the gaze verifies the existence of the Other because his recognition of you is independent of you and thus not subject to your control. Meeting the gaze of another can therefore be viewed as a more reliable validation of existence than self-awareness. It is perhaps because of hospitality as the condition of existence that the father decides not to take his son's life when he dies near the end of the novel.

The son seems to encompass the Levinasian conception of responsibility for the Other in that he takes responsibility for the Other's responsibility, and more so because his responsibility is not solely based on his relationship with his father. Indeed, unhappy with his father's actions, the boy does claim responsibility, as we see in the way he reacts to his father's lack of responsibility towards others. After getting robbed of their cart and supplies towards the end of the story, the father tracks down the culprit with his son in tow. When he finally catches

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<sup>21</sup> See "Introduction: Theoretical Paradigms"

the man he orders him to take his clothes off, including his shoes, and places everything in the cart.

He bent and scooped up the rags in his arms and piled them on top of the shoes. He stood there holding himself. Dont do this, man.

You didnt mind doing it to us.

I'm begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same.

You took everything.

Come on, man. I'll die.

I'm going to leave you the way you left us.

Come on. I'm begging you.

He pulled the cart back and swung it around and put the pistol on top and looked at the boy. Let's go, he said.

(McCarthy 275-76)

Travelling down the road away from the naked man the boy breaks down and starts sobbing.

The father in an effort to console the boy says to the boy:

He's gone, he said. Come on.

He's not gone, the boy said. He looked up. His face streaked with soot. He's not.

What do you want to do?

Just help him, Papa. Just help him.

The man looked back up the road.

He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.

He's going to die anyway.

He's so scared, Papa.

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didnt answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

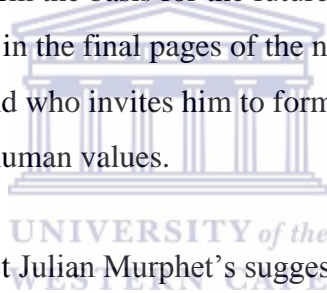
The boy said something but he couldnt understand him. What? He said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one.

(McCarthy 277)

The boy is responsible, even for his father's responsibility. When the father argues that, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything" (277), he implies that their welfare depends on him tracking down the thief and leaving him naked so he will not be able to harm them again. The son who has been a party to the chase and dialogue with the thief is aware of his father's reasoning, and yet he still responds to his father's comment about who is ultimately responsible by saying: "Yes I am ... I am the one" (277). The son implies another responsibility, another "everything" (277), that he has to worry about. From his dialogue with the father we register that his concern lies with the thief who is naked and hungry and with the fact that he will die. But, more than this, he wants his *father* to help him: "Just help him,

Papa. Just help him” (277). He feels responsible for his father’s actions towards others, and tries to correct them because he feels responsible for everything, which includes his father’s wellbeing and the wellbeing of others as well. In this sense he becomes responsible for his father’s responsibility or lack of responsibility towards others when he says, “Yes I am ... I am the one.” It is perhaps for this reason that the father cannot kill the boy with the last bullet he has been saving for just such an occasion. The occasion, that is, when he will no longer be there to protect the child. In the father’s last words before he dies, he says: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (300).<sup>22</sup> This observation is telling in the sense that his last concern is that the boy be found, preferably by goodness the Christian idea that the good triumphs in the end, which is a moral imperative if not the impulse behind hospitality. His wish it seems is that the boy is not going to be alone, because he has to hide from people who would in all probability kill him. If good people find him goodness will find him. Subsequently he will be in a position to be openly responsible for others, and others for him, and this hospitality would form the basis for the future establishment of a community. This perhaps is what is alluded to in the final pages of the novel. The boy is found by a man who does not eat other humans and who invites him to form part of his family who embody a clear set of moral principles and human values.



The father’s final words contradict Julian Murphet’s suggestion that “the boy’s radiance falls, meaninglessly, like Grace itself” (122). Up to this point in the novel it would seem to have been true. However, by not killing his son his action betrays a belief in his son’s Grace, a belief that “Goodness will find the little boy” because “[i]t always has” and “[i]t will again” (300). Without this belief the father would have taken his son’s life. It would have been the compassionate and logical thing to do, because of his son’s openness towards other people which leaves him vulnerable and open to manipulation. This observation is justified because soon after his father dies the boy is willing to hand over his gun to the strange man, who refuses to take it, and who turns out to be good. The father is finally able to validate his son’s beneficence and live up to his words (“Goodness will find the little boy”) by letting his son go out into the world alone, and armed with nothing but an untainted goodness.

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<sup>22</sup> The literal reference here, seems to be for another little boy that the boy believes he saw earlier in the novel. The father, however, does not believe he saw a boy or a dog for that matter. It can thus be assumed that the father’s reference to “the little boy” is to his son, the only boy he believes exists.

In representing the loss of much of our familiar, material reality in *The Road*, McCarthy posits the suggestion that language may yet be able to create meaning without a sure footing in reality. In this way he figures the theoretical conception of the loss of a foundational term or meaning as he literally frames the overabundance of signification due, in part, to the loss of the signs' referents. Furthermore, he does not revel in the possibility of meaninglessness through the flux associated with the overabundance of meaning. Instead, using the medium of his writing, and the techniques and devices of his craft, he creates an affective meaning which is not only one of evoking feelings of despair and loss. Through a language that is at times poetic, he calls up something that is elegiac and more than tragic loss. It is an affective meaning premised not only on certain narrative patterns and literary devices but also on how the sign is associated with the senses. Perhaps, it is this that points toward the elusive "something" that happens in novels, the part that resists translation (Alter 68). However, McCarthy also uses a language that is meaningful because it demonstrates a shared system of cultural beliefs and values as contained in things such as idiomatic expressions. These are meanings that cannot be translated but can only be learnt through "the use of language in the conduct of day-to-day activities and practices" within the culture (Blair 8). It is for this reason that the affective meaning becomes so powerful in McCarthy's work as it figures this loss of cultural meaning in contrast to the narrative of father and son, who still hold on to their system of beliefs despite finding themselves in the midst of the violence, turmoil, destruction, and despair. Indeed, although the boy's "Grace" is meaningless when it comes to self-preservation in the novel, it is still, finally, the source of hope at the end of the novel – a hope not tied to the presence of a signified divinity, but rather, perhaps, tied to the ability of language to construct an image of goodness in a world of despair.

## Chapter 2: Post-structuralist imaginings of the “human” in J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*

*[T]he novel associates me, the reader/critic, with the medical officer, places me alongside the scouts, interrogators, diagnosticians and cartographers of Empire as I focus my gaze on Michael K to determine what order of meaning can be extracted from him. I cannot hide from this fact, only concede my daunting privilege as an agent of reading.*

(Stefan Helgesson, *Writing in Crisis* 182)

Through a close analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, this chapter argues that Coetzee draws on a full range of expressive forms that illustrate what Charles Taylor defines as Heidegger’s expressive-constitutive view of language. This allows Coetzee to keep Michael K’s definitional meaning open and elusive while simultaneously creating an emotional and relational meaning for the reader through his use of language and narrative. Coetzee’s stylistic and narrative devices enable him to keep the figure of Michael K open for discovery, and to elude any system of values that he structures in the narrative world. At the same time the chapter suggests that in the course of the novel Michael K discovers a mode of being in the world based on nurturing and protecting the things that grow. This is similar to what Martin Heidegger calls “dwelling” (450), which allows things to disclose their essence in and of themselves, and which are not disclosed through other modes of being. The chapter argues that through the activity of reading, and through a conversation with the narrative Coetzee’s construction of Michael K allows the reader to view K as having meaning while still not being able to definitively name it. It thus seems to ask the reader to be open to the discovery of new modes of being in the world that as yet cannot be named.

*Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) begins with Anna K and the birth of her son Michael K. He is born with a “hare lip” (Coetzee 3), and because “their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children” (3). It is because of “his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick” (4) that Michael is eventually “taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of Huis Norenhuis in Faure” (4). He finally passes out from Huis Norenhuis in Faure and joins “the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3(b)” (4).



Michael leads a fairly solitary existence. Some of the reasons for this are that because of his disfigurement he “did not have women friends” (4), and the fairly solitary nature of his employment initially as a gardener, and later as a “night attendant at the public lavatories on Greenmarket Square” (4). Furthermore, it was also because “[h]e was easiest when he was by himself” (4). These descriptions of Michael K’s formative years already begin to form the basis for the individuality he finds through solitude, later in the novel.

Anna K falls ill with “dropsy,” and Michael begins living with his mother in her “room under the stairs of the Côte d’Azur” that “had been intended for air-conditioning equipment” (6). He finds “his mother’s swollen legs disturbing and turned his eyes away when he had to help her out of bed” (7). However, “he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty. The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenhuis, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (7). Again, these early fragments of Michael K’s life provide a glimpse of an innate curiosity to find meaning in his life.

Using the possibility of Michael K getting laid off from work, Anna K convinces him to “quit Parks and Gardens” (8) and accompany her to Prince Albert, the district of her birth. They struggle to acquire travel permits in order to leave the “Cape Peninsula police area” (9), and when the documents do not seem to be forthcoming, they embark on the journey anyway. Pushing his mother in a makeshift cart they travel as far as Stellenbosch, where, Anna K succumbs to her illness and passes away.

Michael decides to continue with their planned journey and bury his mother’s ashes in Prince Albert. Along the way he is commandeered into a labour gang for the railway, is let go, and then eventually finds a deserted farmhouse that he assumes is his mother’s birthplace. However, his peace is soon interrupted by the owner’s grandson which leads to K’s escape into the Swartberg mountain range.

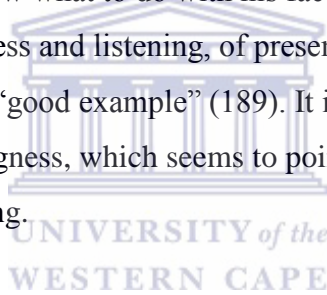
The novel plays with the idea that to be human is solely based on our ability to think. Indeed, rationality, reason and language itself seem to provide the very resources to challenge this idea, and we can see this in the figure of the novel’s eponymous character, Michael K. However, Coetzee’s writing leaves K’s representation anything but certain. His character is cast as “an indeterminate figure who [has] no natural or cultural home” (Attwell, *SB* 145).

Furthermore, it may be helpful to look more closely at K's character through what Stefan Helgesson distinguishes as "three types of blankness" (189) in the novel. The first type of blankness is "connected to K's subjectivity" which Helgesson describes as a "mental black-out" or "absence" (189), and is "tied to the representation of the character's 'experience'" (190). The second type of blankness takes the form of "the way the story is told" (190), and here, blankness "is first inscribed in the primary signifiers of the story" (190). The primary signifiers begin with the name "Michael K" who is later referred to as "K," as well as "equally blank misnomers such as 'Michaels' or 'Mister Treefeller'" (190). Finally, there is a type of blankness "in relation to every political, historical, even biological determination" that the "curious slant of the narration incessantly produces" (190). For Helgesson, K's uncertainty is instituted through a created blankness.

Furthermore, Helgesson citing Attwell suggests that "every sign, no matter how innocent, becomes a signifier at another level," and that therefore, "there is no such thing as an irreducible element," because in a "frenzied culture such as South Africa's" everything points to "the larger conflict" (190). However, as Helgesson points out, it is precisely this phenomenon of irreducibility that brings about "the issue of blankness, of unrepresentability" (191). For Attwell, however, "K is not a representative figure who models certain forms of behavior or capacities for change; rather, he is an *idea* floated into a discursive environment that is unprepared to receive it" (qtd. in Helgesson 191; emphasis added). K is an idea that escapes the boundaries that attempt to define him, or the meaning of his existence. In this way K's representation, paradoxically, points to nothingness, and, at the same time, is open to multiple interpretations because the idea of his multiplicity is incapable of being accepted in the environment in which it is received.

Coetzee's use of literary devices, which include "the use of multiple voices, and ... having different perspectives being played off against one another" (Attwell, *SB* 140), demonstrates what writers can do with philosophical ideas of the human. This "postmodern game-playing" (*SB* 139) provides the very resources for K's uncertainty, or for his created blankness. For, if one were to logically follow K's represented meaning through the course of the novel, the conclusion would be that it is uncertain, blank, and cannot be conflated with that of a guerrilla or patriot, or even to that of the meaning that the Medical Officer assigns to him. He is a blank canvass on which a meaning can be projected *ad infinitum* because, as I will suggest later, of the absence of a foundational truth to the meaning of Michael K's existence.

However, this focus on Coetzee's writing as an expression of thought does nothing more than reinstitute the importance of the human as a thinking being. In a closer analysis of Helgesson's three distinguishing "types of blankness" (189), the first type of blankness, which is "tied to the representation of the character's 'experience'" and not (as he states) to "the way the story is told" (190), leads us to a focus on the writing that is not concentrated on the expression of thought, but rather on a representation of an experience of being itself. Helgesson's first type of blankness "is connected to K's subjectivity" (189). It is here, with this link to "subjectivity" (189), where thought becomes more than an abstraction or logical mind game, but also a subjective feeling of an experiential being. For Helgesson, this first type of blankness can be interpreted "as a mental black-out, an absence," or "as an intensity of being, of stillness and listening, of presence" (189). As an example of "a mental black-out, or an absence" (189), Helgesson refers to the passage where K, "felt stupidity creep over him like a fog again. He no longer knew what to do with his face" (Coetzee 64). For blankness, "as an intensity of being, of stillness and listening, of presence" Helgesson gives "K's experience in the mountain" as a "good example" (189). It is this last example, framed by Helgesson as blankness or nothingness, which seems to point towards an experience of being not solely tied to the thinking being.



The paradox is that Michael K does at times appear stupid. He is described by the Medical Officer as "another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history" (Coetzee 159), and as a person who has "no sense of who you are" (143), "alive but not alive" (158). Yet K's experience in the mountains is described by Helgesson as "an intensity of being ... of presence" (189). It is here that the blankness contains a being, which is an existence or an experience outside of the purely rational. It is a being that just *is*, and perhaps even a true Being, and not in terms of what Heidegger views as a distorted conception of being, where man represents the world in relation to himself thus setting himself up as subject. It is perhaps here in the Swartberg mountain range that K's subjectivity is represented as differently to what we would expect in Western thought. K is represented as having an "intensity of being" in a vein similar to what Heidegger defines as Being. This is done, perhaps, by revealing the other possibilities of being that may be concealed from our conventional understanding. Michael K's experience in the mountains can be seen as a "blankness" (189), but what is telling, is that Helgesson conflates blankness with an "intensity of being" (189). The nothingness or blankness associated with Michael K can

therefore be seen to hide an “intensity” (189) to his existence while he is in the mountains. It is more than a blankness as the noun “intensity” evokes, the degree, strength or greatness of *something*. The blankness therefore contains something, whatever it may be.

However, this blankness which is conflated with an intensity of being is not present in the beginning of the novel. It only begins in the Swartberg Mountains. K’s blankness before his experiences in the mountain can be viewed as closer to the nothingness we normally associate with blankness, and this has a lot to do with the character’s lack of agency and the narrative voice used to represent K here. In the beginning K’s story is told in the third person. He is the protagonist of the novel but the object of the narrator. Furthermore, in the beginning of the narrative he has no agency. He is told what to do, where to go, and is represented as rather dull and incapable of doing anything that is thought provoking. K’s lack of agency in the world is compounded by a narrative voice that in the third person gives K very little control over his own story. The third person narrative mode enables the characters thoughts to be accessed, but the intensity of these thoughts is less powerful than in the first person narrative mode. In other words, there is ‘distance,’ which is felt by the reader, between the character that tells his own story and one that has his or her story told by another agent. This difference between first person and third person narrative modes is a subject I will discuss later, but for now, K not only lacks agency in the world of the novel, he also has his agency taken away from him by this disembodied mode of narration. Furthermore, his blankness can also be ascribed to the way he is depicted in the novel. Apart from the physical feature of a harelip, K is described without any racial or sexual markers. As the narrator remarks, “[Anna K] kept *it* away from other children” (3, emphasis added). Furthermore, it is also a blankness that relates to a “biological determination,” as Helgesson suggests (190), which would imply a racial blankness as well. It seems that in the beginning of the novel K’s blankness seems more akin to the nothingness we associate with blankness and not with any intensity of being Helgesson associates it with.

I will suggest that it is after K finds the Visagie farm, and while in pursuit of the goats on the farm, that the mode of narration in the novel changes. The voice changes from a standard third person narration to a mode of narration that includes “K himself and an observer, puzzlingly located inside K’s consciousness” (Attwell, *SB* 140). The third person omniscient narrator is often privy to his character’s thoughts, and this is true of the novel thus far. As

Roland Barthes suggests in his three conceptions of “[w]ho is the giver of the narrative?” (261).

The second conception sees the narrator as a sort of omniscient, apparently impersonal, consciousness that tells the story from an all-encompassing point of view, that of God: the narrator stands at the same time inside his characters (since he knows all that happens in them) and outside them (since he never identifies with one more than the other).

(Barthes 261)

What is compelling in this description of the omniscient narrator is the reference to “God” with “an all-encompassing point of view” (261). It speaks of the narrator in a position of absolute power which in turn produces the idea of the author. The idea of the author as Coetzee explains, with reference to Lacan in *Doubling the Point*, is conceived of as the “subject supposed to know” (Clarkson 80). Furthermore, an example from the novel of the point of view from an omniscient narrator would be, “[p]erhaps, he thought, it was better when *one* did not have to rely on other people” (Coetzee 24; emphasis added). From this example, and referring in particular to the phrase “he thought,” we see the narrator standing “inside his characters” (Barthes 261) and revealing their thoughts, or in this case, K’s thoughts. Furthermore, as Clarkson suggests “the relentless use of the impersonal ‘one’ comes across as a near parody of the tendency in academic (rather than fictional) discourse to abdicate the position of ‘I’, in a sidestepping of personal accountability for the views expressed” (85). Here is another example which demonstrates this point as well: “The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenhuis, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (Coetzee 7). Here the narrator’s access to K’s thoughts is demonstrated by the fact that he can name the problem that had exercised him. Here, again his thoughts are reported to the reader through the narrator and again the “position of ‘I’” (Clarkson 85) is abdicated. It is through this abdication that Michael K can be seen not to be responsible for his own story and therefore not have control over his own story.

What changes in the course of the narrative before the extract at the Visagie farm is the way his thoughts begin to be narrated, which seems to give K his own voice, and through it the reader has a more direct connection to K’s mind. From within the text, he begins to say what he is thinking in his own voice and this disrupts his status as the object or topic under the narrator’s control. Consequently, K becomes another voice in the novel and this increases his level of subjectivity. The subtle change in narration that Attwell refers to begins with, and



includes, this thought: “It is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief” (Coetzee 39). Here his thought is given in the first person narrative mode: “I am not a thief” (39), as opposed to K’s previous thoughts: “it was better when *one* did not have to rely on other people” (24, emphasis added), as well as, “he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (7), which like the previous quotation is given in the third person narrative mode as well. It would seem that K’s thought, “I am not a thief” (39), demonstrates his ability to take responsibility for himself and be personally accountable for his actions.

This thought in the first person occurs after K is starving, and stumbles across a field of cauliflower, carrots and potatoes, and he begins to “pull yellow half-grown carrots out of the soft earth” (39). The thought comes in part as a result of the realization that somebody else has planted the carrots that he is picking, and which in turn demonstrates the emergence of a moral or ethical awareness in K. This exercise in moral awareness and personal responsibility is repeated on the Visagie farm where his thoughts become predominantly narrated in the form of a first person. We begin to see the development of K’s voice along with his sense of agency while he attempts to hunt a herd of goats, and failing “he would have to say to himself: They have many thoughts, I have only one thought, my one thought will in the end be stronger than their many” (53). Here, again, we see the personal pronoun “I” and the presence of his subjectivity in the possessive “my” in relation to his need to survive. He becomes responsible for himself after he catches a goat and thinks: “What will I do when the goat is consumed?” (56). Furthermore, his independence is suggested when he reflects, “[h]ere I can make any sound I like” (56). The experience on the farm also signals his coming to an awareness of who and what he is: “It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature” (59). He begins to learn through the choices he makes and his mistakes: “K sat on his heels poking the fire, barely listening, thinking: I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson” (61). His musings on his own experiences also begin to become subjective as they are based on what he feels and thinks:

He thinks I am truly an idiot, thought K. He thinks I am an idiot who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money. He looks at the badge on my beret and asks himself what child gave it to me out of what lucky packet”

(Coetzee 62)

Finally his thoughts become self-reflective and critical: “To himself he thought: A soldier without a gun. A boy on an adventure. To him the farm is just a place of adventure” (63)



What becomes noticeable in these examples is the appearance of personal pronouns when reporting K's thoughts, which only seem to come into effect after the death of K's mother. Indeed, the narrator remarks while K is hiding in the mountains that "there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one" (67). It would appear that with the passing of his mother that his subjectivity begins to develop. In particular, this is evident in the representation of his thoughts and reflected with the deployment of personal pronouns and possessives in the text.

Carrol Clarkson recalls that the "trouble about first-person 'representation,' for Socrates, it seems, is the *affective power* of the first person in relation to the audience" (76), and in our case the reader. The problem for Socrates, as Clarkson suggests, is that the affective power of first person representation can lead the audience to an "identification with characters who are 'disgraceful' or 'madmen' or 'women' or 'slaves,' or those who 'indulge in comic abuse and use foul language, drunk or sober'" (76). For Socrates, the danger to the audience lies in the writer's ability to impersonate these types of characters, through first person representation. As Clarkson observes, "the first person has a morally deficient predilection to deceive" (77). Furthermore, for Socrates

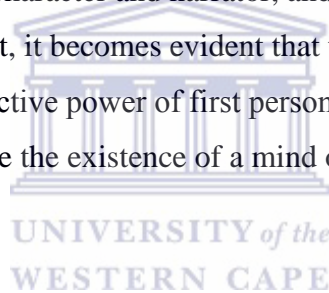
Homer 'does his best to make us think that it is not [himself] but an aged priest who is talking' (§393a), the poet assimilates himself to another person and 'conceal[s] his own personality' (§393c), to the extent that the question arises whether the use of 'representation' in the form of first-person, direct speech, should be entirely forbidden in the literature of the ideal state (§394d).

(qtd. in Clarkson 77)

Clarkson goes on to argue that the "common critical consensus about the use of the third person is that it distances the character from the narrating consciousness, perhaps even from the historical author" (77). Conversely, Clarkson observes that "in Plato the emphasis tips the other way," and that "the use of third person in narrative prose *affirms* the identity of an authorial voice ... as separate from the characters on the page, even though – or perhaps precisely because – the author does not *say* 'I'" (77). It is this "question of voice" that Clarkson explores in her book, *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009). However, although *Life & Times of Michael K* reflects some of these issues, I wish to focus on both the voice of K himself and the observer's narrating voice, even though the author's presence in the story is equivocal: "Coetzee is always present and not present in his own work" (Attwell, *AT* 27). Moreover, as Attwell observes, Coetzee has a "strong desire for self-masking" (*AT* 27).

However, this “self-masking” or Coetzee’s “impersonality is not what it seems. It is not a simple repudiation of self in the name of art; on the contrary, it involves an instantiation of self, followed by an erasure that leaves a trace of the self behind” (AT 27). In the passages set in the mountains there are at least two descriptions of K’s experience in which a trace of the implied author becomes apparent, as I will show later.

What seems significant about the appearance of personal pronouns when K’s thoughts are represented is the “*affective power* of the first person in relation to the audience” (Clarkson 76), and in particular in its relation to K’s thoughts, which till now have been represented in the third person, or not at all. The “*affective power*” of first person representation is what catalyses the readers’ “identification with characters” (76). As Clarkson argues again, “common critical consensus about the use of the third person is that it distances the character from the narrating consciousness, perhaps even from the historical author” (77). The focus is thus on the relationship between character and narrator, and, if the question of the implied author is excluded for the moment, it becomes evident that these two modes of narration invite the reader, through the affective power of first person narration, to identify with K’s thoughts and therefore to associate the existence of a mind or a consciousness to that of the character.



Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the predominantly third person narrative voice and that of the first person, when representing K’s thoughts, allows Coetzee to introduce the presence of consciousness and then disguise it with “the use of the third person” that “distances the character from the narrating consciousness” (77), and as such the reader from the affective power of K’s thoughts. In his notes on the writing of the novel, Coetzee remarks that “the ‘basic problem’ was literary; it was ‘not how to write this story: it writes itself, that is the trouble. The problem is to introduce consciousness into it’” (qtd. in Attwell, SB 138).

Furthermore, Attwell points out that “Coetzee spent a good deal of time and effort developing K’s voice” and that the “problem of accessing K’s consciousness was solved finally by the use of multiple voices and by having different perspectives being played off against one another” (SB 140). It seems that the juxtaposition of these two modes of narration provide Coetzee with the tools for K to be elusive or present but absent at the same time. Indeed, as Attwell suggests, “[t]he reason the multiple voices were felt to be liberating would seem to be that Coetzee could use them to make K a more elusive figure – more liminal, slipping in and out view” (SB 141). The sporadic insertion of K’s thoughts into the narrative gives the reader

a glimpse into K's consciousness which is then subsumed by the predominant third person mode, and later by the voice of the Medical Officer himself.

It would seem then, that the affective power of the first person narrative voice when representing K's thoughts has the effect of interrupting the predominate mode of narration. It stands out and thereby attracts the reader's attention. Another feature of the writing which helps emphasize K's thoughts amidst the narrative is the generous use of the colon when representing K's thoughts in the first person. The effect is that visually, it stands out from the rest of the text, and draws the reader's attention to K's awareness. Attwell observes that Coetzee, in his drafts, experiments with "a mode of narration derived from film, with passages of dialogue and passages of voice-over set alongside one another" (SB 140). The colon as a remnant of these experiments is plausible, as the use of the colon seems to mimic the textual representation of a film script, where the actor's dialogue follows the colon. However, in this case the dialogue is replaced by K's thoughts, while his direct speech is framed within quotation marks. What is more important, perhaps, is the effect of the punctuation. It ruptures the narrating voice of the observer and thereby forces K's consciousness into the narrative for brief moments. Positioned as such it also breaches the authority of the third person omniscient narrator, who "tells the story from an all-encompassing point of view, that of God" (Barthes 261). It is also an authority that stems from "the Socrates of Plato's *Republic*" who "argues that the poet ought to speak 'in his own person' as far as possible" (Clarkson 76), and therefore as "separate from the characters on the page" (77). It appears, then, that when K narrates his own thoughts he assumes the authority from the observer. By narrating his own thoughts he challenges the privilege of the omniscient narrator who assumes to know these thoughts. What these moments present is the shortening of the distance between the narrating voice and the subject of his narration. In these instances it appears that K becomes a subject in his own right. He begins to challenge and "usurp" the voice that speaks for him.

Interestingly, this developing nascent voice of K begins with a moral dilemma. On his way to Prince Albert, he is stopped by a soldier who accuses him of being a thief: "Thief. Watch it. You could be lying in the bushes with flies all over you" (Coetzee 37). And as we noted above, "[d]izzy with hunger," K comes across "a stretch of cleared ground" in which there were "neatly tended patches of vegetables: cauliflower, carrots, potatoes" (39) and begins to pull the vegetables from the ground. The narrator then remarks: "It is God's earth, he thought,

I am not a thief. Nevertheless he imagined a shot cracking out from the back window of the farmhouse, he imagined a huge Alsatian streaking out to attack him” (39). The voice of the first person narrator, “I am not a thief” (39), begins to appear as a moral statement against what one may assume are the actions of a thief. This is repeated after K goes home with the stranger he meets in Laingsburg and tells his family of “his journey. ‘I met a man the other day,’ he said, ‘who told me they shoot people they find on their land’” (47-48). The stranger replies that he has never heard of that but thinks: “People must help each other, that’s what I believe” (48). In the passage that follows, K and the observer have this to say:

K allowed this utterance to sink into his mind. Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought.

(Coetzee 48)

As a whole the passage seems to be ambiguous: K “might” or “might not help” people but what perhaps is more important is the question itself, “[d]o I believe in helping people?” (48). The question is a moral one, but it is the formulation of the question itself that signals the beginning of the formation of a self-awareness, or the emergence of a conscious self-hood for K. This is a prelude to K’s experience in the mountain, and it is these momentary first person insertions that begin to assert K’s authority over the story, and provide his own insights into his thoughts and beliefs.

K thinks, and he speaks his thoughts, in response to the dialogue he had with the stranger in his home. In this regard he becomes what Charles Taylor refers to as an “interlocutor” (440).

Standing to someone as an interlocutor is fundamentally different from standing to him or her as an object of observation, or manipulative interaction. Language marks this most fundamental distinction in the difference of persons. I address someone as ‘you,’ speak of them as ‘him’ or ‘her.’

(Taylor 440)

It is in this moment where K’s thoughts are in the first person that K demonstrates to the reader that he is no longer an object of observation. The distinction and distance in the difference between first and third persons is fused, so much so that the reader has a first-hand experience of K’s subjectivity. By responding to the stranger with his thoughts, K becomes an interlocutor. As Clarkson suggests, citing Lacan, “the function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question” (qtd. in Clarkson 91). Furthermore, Charles Taylor argues in his “Herder-Humboldt understanding of language” (440) that:

A conversation has the status of a common action. When I open up about the weather to you over the back fence, what this does is make the weather an object for *us*. It is no longer just for you, and for me, with perhaps the addition that I know it is for you and you know it is for me. Conversation transposes it into an object which we are considering together. The considering is common, in that the background understanding established is that the agency which is doing the considering is us together,  
(Taylor 440)

What becomes salient in this understanding of language is that the topic of conversation becomes the object for both participants. Here, in the stranger's house K seems to be developing a subjectivity because the topic, whether people should help each other, begins to become an object which K is considering in relation to the stranger's "utterance" that "[p]eople must help each other" (Coetzee 49). A striking feature here is the shared agency and common space that this understanding opens up for the reader. K's thoughts in the first person (thus excluding the observer) are in conversation with the stranger's words; they share a common object and a mutual agency. Indeed, Coetzee's literary technique seems to mirror the progression of the narrative with the unfolding of K's growth of consciousness and subjectivity. Not long after leaving the stranger's home and finding the Visagie farm, K is disturbed by the runaway Visagie grandson, who becomes the catalyst for K's escape to the mountains. As the narrator observes: "Already it was hard to believe that he had known someone called the Visagie grandson who had tried to turn him into a body-servant" (65). What is telling here is the strange term at the end of the sentence, "body-servant" (65). The term seems to reflect the issue at the centre of the struggle for authority between the voice of the observer and the voice of K himself within the narrative. K does not want to be a body-servant, or object under the control of the Visagie grandson. Like earlier on in the novel, K "felt stupidity creep over him like a fog again" (64) when the grandson pointedly threatens him with, "I'm not the one who pays you, I can't put you off the farm just like that. But we have to work together, otherwise—" (64). Just like the voice of the novel K, at this stage, seems to be struggling for a shared agency, for a level of equality in which he and the Visagie grandson are in conversation.

The Visagie grandson's view of Michael K as an object standing in reserve for his needs and uses, comes into conflict with K's growing subjectivity, and his developing view of the world. In a sense the Visagie boy's way of behaving buttressed by his sense of entitlement, can be seen as producing a distorted view of Heidegger's notion of the clearing. Wrathall suggests that "the clearing should be understood as something like a space of possibilities – it 'grants first of all the possibility of the path to presence, and grants the possible presencing of



that presence itself” (356).<sup>23</sup> In other words just like the metaphorical clearing in a glade or forest the clearing does not work by keeping “different determinate ways of being in the world locked in the back room, while exhibiting one at a time” (356). Instead, it is a space of possibilities where “a certain understanding of being – a particular mode of presence” (356) comes to be salient among entities because “the forest clearing is nothing but the condition that there are no trees or shrubs growing” (356). In short, the potential of possibilities becomes prominent because there are no other determinate possibilities available (356). In this sense the clearing offers up possibilities because of a particular mode of being in the world. However, the Visagie grandson’s way of being in the world is distorted in the sense that it denies the potential opening and possibility that K may be a subject in his own right, and this only allows him to both see and approach K in terms of his needs and uses. Taylor suggests that in Heidegger’s conception of the clearing:

Heidegger has argued that there is a tendency precisely to distort our understanding of the clearing. At least in the tradition determined by our Western ‘destining,’ we come to see language as our instrument, and the clearing as something which happens in us, and reflects our goals and purposes. At the end of this road is the reduction of everything to standing reserve in the service of a triumphant will to will.

(Taylor 448)

In this sense the Visagie grandson’s conception of existence or being stems from understanding objects including people, and their essence or their meanings, as “standing in reserve” in the service of his “triumphant will to will” (448). This includes the way he understands K’s selfhood. From this point of view K’s reflection on the Visagie boy as trying “to turn him into a body-servant” (Coetzee 65) seems to fit the view of the distorted clearing. Wrathall observes,

the clearing makes it possible for a certain understanding of being – a particular mode of presence – to come to prevail among entities. For possibilities to be live possibilities, however, it requires a space from which other incompatible possibilities are excluded.

(Wrathall 356)

It seems that Michael K’s escape from the Visagie grandson is not only an escape from the boy, but from the “live possibilities” of the space he inhabited with him. It is an escape to another space where these possibilities of understanding and being towards objects, people, and things, can be excluded. In other words, it is a space or a clearing where another “mode of presence” may “come to prevail among entities” (356). By running away K seeks the freedom to live on his own terms away from the Visagie’s understanding of being and his

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<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, M. *Basic Writings*, rev. and expanded ed, translated by D. F. Krell, HarperCollins, 1993.



mode of presence towards people, objects and things. He runs away because he seems to despise the Visagie's style of being and by living on his own terms he can exclude the possibilities open to him through the Visagie's understanding of being and discover other potential possibilities of presence in the world

In many ways the Swartberg Mountains stand as metaphor for Heidegger's clearing. It is a space cleared from all human subjects and social formations, and it is this which allows other ways of living to become possible. K's escape into the Swartberg Mountains is an escape into just such a cleared space, in which other active ways of living are excluded. In the passage below we have a description of K's journey into the mountains.

He was cold all the time. So he climbed higher, zigzagging up the slope till the road through the pass disappeared from sight and he was looking over the vast plain of the Karoo, with Prince Albert itself miles below. He found a new cave and cut bushes for the floor. He thought: Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to find me; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost.

(Coetzee 66)

The passage evokes a desire to let go of a world centred on the subjective power of the human (the will to know and the will to power). K "zigzagging up the slope" till "the pass disappeared from sight" and "Prince Albert itself" "... miles below" (66), suggests a geographical distance from the inhabited world in the distance. More importantly, he thinks: "surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to find me; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost" (66). This distance is emphasised by his thoughts and the repetition of the adverb "surely" (66) that occurs three times in the same sentence and denotes his confidence in this belief. The logical progression of his thought is that he can think of himself as lost. This I think is what allows K to come to a new understanding of being and beings. As Wrathall argues "the ready availability of beings to us depends on our losing sight of the fact that their availability is grounded in a particular understanding of the essence of beings as a whole" (355). Furthermore, he observes that "a new understanding of being can establish itself, and a new ordering of beings can become operative only if there is something like a clearing which conceals any other way of experiencing the world in order to allow this particular way to come to the forefront" (355). In this respect the narrative of K's experience in the mountain is predicated on his need not to be found by other people. Now he can think of himself as lost because no one "will be mad enough" to "search these rocks to find"

(Coetzee 66) him, and therefore there is no one to tell him what to do or what he is. As K suggests, “[t]here seemed nothing to do but live” (66). Here, being is not presupposed on what you do or should be doing, but just on living, and this allows K to find a new mode of being based on nothing but living itself. This new mode of being allows K to think that he is “becoming a different kind of man” that he is “becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67). He thinks that there is “a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam,” and of himself “as a termite boring its way through a rock” (66). K begins to become part of the natural world connected by a “cord of tenderness” or by being like “a termite,” he is no longer the human subject around which the world is centred, and which perceives itself as separate from the natural world, but rather, he becomes part of the world, like the world. This mode of being like the natural world can come into being because he is lost to the world of people that ground our understanding of the essences of things through the activities we engage in with those people and with the objects, and things of the world. The narrative itself mirrors what his consciousness requires in order to establish “a new understanding of being” and “a new ordering of beings” (355). K has to lose all contact with people, like the Visagie grandson, who have defined the essence of things for him to date, in order for him to come to his independent understanding of being and beings. In a way the Swartberg Mountains provides the clearing for him to establish these possible understandings. As the narrator observes “[h]e did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait” (Coetzee 67). K’s life up till now has been defined by other people, his meaning has been imposed upon him. Here in the mountain for the first time away from everyone he is truly lost.

However, it is perhaps in Michael K’s second escape from the world that we begin to garner an insight into his changing experience of being in the world. In his first escape into the Swartberg Mountains he establishes a clearing away from the world he has experienced so far. However, even though he feels he is “becoming a different kind of man” (67), his lack of a formulation of “what to do next” leads him to wait and eventually succumb to starvation. The clearing as Heidegger conceives it, “is Dasein-related yet not Dasein-controlled. It is not Dasein’s doing” (Taylor 444). In other words the clearing is related to being but it is not controlled by our being. It is how you comport yourself to other things or beings in the world that allows their essence to be revealed. Even though Taylor suggests that “[i]t is our being there which allows it to happen” (444), he also says that:

We can't see this as something that we control, or that simply happens within our ambit. The notion that it is simply in our heads already supposes in order to make sense that we understand our heads and ourselves as placed in a world, and this understanding doesn't happen just in our heads.

(Wrathall 444)

The clearing, then, is not simply in our "heads" (444). It is related to the world because in order to make sense of our minds we need to see our "heads and ourselves" in relation to the world we inhabit. Wrathall suggests that

before anything can show up *as* anything, we must have some particular, pre-linguistic disposition or readiness for the world that leads us to see certain features as more important than others. All understandings of what things are thus arise on the basis of a background disposition to the world. We disclose the essences that we do, according to Heidegger, because the way we are moved by or disposed to things allows a particular style of being "to be ascendant."

(Wrathall 354)

In K's first experience in the Swartberg Mountains he is unable to establish a new understanding of being and beings, because although the context seems to facilitate it he succumbs to starvation. He does not attempt to grow anything, and perhaps it is not just the food that would prolong his stay and help him to come to a new understanding of beings and being, but also the act of gardening itself. Engaging with the things of the earth, soil, seeds and water and then nurturing things to grow would also give K a "pre-linguistic disposition" to the world "because the way we are moved by or disposed to things allows a particular style of being 'to be ascendant'" (354). This is what he gains in his second experience when he returns to the dam. Instead, without food K is forced to leave the mountains, and the narrator witnesses his descent: "He ate handfuls of flowers and his stomach hurt. As the days became hotter the streams ran faster, he could not see why. In this crisp mountain water he missed the bitter savour of water from under the earth. His gums bled; he drank the blood" (Coetzee 68). Furthermore, his last days are such that:

It became an effort not to shut his eyes against the glare of the sun. There was a throbbing that would not leave him; lances of light pierced his head. Then he could keep nothing down; even water made him retch. There was a day when he was too tired to get up from his bed in the cave; the black coat lost its warmth and he shivered continually. It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing, that he might lie here till the moss on the roof grew dark before his eyes, that his story might end with his bones growing white in this faroff place.

(Coetzee 69)

Whatever inkling he had of "becoming a different kind of man" and "becoming smaller and harder and drier every day" (67), Michael K learns that hunger and the possibility of starvation and his eventual death requires some sort of saving agency on his part. Just as the

clearing in Heidegger's understanding requires human agency K also requires himself to act. The clearing requires humans to be present there and to become disposed to things in a certain way, which is what Heidegger defines as a "pre-linguistic disposition," and which occurs through one's active engagement or interaction with the objects and things of the world. This is not to say that K has not had a "pre-linguistic disposition" before, but rather that here away from the Visagie grandson he has the opportunity to discover a new one, or one which he can call his own. It requires an interaction with both the world and the things in it, and is not simply based in the mind. Again, it is perhaps through K's experience as a gardener that this disposition can be achieved. However, he does not attempt to garden in the mountains but instead he just waits. The represented clearing in K's mountain experience seems in many ways to stand as a metaphor for Heidegger's vision of the clearing, because Heidegger's clearing "can't be reduced to either ordinary physical space or inner 'psychic' space, the domain of the 'mind'" (Taylor 445). In this sense the Swartberg Mountains approximate Heidegger's clearing as it is here that the qualities of the clearing become evident, apart from having an active human participant. And it is perhaps for this reason that K's escape from society cannot last. Ultimately, the mountains provides a space where all other understanding of beings and things are cleared from his mind and his activity in the world, and where the use of language itself in the service of human subjectivity, through which his role and meaning in society is defined, is also not made available.

However, with the onset of starvation K creeps down the mountain and is arrested by police sleeping "in the doorway of the Volkskas office" (Coetzee 69-70). After a night in police cells he is admitted to a hospital and put on a drip because he is malnourished. While lying in a hospital bed an orderly comes around with a trolley carrying trays of food. The narrator relates:

Smelling the food, he felt the saliva seep in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again; but a hospital, it seemed, was a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their rights.

(Coetzee 71)

The passage gives us an insight into the type of sustenance, knowledge or meaning K was looking for in the mountains. A lack of food is the reason K is in the hospital. Indeed the mere smell of the food makes "the saliva seep in his mouth" (71). Furthermore, the passage goes on to say that "[i]t was the *first* hunger he had known for a long time" (71, emphasis added). It follows that while starving in the mountain his experience was clearly focused on

something, other than his physical needs. Earlier, outside his cave in the mountains the narrator observes that “[a]s a child K had been hungry, like all the children of Huis Norenus,” and “[t]hen he had grown older and stopped wanting” (68). Furthermore, “[n]ow, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (69). Hunger it seems is something K has learned to live with, if not control. It is only the smell of food in the hospital that triggers K’s response to the “first hunger he had known for a long time” (71). His first worry when hunger calls is that he is not sure if he wants to “become a servant to hunger again” (71). K associates his hunger with the demands of the body and his initial experiences of Huis Norenhuis.

Indeed, after he is forced to creep down the mountain because he might die, the realization that he may be hungry is still not triggered until he smells the hospital food. Hunger, although it is certainly the cause of his mountain exit, it is not food that K is waiting for when the narrator observes, earlier that, “the best thing seemed to be to wait” (67). It is not that K is oblivious or insensitive to the pangs of hunger, he has just learnt to ignore them. In fact K, as I have just said above, has become accustomed to hunger at Huis Norenus: “Whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness” (68). These memories of hunger and its subsequent silencing follow the paragraph where the pangs of hunger are described as, “[h]e would sit or lie in a stupor at the mouth of the cave,” where “[h]e ate handfuls of flowers and his stomach hurt,” and where “[h]is gums bled; he drank the blood” (68). The juxtaposition of these pangs of hunger with K’s childhood memories of hunger implies that K is aware of what he is going through. However, it is of no concern to him as he believes he can live past hunger. He is confident that he has an ability to endure and survive. Two qualities which Attwell suggests are best viewed in the final image of the novel where K uses a teaspoon to draw water out of a well, as we discussed above. By discounting K’s concern for food and therefore the body we gain an insight into the nature of being that Heidegger predisposes for the disclosure of the clearing.

While waiting, K waiting is not focused on his thoughts, as the last part of the paragraph reads that he “closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (69). K’s ability to transcend both mind and body seems to resemble Heidegger’s conception of the clearing that “can’t be reduced to either ordinary physical space or inner ‘psychic’ space, the domain of the ‘mind’” (Taylor 445). The clearing is manifest in a space



such as this. Indeed, if we see the manifestation of the clearing in a space such as this, then as Taylor claims, “the basis is there for a de-onticizing move, relative to the categories of our modern ontology, matter and mind” (Taylor 445). In this way K’s meditative process at the end of the paragraph seems to acknowledge the way of being in the clearing that allows an undistorted view of it. K’s overcoming of both mind and body in his meditative state marginalizes the very qualities that form the basis for any form of human subjectivity. Through his process, K has removed himself from the position of knowing subject. We witness this because he empties “his mind” and wants nothing, and looks “forward to nothing” (Coetzee 69). Interestingly, as a gardener K can harvest, tend, but also clear gardens. Yet, he has no desire to become a “clearer” in his Karoo mountain experience. He seems to want to live past the conventional humanistic notion of making clearings in order to become actualised as a being. However, he realises as he begins to starve and hallucinate that he is part of the clearing operation whether he likes it or not. It would seem then that while in the mountains K allows the world and the things within it to “show itself in its own essence” (Wrathall 347), unencumbered by his understanding of things or his wishes, desires, intentions, and purposes for them. In this state his ideas or beliefs about things are not subjected or formed from the demands of his thoughts or the needs of his body. Instead, his ideas or beliefs about things are formed from him being part of the world and allowing first-order entities to show up in, and of, themselves.

Charles Taylor gives us a demonstration of how “first-order entities show up” using Heidegger’s example of a peasant wine jug (449). Firstly, for first-order entities to show up “they, or an important subset of them, have to show up as ‘things,’<sup>24</sup> and not simply as objects, or even worse, as standing reserve” (449). Furthermore, “[t]he thing about a ‘thing’ is that in being disclosed it co-discloses its place in the clearing” (449). For example, the jug as an entity shows up in the world of a peasant. It can be considered to be “as yet unmobilized by modern technology” (449). In this state the jug is in its material or physical form, and in this form it is also suggestive of the “human activities in which it plays a part” (449) and can therefore be mentally associated with them. For Heidegger, it is the shape and handle of the jug that becomes suggestive of the act of pouring wine at the table. The jug marks a point where a rich web of practices intersect, they can be sensed, and they are made visible in the

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger’s use of the term “things” in his work “include more than made objects. They include living things. And they go beyond that ... tree and pond, brook and hill, are also things, each in its own way” (qtd. in Taylor 450).



shape of the jug and the handle which allows wine to be poured from it, as well as “the human life which co-shows up in this thing” (449). Furthermore, peasant life is organized, founded on, and intimately entwined with “strong goods” and “matters of intrinsic worth” (449). Accordingly, these “goods” and “matters of intrinsic worth” “make a claim on us,” and can therefore “be called divine,” as well as being “co-disclosed in the thing.” Here, Heidegger formulates this connection through human activities such as the “ritual of pouring a libation from the jug” (450). Through this ritual pouring “human modes of conviviality” are disclosed and these are “shot through with religious and moral meaning,” because “this life together has central meaning in the participants’ lives” (450). Heidegger suggests that the jug is an object already formed and made for human use, which is why it can be “clearly identified” with a “locus of features” (450). From this perspective, the jug “stands on and emerges out of a vast domain of as yet unformed and unidentified reality,” and which is a “limitless” and “inexhaustible” “field of potential future forming” (450). Consequently, “[a]ll forming” surrounds and draws on this “unformed and unidentified reality” (450). Ultimately, if we are open to the jugs disclosure it “will speak of its history as a formed entity” and “of its emergence from unformed matter,” as well as the jugs continued “dependency on the unformed,” because “it can only exist as an entity as long as it is supported by the whole surrounding reality” (450). This way of perceiving the jug and being open to first-order entities allows one to move away from viewing things as “standing in reserve in the service of a triumphant will to will” (448). It seems that what Heidegger is saying is that when the human positions himself as the knowing subject that uses things in the service of his will he or she separates themselves from the world and conceals other possibilities of being in the world. Furthermore, it seems that by letting go of his subjectivity, K is able to become part of the world and move towards embodying another mode of presence in it.

Ultimately, the jug rests “on the earth, and that is the word Heidegger uses for this dimension of co-disclosure” (450). In closing, “the jug and the whole round of activities it speaks of, and the earth” are susceptible “to greater cosmic forces which are beyond the domain of the formable, and which can either permit them to flourish or sweep them away” (450). Some of the cosmic forces Heidegger refers to are “storms, floods, earthquakes” and the “alternation of night and day” (450). These forces may be benign which results in the whole round of activities surrounding the jug flourishing. Furthermore, as Taylor observes, Heidegger assembles these things “under the title ‘sky’” (450), and hence the “notion of the ‘fourfold’ to explain this” (449). As Taylor observes, “[a]ll these are co-disclosed in the thing” that

“Heidegger says ... ‘assembles’ (*versammelt*) them and they ‘sojourn’ (*verweilen*)<sup>25</sup> in it” (450). When this occurs, as Heidegger conceives it, the clearing can then be said to be “undistortively disclosed” (450). Furthermore, “through this manner of first-order showing up” the “undistorted meta-disclosure occurs” (450). As Taylor explains, “[b]eing among things in such a way that they show up thus is what Heidegger calls ‘dwelling’” and “[i]t involves our ‘taking care’ of them” (450). Heidegger says that:

Staying with things is the only way in which the fourfold stay within the fourfold is accomplished at any time in simple unity. Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the essence of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the fourfold only when they themselves as things are let be in their essence. How does this happen? In this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow.

(Heidegger, qtd. in Taylor 450)

It is this manner of first-order showing up that Michael K seems to be adopting in his Karoo mountain experience, which means he is dwelling with beings so that they “themselves as things are let be in their essence” (450). However, this only happens when “mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow” (450), and it is this that comes to fruition in K’s second experience with his life at the dam. As the narrator observes:

Among the seeds he had sown had been a melon seed. Now two pale green melons were growing on the far side of the field. It seemed to him that he loved these two, which he thought of as his two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers. Under the melons he placed pads of grass so that their skins should not bruise.

(Coetzee 113)

The care, if not the love, that K takes in nurturing these “things” begins to become evident in this second experience of his life by the dam. His bond with the things that grow are so intimate that he refers to them as “sisters” and “brothers” (113). Furthermore, his nature or need to nurture is so intense that he places “pads of grass” under the melons “so that their skins should not bruise” (113). It is this mode of “taking care,” of things by nursing and nurturing “the things that grow” (450), that allows him to actualise being through an undistorted disclosure of the clearing.

Before I consider K’s final experience at the dam, in which he actualizes his mode of being in the world, I think it would be worth looking at his stay in Jakkalsdrif which may be the catalyst for K’s emerging mode of being. After K is found starving at the entrance of

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<sup>25</sup> Heidegger’s collection of essays, page 175 *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000.

Volkscas bank, he is taken to a resettlement camp called Jakkalsdrif. Life in the resettlement camp consists in the exchange of food, lodging and “one rand a day” for work the interned provide to “The Railways Administration,” the “Prince Albert Divisional Council” and “the local farmers” (81). This method of indenture is explained to him, by a policeman, when K asks: “Where do I get something to eat?” (Coetzee 77). The policeman’s response is that, “[t]his isn’t a jail,” and that “this is a camp, you work for your food like everyone else in the camp” (77). K at first tries to assimilate into the camp by joining the labour team. He, however, has no appreciation for the money he earns and gives half of his wages away to a man named Robert, who has a wife and four children to support. K is forced into a being who encamps and waits, the clearing is in someone else’s hands, except when hired out as a labourer to clear the lines. On one particular day, K pretends to be sick and stays at the camp instead of going to work. K asks the guard:

‘Can I go out?’

‘I thought you were sick. This morning you told me you were sick.’

‘I don’t want to work. Why do I have to work? This isn’t a jail.’

‘You don’t want to work but you want other people to feed you.’

‘I don’t need to eat all the time. When I need to eat, I’ll work.’

The guard sat in his deckchair on the porch of the tiny guardhouse with his rifle leaning at his side against the wall. He smiled into the distance.

‘So can you open the gate?’ said K.

‘The only way to leave is with the work party,’ said the guard.

‘And if I climb the fence? What will you do if I climb the fence?’

‘You climb the fence and I’ll shoot you, I swear to God I won’t think twice, so don’t try.’

(Coetzee 85)

The guard, like Robert, tries to point out the pointlessness of escaping the camp. The following day K walks over to the gate, the same guard is on duty, and K does not seem to be affected by his threat. Instead they end up having a conversation about “football” (86), while the guard also shares the reason he is on guard duty and not fighting up North, diabetes he says. He also discloses the fact that the day he gets orders to go north is the day he walks out, expressing the view: “It’s not my war. Let them fight it, it’s their war” (86). In many ways the guard’s sentiments are similar to those of K: “It’s not my war,” he says, which is similar to K’s argument later in the novel where he says, while under interrogation, “I am not in the war” (138). However, the guard in his role as sentry still trots out the party line and will not let K go. He is even willing to shoot K: “I’ll shoot you, I swear to God I won’t think twice” (85). Furthermore, he asks K about his mouth and K tells him the truth, and the guard shares his refrigerated “chicken and bread ... passing the food through the mesh” (86). It seems that both men get along and have similar interests and sentiments. Yet, he will not let K escape,

and not because he is vindictive or dislikes him, but because of his role in society; his position in the system as a guard defines what he needs to be even if this goes against his nature and sentiments. He is interpolated into the system, conditioned and socialised, unlike K.

In general, K has pretty much led a solitary life, “[h]e was easiest by himself” and “his jobs had given him a measure of solitariness” (4). Furthermore, as noted above, because of his harelip he “did not have women friends” (4). Moreover, “there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next” (67). After his mother’s death and his journey to bury her ashes in Prince Albert he has had the opportunity to discover his nature. This realization dawns on him at the Visagie farm when his deepest pleasure arises from watering his garden, and he concludes: “It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature” (59). His burgeoning self-awareness, after his mother’s death, begins to usurp the narrator’s voice, momentarily, perhaps as the result of the situation and the people he encounters. One such encounter, as noted earlier, is with the man who believed that “[p]eople must help each other” (48). In this encounter, “K allowed this utterance to sink into his mind” (48), and it seems to provoke the thought as he wonders, as we saw above, whether he believes in helping people. This question may perhaps be central in his encounter with the Visagie grandson. The grandson expects help, he feels entitled to it; and expects to be served and obeyed as if it is his right because he is a Visagie, and thinks that this privilege extends to him as he assumes that K having worked for his grandfather, therefore works for him. He understands everything in relation to the service of his will and so is incapable of seeing K or even the goats on the farm as anything more than what they can provide him with, namely service and food. Even the language he uses to converse with K is rhetorical in nature, at once flattering, then commanding, then appealing, and finally threatening. All this is in the service of bending K to his will. He does not give K the opportunity to question whether he should or could help him. Instead, all he can do is command: “I need your co-operation, Michael. You must help me. Otherwise there is no future for either of us. Do you see?” (63). K never really answers the question of whether he believes people should help each other, not literally, but instead, what becomes operative is his tendency to nurture and protect the things that grow. Furthermore, it is possible that there are two different notions of “help” at work between these two scenes. Here, Michael K is being literally asked to help, become the body-servant. The other notion, though, is perhaps a more humanist and communal one, which we would expect to find in communities where life is hard, as in marginalised rural areas, for example,

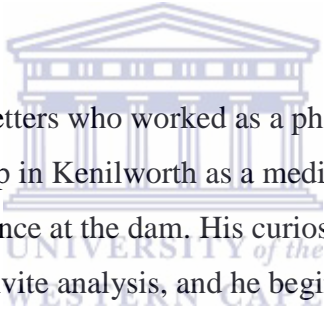
and whose very reason for being and survival rests on collective effort. However, even if the Visagie grandson mobilises this second notion so as to attain K's "co-operation," he nevertheless distorts its meaning in the sense that he expects K to provide his food and run his errands, and which ultimately leads to K's need to escape. There is no "co" in the grandsons "co-operation" (63), as the social or collective are not part of his world view.

Michael K's interaction with both the guard and the Visagie grandson allows him an experience of their different styles of being, thinking and behaving in the world. Furthermore, it allows K to view and contemplate other styles of being in the world by drawing on their lives as examples. Similarly, the relocation camp acts as a crucible of intersecting lives and meanings for the human in a country ravaged by civil war, and where the very structures that have defined these different lifestyles are falling apart. Meaning as Hall suggests "depends on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects, and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual system, which can operate as *mental representations* of them" (18). The camp therefore acts as a fulcrum of different "conceptual systems" vying for power. Moreover, the townsfolk and the camp dwellers operate in very different conceptual systems, and as we can expect their "*mental representations*" are out of sync with each other because they relate to the "things in the world – people, objects and events" these conceptual systems operate in the townsfolk and the camp dwellers are contradictory and out of sync with each other because they (the townsfolk and the camp dwellers) relate to the "things in the world – people, objects, and events" (18) differently. These different meanings are a source of conflict, and we see this represented in a country at war with itself.

The lives of the interned families' are in limbo, as they have once more been relocated and marginalised, and will remain so until a new system which defines and structures human meaning can be re-installed. One option, of course, is that the rebel faction may usher in a new social formation and with it a new way of being in the world. These families in the camp, many of whom were let go from the farms where they were housed and employed, are now unemployed and considered "vagrants" (Coetzee 88) and with "[n]o fixed abode" (80). Jakkalsdrif is advertised by the local authorities, namely the army's Free Corps and the town's police, as a place of safety or a home where food, shelter and work will be provided. Furthermore, the Free Corps provided "a man at the gate with a gun to stop the thieves from coming in the night to steal [their] money" (78). However, Robert points out the emptiness of this rhetoric when he suggests that the guard is only there because the farmers "want to stop



people from disappearing into the mountains and then coming back one night to cut their fences and drive their stock away” (80). Furthermore, he informs K that Jakkalsdrif is now considered his place of abode. If he is found to have left his place of abode and is now without a place of abode for a second time, he will “go to Brandvlei, penal servitude, hard labour, brickfields, guards with whips” (78). The state, unable to provide “Welfare” (79) for its citizens, has to rely on the goodwill of the town’s people and the surrounding farms, to provide food, wood, and shelter for those from the camp in exchange for their labour. For these families with “[t]oo many mouths to feed” (80), there is nowhere to run away to, and regardless of whether they sympathize with the rebel cause or not, they are to all intents and purposes stuck in the country of their birth. Moreover, it is only the younger men that have disappeared into the mountains, the women the children and the old people seem to have no choice but to remain in the camp (80). In view of this I think the Medical Officer’s first impressions of Michael K, could be associated with the inhabitants of Jakkalsdrif, and not with K himself.



The Medical Officer is a man of letters who worked as a pharmacist before the war and now stationed at the rehabilitation camp in Kenilworth as a medical officer. He is charged with healing K after his second experience at the dam. His curiosity is triggered by K’s unmistakable differences which invite analysis, and he begins to question what the military has accused K of doing. In the beginning he suggests that K is like a person “who has no sense of who you are” (Coetzee 143), “a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations” (151), and “another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history” (159). Indeed, many of these qualities may just as easily apply to the members of the community at Jakkalsdrif. Relocated to a makeshift camp in the middle of nowhere and living in tents, they cannot define themselves as citizens of the country who share the same rights as the farmers and the town’s people. Their lack of self-determination and their reliance on the people of Prince Albert means that their very survival is dependent on a community which is at odds with them from the start. Furthermore, the money that they earn from the town is worthless as the only place to spend it is in Prince Albert on a Sunday, and, as Robert observes, “when you go into a shop in Prince Albert, all of a sudden prices go up” (81). The camp dwellers have been defined, by the labour that they do for the railways and farms. Their future is controlled by the broader community of Prince Albert and as such their meaning is framed by the same antagonistic community too. In this way they are in all senses of the word invisible.



Furthermore, the assumed rights that come from being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* and that governs “the laws of nations” (159), are out of their reach, but not out of the reach of the town’s people, ironically. Indeed, Emer Vattel in *The Law Of Nations* (1758) suggests that a nation that governs itself without dependence on a foreign power is a sovereign state. In many ways, in a defunct state, the town has assumed the role of a state. They look after their own needs with no reference to, or help from, the actual state. The camp dwellers are at the mercy of the town’s people even though they have committed no crime or transgression, save losing their employment and their place of abode through no fault of their own. Ironically, if they are caught escaping the camp they will be incarcerated. Certainly, they are at times busy working for the town, farms and railways, but they are not “too stupid ... to listen to the wheels of history,” and only because they are just “too absorbed” (159) in the day to day survival of their families than in events shaping the country, and which through a loss of agency they do not have the power to affect.

Indeed, as Robert observes that the camp is there “to stop people from disappearing into the mountains” (80) because of the small proportion of young men living in the camp in relation to the number of families interned. To emphasize his point he asks K rhetorically: “So I ask you, where are the men who aren’t here with their families?” (80). His astute understanding of the primary purpose of the camp is revealed when he turns down K’s invitation to go with the others to Prince Albert. He suggests K should, “[g]o with them if you want to. Buy yourself a cool drink and sit outside the café and scratch your fleabites. There is nothing else to do. I say, if we are going to be in jail, let’s be in jail, let’s not pretend” (83). Robert is intelligent enough to know what is going on around him. However, his priorities, and his responsibilities lie with providing for his family. Whatever his sentiments towards the state may be, he is excluded from participating in “the wheels of history” (159), and not through a choice of his own, but because his situation will not allow his participation without placing his family’s welfare in jeopardy.

The relocation camp provides the stage where the forces at play in the novel’s social fabric may be viewed in miniature. A salient feature in this section is how a representational model of language, “where words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the ‘ideas’ which represent them” (Taylor 434), is inadequate when it comes to defining the meaning associated with being human. The privileging of reasonable “ideas,” and the

valorisation of the rational mind, in this “modern representational epistemology” of the Enlightenment, is based on the notion that ideas are exclusively the property of the intellect (434). Moreover, these ideas are generally considered to be “representations of reality, [and] much of it ‘external’” (434). In terms of this framework “[k]nowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality. This we can only hope to achieve if we put together our ideas according to a responsible procedure. Our beliefs about things are constructed, they result from a synthesis” (434). Furthermore, as we noted in the introduction, Taylor names the “mainline, instrumental view” of language that develops from “the philosophy articulated in different ways by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac,” as “an ‘enframing’ theory” (434). He uses

this term to describe attempts to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behaviour, purposes, or mental functioning, which is itself described and defined without reference to language. Language can be seen as arising within this framework, and fulfilling some function within it, but the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of language.

(Taylor 433)

What this theory promotes is not only an instrumental view of language, but the assumption that “the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of language” (435). In this sense, then, “[l]anguage is understood in terms of certain elements: ideas, signs, and their association, which precede its arising” (434). Condillac explains this through his exploration “of how language might have arisen between two children in a desert” (434). In his explanation, children pass “from a condition in which” they “emit just animal cries to the stage where they use words with meaning” (434-435). He argues, then, that the “association between sign and some mental content is already there with the animal cry” (435), which he describes as the “natural sign” (435). With the development of the “instituted sign” the children are now able “to focus and manipulate the associated idea, and thereby direct the whole play of their imagination” (435). It would seem, then, that “the imagination is at work and association takes place” before and after the development of the “instituted sign” (435). What is introduced in this development “is that now the mind is in control ... something that didn’t exist before” (435). Furthermore, as Taylor observes, the theory “establishes the maximal possible continuity between before and after. The elements are the same, combination continues, only the direction changes” (435). However, as Taylor also argues it is “this continuity which gives the theory its seeming clarity and explanatory power: language is robbed of its mysterious character, is related to elements that seems unproblematic” (435).

Besides the enframing theory's privileging of the mind, another issue is in relation to its construction of our beliefs. The "ideas" in our heads are "bits of putative representation of reality, much of it external" (434), according to Taylor. Furthermore, "words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the 'ideas' which represent them" (434). In other words, the "ideas" which we get from "the bits of putative representation of reality" are used to attach words to the things we want to represent. It follows, that knowledge according to Taylor consists in having the representation actually square with reality. This means that all the bits of putative representation need to be put together "according to a responsible procedure" (434). In this way our "beliefs about things are constructed, they result from a synthesis" of "bits of putative representation of reality," put together "according to a responsible procedure" (434). The problem arises when the construction of these "bits of putative representation" are not put together according to a responsible procedure and are rather put together slapdash or indulgently, which means that our beliefs about things are untrue and they do not square with reality. This is perhaps the reason for Captain Oosthuizen's slippage from signifier to signifier in reference to the camp dwellers, because he has not put his "ideas" together according to a responsible procedure and therefore his "ideas" do not square with reality, and as such they have no foundation, or origin in the world. In many ways this is similar to Derrida's conception of language as movement because of an absent transcendental signified or foundational term. This deconstruction is played out in the camp at Jakkalsdrif when Captain Oosthuizen leads a police squad to search for three supposed saboteurs. His view of the community seems to be based on defining them as strangers and therefore marginal. However, the terms he uses to label them exposes the slippage from signifier to signifier in the language that he uses to represent them.

Captain Oosthuizen, in many ways, projects a similar worldview and its concomitant understanding as the Medical Officer in the beginning of part two of the novel. However, the Medical Officer is more sceptical and his view changes with time. He places the human, or man at the centre of his system and it is this that structures his understanding. He defines K as being "another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history" (Coetzee 159). Furthermore, his rhetorical question to K makes the same claim for the human as the dominant power of a structured system. Here he reflects:

Did you think you were a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the laws of nations? Well, the laws of nations have you in their grip now: they have pinned you down in a bed beneath the grandstand of the old Kenilworth racecourse, they will grind you in dirt if necessary.

(Coetzee 151)

Here his opinions give us an insight into his perception of the human, and which leads to his conception of our normative subjectivity. Furthermore, his understanding seems to follow in the tracks of the Cartesian dualism which began as we have seen to dominate humanism in the Enlightenment.<sup>26</sup> This understanding, as I have suggested, has also been associated with a fairly one sided view of the Enlightenment<sup>27</sup> that shares with humanism an emphasis on the importance of the individual, as a stable knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous and universal. In the Medical Officer's centring of man, history is significant and every human life is in some way affected by the historical moment. Indeed, he defines it as,

currents of time swirling and eddying all about us, on the battlefields and in the military headquarters, in the factories and on the streets, in boardrooms and cabinet chambers, murkily at first, yet tending ever towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning.

(Coetzee 158)

The effect here is of history's all intrusive entanglement in our lives, as it structures the chaos we are embedded in, and gives meaning to our lives. The Medical Officer's view is very much one of seeing one's life in terms of the grand narrative of history as a notch in the chronology of recordable time. To have meaning is to be seen in terms of this narrative. For this reason he is unable to understand Michael K at the beginning of his stay in the hospital at Kenilworth for K exists outside this framework. Furthermore, while interrogating K on his association with the insurgents in the mountains he gets frustrated at K's silence, and reacts:

'Come on, Michaels,' I said, 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!'

At last he spoke: 'I am not in the war.'

Irritation overflowed in me. 'You are not in the war? Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not! This is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home: it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work! You are going to learn to fill sandbags and dig holes, my friend till your back breaks! And if you don't co-operate you will go to a place that is a lot worse than this!

(Coetzee 138)

For the Medical Officer living in times of such historical import, in the midst of a civil war, there can be only two ways of being, for or against the state, either as patriot or insurgent. It is because of this narrow oppositional if not programmatic understanding that he cannot

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<sup>26</sup> See "Introduction: Theoretical Paradigms"

<sup>27</sup> For an alternative view of the Enlightenment see "Introduction: Theoretical Paradigms"

imagine that K is not involved with the insurgents. Anyone not involved in either side of the conflict is either “too busy,” “too stupid” or “too absorbed” to be aware of the “wheels of history” turning (159). It is only after spending some time with “Michaels” (130) that the Medical Officer starts searching for another paradigm to slot K into so as to discover his true meaning.

Similarly, in Captain Oosthuizen’s communication with the camp dwellers a similar bias is evident. After an explosion in “the welding shop on the High Street” and the “uncontrollable fire that had spread to the building next door and thence to the town’s cultural history museum” (93), Oosthuizen leads a police squad to the camp at Jakkalsdrif in search of the perpetrators. They line the residents up and turn the camp upside down looking for the culprits. When they find “three men who slept in one of the other huts” (91) missing, the captain addresses the camp and the guards:

What are we keeping here in our back yard!’ he shouted. ‘A nest of criminals! Criminals and saboteurs and idlers! And you! The two of you! You eat and sleep and get fat and from one day to the next you don’t know where the people are you are supposed to be guarding! What do you think you are doing here – running a holiday camp? It’s a work camp, man! It’s a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!* And if they don’t work we close the camp! We close it down and chase all these vagrants away!

(Coetzee 91)

Later, in the same monologue he “turned to the group of the men” (91),

‘Do you hear me?’ he shouted. ‘I want everyone to hear me! You ask for war, you get war! I’m putting my own men on guard here—fuck the Army!—I’m putting my own men on guard, and I’m locking the gates, and if my men see any of you, man, woman or child, outside the wire, they have orders to shoot, no questions asked!

(Coetzee 92)

And, even later in the same rebuke he says: “‘And I’m locking up these monkeys with you!’ He raised an arm and pointed dramatically at the two guards, still standing to attention. ‘I’m putting them in to teach them who runs things here!’” (92). Captain Oosthuizen’s admonishment betrays the structure he uses to define and give meaning to the human residents of Jakkalsdrif, as his subjects. He places the residents of Prince Albert and the farmers at the centre and defines the residents according to the terms of the Other, by placing them on the margins. In fact he allocates the very same roles to them as the state and the insurgents, “fuck the Army!” he says, “I’m putting my own men on guard” (92). He also refers to the community as “saboteurs,” as well as referring to the conflict as a “war,” as he suggests, “[y]ou ask for war, you get war!” (92). It is clear from the passage that captain



Oosthuizen sees the community of Jakkalsdrif as different from the other residents of Prince Albert, and as such not being allowed the same inalienable individual rights associated with being human.

More importantly, is how Oosthuizen uses language to serve his purpose. He uses it as an instrument. Heidegger's term "*technology (die Technik)*" could be useful here (Edwards 458).

Technology for him

is now the *fundamental* way – in which the world of human beings is revealed, constituted, and populated; it is an overarching set of linguistic and behavioral practices that allow our entities to appear around us in a particular way, that give to the entities that appear in our world a particular being, a particular significance, a particular sense. (Edwards 458)

In this conceptualization of technology Heidegger combines the set of linguistic practices with a set of behavioural practices, which together allow entities to appear around us in a particular way. The linguistic is tied to the behavioural. It is not just our behaviour towards things that is incorporated in Heidegger's conceptualization of technology, it is also the way we refer, define and speak about things. He continues this line of argument by revealing the particular type of "unconcealment" that he considers "peculiar" to *technology* (458). He asks:

What kind of unconcealment is it, then, that is peculiar to that which results from this setting-upon that challenges? Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*].

(Heidegger<sup>28</sup>, qtd. in Edwards 458)

The kind of entity Heidegger conceives and that is "brought to light by the practices of technology, is *Bestand*, 'standing-reserve,' 'stock': that which in an orderly way awaits our use of it for the further ordering of things" (458). It is this use of language to define the meaning of a community that seems to be the focus of Captain Oosthuizen's rebuke. It is also this way of speaking and thinking that distorts the clearing, as we explored earlier in K's interaction with the Visagie grandson. Although Oosthuizen threatens to "close the camp! We close it down and chase all these vagrants away!" (91), he also threatens paradoxically to shoot "any of you, man, woman or child, outside the wire" (92). The community at Jakkalsdrif are seen as a resource, their value is in their labour and not in their humanness, as he confirms, "[i]t's a work camp, man! It's a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!*" (91). Moreover, his language defines what it means to be defined as labour to the residents, and he

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<sup>28</sup> As above.



does so by both threatening and reasoning with them, as in this rhetorical line of questioning: “Who builds houses for you when you have nowhere to live? Who gives you tents and blankets when you are shivering with cold? Who nurses you, who takes care of you, who comes here day after day with food?” They are anonymous people without rights and with no value to him, apart from their presumed use value. As Edwards suggests, the “anonymous interchangeability is what gives them their being as *Bestand*. They are no one’s because they are everyone’s. Their nature, one might say, is to have only a *general* nature, a nature exhausted by their impersonal usefulness to any one of us” (459). Or, as he later observes, “more precisely, all these things are entities the being of which fails to gather the manifold conditions of their coming to presence” (459). Similarly, the camp dwellers are caught in limbo, “living in suspension, alive but not alive, while history hesitated over what course it would take” (Coetzee 158).

However, the terminology and language that Captain Oosthuizen uses to rebuke and cajole also reveals another problematic in the way he tries to define the value of the community in opposition to that of the residents of Prince Albert. This is also the problematic that grounds the Medical Officer’s reflection on Michael K’s meaning in part two of the novel. Again Jacques Derrida may be helpful here. Brenda Marshall observes that Derrida’s thought regarding “the history of Western metaphysics is a history of ‘centers’ which provide an understanding of (and make possible) the structures surrounding the concept of Truth, regardless of the form that truth takes: for example, God, Law, the Word” (65). Furthermore, for Derrida, “this center takes the form of Presence” (65). Barbara Johnson explains this detail of Derrida’s thought in this way:

Western thought (metaphysics), says Derrida, has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference ... speech vs. writing .... The second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it. Hence, absence is the lack of presence, evil is the fall from good, ... [T]hese hierarchical oppositions privilege unity, identity, immediacy ... presence.

(Johnson, qtd. in Marshall 65)

Captain Oosthuizen, seems to be trying to configure the community of Jakkalsdrif as marginal or Other. This entails structuring a concept of truth whereby the community of Jakkalsdrif is seen as the “negative, corrupt, undesirable version” (65) of the present residents and farmers of Prince Albert. However, his struggle with various terms to create this structure portrays the instability to the truth at the centre of this conception, which is the instability “in

the mimetic nature of language and life, of language as the mirror of the world” (65). The inhabitants are at once referred to as, “[c]riminals and saboteurs and idlers!” and later as people who are meant “to work” because they are “vagrants” (91). It is possible in the context of the story that individually either one of these terms may apply to the community at Jakkalsdrif but what we do see is that there is no unity to the terms he uses. Moreover, there is no foundational truth in the reality of the novel to tie the meaning of the community to one, let alone one dreamt up by Oosthuizen himself. Instead, because of the absence of a foundational meaning, their meaning is constantly changing depending on the centre which grounds the system. For example, if the system is centred on “Law” (Marshall 65) they could be conceived as “criminals” (Coetzee 91); or if structured on the social welfare system, then they would be “vagrants;” and in terms of a socialist economic system, they would then be workers or “idlers!” while “saboteurs” (91) would fit in with a military system. What becomes evident is that the system is centred on an essential definition of the human, of man. But it is the absence of an originary, or foundational meaning that allows their labels to change according to the defining force of the different centres. Indeed, it requires the substitution of these multiple centres to structure the system because the context is fluid, it is after all a civil war and subsequently we can expect Oosthuizen’s desperate attempt to attach unsuccessfully a particular meaning to the group. The bravado in his desire to name and shame them appears unconvincing, or merely rhetorical. In this way there is no definitive truth to the Captain’s words but only a construction of truth based on his sense of what constitutes the centre and guided by his lexicon of understanding.

There may be no essential definition or foundational meaning for the community of Jakkalsdrif, but essential definitions have their own set of rules and problems. If, as Wrathall suggests, “the world gives us no basis for deciding which of the competing essential definitions is right, then perhaps we have to conclude that there are no genuine essences in the world” (352). Instead, he proposes that “what we find in the universe is what we (arbitrarily) project into it” (352). Furthermore, “if we conclude that, then we also might be forced to conclude that there is no way that the universe is independently of the way we conceive of it, because it seems we are free to carve it up in any way that we want” (352). However, the problem with such “anti-essentialist and anti-realist views” is that they “threaten the possibility of our thoughts and claims being about the world at all, and thus

threaten the possibility of their being either true or false” (352). Wrathall summarizes the problem in the following way:

It seems that our ability to have truly uncovering comportments and true beliefs and make true assertions about the world depends on things having an essence, and our grasping that essence. This is because we cannot succeed in linguistically referring to things in the world unless they have an essence. However, if an understanding of essences consists in a grasp of a propositional definition, then nothing in the world can make the essential definition true, because nothing in the world could establish one definition as opposed to any other. Thus, it seems to follow, that nothing in the world can make our beliefs or assertions true.

(Wrathall 353)

However, Heidegger rejects this argument because he does not believe “that our understanding of essences” consists in the abstract “grasp of a propositional definition” (353). As Wrathall contends, the “‘knowledge of essence,’ he [Heidegger] claims, ‘cannot be communicated in the sense of the passing on of a proposition, whose content is simply grasped without its foundation and its acquisition being accomplished again’” (Heidegger,<sup>29</sup> qtd. in Wrathall 353). For Heidegger, “the knowledge of essence he is interested in is a way of being attuned to the world; for that, we have to be introduced to the practices that will eventually teach us to have a particular sensibility and readiness for the world” (353). For this reason “the knowledge of the essence must be accomplished anew by each one who is to share it” (Heidegger,<sup>30</sup> qtd. in Wrathall 353). Furthermore, as Heidegger illustrates:

We are acquainted with the ‘essence’ of things surrounding us: house, tree, bird, road, vehicle, man, etc., and yet we have no knowledge of the essence. For we immediately land in the uncertain, shifting, controversial, and groundless, when we attempt to determine more closely, and above all try to ground in its determinateness, what is certainly though still indeterminately ‘known’: namely, house-ness, tree-ness, bird-ness, humanness.

(Heidegger,<sup>31</sup> qtd in Wrathall 353)

For this reason Heidegger suggests that “the essence of things” is something which “we know and yet do not know” (Heidegger,<sup>32</sup> qtd. in Wrathall 353). In other words, the essence is “not

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted on page 87 of *Grunfragen der Philosophie: ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik.”* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984. Translated as: *Basis Questions of Philosophy. Selected “Problems” of “Logic”* (trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted on page 87 of *Grunfragen der Philosophie: ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik.”* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984. Translated as: *Basis Questions of Philosophy. Selected “Problems” of “Logic”* (trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> From page 81 of *Grunfragen der Philosophie: ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik.”* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984. Translated as: *Basis Questions of Philosophy. Selected “Problems” of “Logic”* (trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

first captured in a ‘definition’ and made available for knowledge” (Heidegger<sup>33</sup>, qtd. in Wrathall 353). This, as Heidegger explains, is because the knowledge of essences originally manifests in the way “that all acting and creating, all thinking and speaking, all founding and proceeding were determined by and thoroughly in accord with the unconcealment of beings as something ungrasped” (Heidegger,<sup>34</sup> as qtd. in Wrathall 353). It is this way of being attuned to the world, of acting and creating, without fully having knowledge of the essence of things that allows one to discover the true essence of things. It is through one’s interaction with the things in the world as not fully grasped that one discovers and allows their essence to be revealed, anew.

In many ways it is this lesson that K learns at the end of his stay at the Jakkalsdrif camp. The lesson is that being attuned to the world anew, in the Jakkalsdrif camp, does not seem to be possible. Furthermore, this is perhaps demonstrated in the extract below, and which provides the motive for K’s escape. His escape follows after Captain Oosthuizen’s police squad take control of the camp and the former Free Corps guards are placed in the camp with them, and as one of them. Our attention is drawn to this displacement and violence in the extract below. Furthermore, K reads this violent shift as a need to escape.

[One] night there was liquor in the camp and a fight broke out. When K looked again, one of the Free Corps men, the one who said he had diabetes, was standing in the firelight gripping his thigh and calling for help. His hands glistened with blood, his trouser-leg was wet. ‘What is going to happen to me?’ he cried, over and over. One could even see the blood oozing between his fingers, thick as oil. People came running from all quarters to stare.

K rushed to the gate, where the two police guards stood peering in the direction of the commotion. ‘That man has been stabbed,’ he stammered—‘he is bleeding, you must take him to the hospital.’

The guards exchanged glances. ‘Bring him over,’ said one, ‘then we’ll see.’

K ran back. The wounded man was sitting with his trousers around his ankles, talking without cease, gripping his thigh, from which blood continued to gush. ‘We must take him to the gate!’ K shouted. It was the first time he had raised his voice in the camp, and people looked at him curiously. ‘Take him to the gate, then they will take him to the hospital!’ The man on the ground nodded vigorously. ‘Take me to hospital, look how I’m bleeding!’ he cried.

His comrade, the other Free Corps man, pushed his way to his side, bringing a towel which he tried to tie around the wound. Someone nudged K: it was one of the

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<sup>32</sup> As above.

<sup>33</sup> From page 115 of *Grunfragen der Philosophie: ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik.”* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984. Translated as: *Basis Questions of Philosophy. Selected “Problems” of “Logic”* (trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> As above.

men from the other huts. 'Leave them, let them look after each other,' he said. The crowd began to break up. Soon there were only children left, and K, watching the younger man bind the older man's thigh in the flickering light.

K never discovered who had stabbed the guard or whether he recovered, for this was his last night in the camp.

(Coetzee 96)

What this passage evokes is the intense affect this violent event has on K. The stabbing of the Free Corps man makes K shout for help from the residents at Jakkalsdrif. He does not recoil from the sight of "blood oozing between the fingers" (96) of the Free Corps man and he rushes to tell the policemen at the gate that the man has been stabbed. He then goes back and shouts for the other residents of the camp to help carry the Free Corps man to the gate. From this perspective when K does escape from the camp it is not because of the sight of the bleeding man that still haunts him, but because of the violent behaviour of the community at Jakkalsdrif, and their subsequent reaction to it.

In relation to the utterance, "[w]e must take him to the gate!" K shouted" (96) the narrator observes that it was the first time "he had raised his voice in the camp," an action so unusual for K that "people looked at him curiously" (96). K's action, and the fact that he breaks from his usual demeanour, provides a clue as to what K considers to be important, namely, the nurturing of life, never mind whose it may be. In contrast to this the camp dwellers reaction to the stabbing speaks of their separation from the former guards. The guards are seen as not being part of their community; they are the enemy, and untouchable at that. In this respect the camp dwellers actions replicate how the towns' people of Prince Albert have treated and defined them. When a man from the camp says: "Leave them, let them look after each other" (96), this implies that the guard is inherently different to the camp dwellers. K should leave them to look after each other because they are the same and hence by implication different to the camp dwellers. Therefore, the implied reason that he should not help them is because he is not the same as them. Furthermore, the extract demonstrates K's coming to a decision about who he is in relation to the camp people and the guards, as well as a sense of the direction in the way in which his life should be led. This manifests in a style of being based on a nature that nurtures and protects, and which fits in with his occupation as a gardener and his new found belief in helping people. Whether to help people, is a question he could not answer before and perhaps cannot answer directly, but one which seems to be answered in the way he has reacted towards others in distress, even to people that have threatened to shoot him if he tried to escape, like the guard with diabetes who has been stabbed in the thigh.



What becomes noticeable is the ease with which K escapes from a camp that ironically is both more protected and dangerous as the police now guard the camp rather than the indifferent guards. In this respect he could have escaped a long time ago, but chose not to. One wonders whether it was not because of the human interaction K had with the guard, the conversation, the sentiments and the meal that they shared, that kept him in the camp and made it less desirable for him to escape. In other words, perhaps the guard's kindness, regardless of his role and duty as a guard, accounted for something in K's response. However, the fact that he escapes immediately after the stabbing and the camp's residents' refusal to help, seems telling enough as it does imply that he believes instinctively in helping people. It is possibly because the camp dwellers do not believe in helping 'other' people that he is willing to risk his life by escaping despite the heightened danger that he would now be exposed to. He decides to escape, steps into the void and this course of action is just and socially responsible, oddly enough. Being socially responsible does not sit well with our expectations of K. However, it seems that these qualities may stem in part from his nature which is motivated to nurture and protect the things that live.

Michael K's second escape allows him to fully embody his role as nurturer, a role where he seems predisposed to protect and nurture the things that grow. As Attwell suggests, "K's gardening is more than wage-labour; it is a mode of life and an existential principle" (K 77). It is a mode of life that he is willing to risk starving for. Attwell also observes that with "gardening elevated to a redemptive mode of being, it comes to stand as an alternative to political liberation in *Michael K*" (K 77). K, it seems, is liberated through this mode of being which is not focused on the mind or the body, but instead on nurturing and hospitality. It serves as an "existential principle," or as a "redemptive mode of being" that can carry him through starvation itself (K 77). In this sense gardening is a vocation for K (a philosophy and a way of life) and not just a means of employment. It is elevated to the importance of offering a mindful and a justifiable alternative to the guerrillas and their concern.

Furthermore, it is not a mode of being that is unaware of other ways of being. When K comes across "men from the mountains, men who blew up railway tracks and mined roads and attacked farmhouses," he fantasizes about running off with them: "I could come out of hiding and trot along behind them like a child following a brass band. After a while they would



notice me and stop to ask what I wanted. And I could say: Give me a pack to carry; let me chop wood and build the fire at the end of the day” (Coetzee 109). However, he does not join the guerrillas. Instead, as the passage below suggests:

[I]n the same instant that he reached down to check that his shoelaces were tied, K knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why.

(Coetzee 109)

It is not that K is oblivious to the political context of his times. Indeed, as I have just said, he imagines joining the men from the mountains by helping them by carrying a pack, and chopping wood, and building their fire, of helping their cause rather than because of any belief he may or may not have in their cause. However, he knows that his temperament is more attuned to gardening than war, and that there is a value in gardening, in “the idea of gardening” that needs to be kept “alive” (109). His reasoning is undeniable as soldiers have to be fed. I would suggest that it is this idea of nurturing that forms the basis for K’s mode of being. It is through the idea of growing and harvesting by nurturing the things that live and therefore will continue to live and reproduce themselves. This mode of being, it seems, is similar to Heidegger’s conception of “dwelling” which requires that “mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow” (Taylor 450). The same mode of behaviour is required for gardening, because in order to have a garden one needs to nurse and nurture the things that grow in it. The idea of gardening becomes important because the idea of war does not entail nurturing and protecting the things that live; in fact, it is the exact opposite. It is K’s fear that this idea may be lost and that the “cord” that connects us to the nurturing of life might be “broken” and from which “the earth would grow hard and forget her children” (Coetzee 109). It is not that he does not believe in the importance of fighting for justice but because “enough men had gone off to war,” and enough men had placed the value of war over the value of life, and as such the idea of nurturing and protecting the things that grow might be forgotten. In which case, everyone loses by starving. It is the idea of gardening that he must protect. These are the qualities that the act of gardening entails, and which makes it just as important as the political and which elevates it to a redemptive mode of being and critical as it is, few have chosen to follow.

It follows that the novel can be seen as an allegory for a South Africa in the midst of a civil war. Coetzee “had to tackle the political sensitive question that the writing of *Michael K* had produced: the matter of K’s relation to the guerrillas operating from bases in the mountains” (Attwell, *SB* 141). Attwell remarks that even though the novel “won applause abroad ... some critics at home were uneasy. Most memorably, in her review for the *New York Review of Books*, Nadine Gordimer” (*SB* 141). He also says that the “problem, for Gordimer, was K’s indifference to the anti-apartheid struggle” (*SB* 142). Gordimer argues that Coetzee “does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves” (qtd. in Attwell, *SB* 142). Furthermore, Coetzee suggests, in his notebook on *Michael K*, that: “I wanted there to be at least one gardener throughout. Who did not hoe and plant in order that a war should be won and he should be free to garden but because the earth called to be hoed and planted” (qtd. in Attwell, *SB* 144). In this way, the creation of a character who chooses to garden rather than join the liberation struggle, a struggle whose interest would serve him as well, does seem to portray a fair amount of indifference to the anti-apartheid struggle. However, as Attwell points out in his book *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), the novel’s “intensity lies not in social representation but in the creation of a protagonist of extraordinary symbolic power who becomes in turn, the focus of a struggle for control over the resources of fictionality itself” (“Writing in ‘the cauldron of history’” 91-92).<sup>35</sup> Michael K’s meaning does not reside in his rejection of the guerrilla faction for the vocational pleasures of gardening, but rather his meaning resides in his symbolic power to demonstrate the capacity of representation to create new meaning. As Attwell observes, in response to Stephen Clingman and Nadine Gordimer’s critique of the novel, that they assume “that the limits of fictionality lie in representation” (*WCH* 93). By assuming that Michael K can only have a political meaning, they limit the representational capacity of fiction. He maintains that:

Insofar as Gordimer and Clingman, independently of one another, are prepared to accept that the novel works outside the conventions of realism, they do so to suggest how Coetzee is making political choices through a medium of allegory; what kind of allegory this might be, however, is largely left unexplored. None of these criticisms of *Michael K* venture a word on the novel’s structure or hetero-diegetic narration—that is, on the work’s metafictional features.

(Attwell, *WCH* 93)

It is perhaps through an analysis of these metafictional features that we begin to see the layered complexity of representation that Coetzee uses to construct the novel, and as such

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<sup>35</sup> “Writing in ‘the cauldron of history’” abbreviated as *WCH*.

evoke the symbolic aspect of meaning, and an engagement with the full social complexity of living in South Africa during a political war.

Part One and Three of the novel are predominately narrated in the third person, as we saw earlier in the chapter. However, after Anna K's death, Michael's voice begins to interrupt the narration, mostly in the form his thoughts. Attwell suggests that this was done in order to access K's consciousness (*SB* 141). By allowing the reader to access K's consciousness, we gain an insight into K's mode of relating to the world, people and things. As Mike Marais observes,

Coetzee's novel repeatedly stresses the tenuous nature of K's grasp of language. Apart from his speech impediment, which is mentioned in the opening sentence of the novel and emphasized thereafter (3), he describes himself as "not clever with words" (190). Moreover, his existence on the farm, following the departure of Visagie, is purely sensory and marked by the absence of language.

(Marais 45)

Indeed this mode of being seems applicable to K. The amount of times he actually speaks in the novel is minimal. His thoughts whether reported in the first or third person, nevertheless, allow us to witness the way K thinks, feels and relates to the world. More importantly, it allows us to know that K is capable of thought and that he changes in the way that he relates to the things and people in the world. On K's first arrival at the Visagie farm Marais suggests that when K kills the goat the emphasis of the "passage falls squarely on K's physical mastery of the goat. Quite clearly, he is represented here as being part of the nature dominating rational world rather than of nature itself" (38). When the Visagie grandson tries to exert the same mastery over K, he flees. In his return to the farm, after his escape from the Jakkalsdrif camp, his way of thinking and relating to things has undergone a shift. This shift in K can be understood in the way that he represents what Heidegger refers to as the first order uncovering of entities in the clearing, by allowing things themselves to reveal their essential essences. As Marais argues, "[a]n absence of self-possession, of subject-centred consciousness, the novel suggests, renders impossible cognitive control over entities. This is further evident in K's apparent inability to relate to things other than they are in themselves" (39). He continues by suggesting that "[w]hat K sees is not always intentionally assumed. His consciousness no longer mediates things, it no longer produces objects for experience" (39). What Marais seems to be pointing out here is the development of a pre-linguistic disposition, which is one that is not based on a technological distortion of objects. K does not try to control or dominate nature but allows things to reveal themselves as they are in themselves.

Furthermore, the change in the way K relates to things is signalled by his refusal to take up residence in the Visagie farmhouse; instead he decides to live in a burrow under the earth (39), as suggested in the passage below.

Because whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived, sleep where they slept, sit on their stoep looking out over their land. If this house were to be abandoned as a home for the ghosts of all the generations of the Visagies, it would not matter to me. It is not for the house that I have come.

(Coetzee 98)

Marais contends that in the burrow K is described as feeling at home as he had never felt in the farmhouse. Ultimately, for Marais, K's "relocation from the farmhouse to the burrow," "connotes an overcoming of the separation between human subject and natural object. Without this opposition, the impulse to possess and dominate is structurally impossible" (39). In K's second occupation of the farm his protective and nurturing nature which is the essence of his vocation as a gardener allows him to relate to things as they are in themselves, and this is because he does not have the impulse to dominate, and without this impulse he does not situate himself as the subject and can therefore not experience things as objects under his control and domination. Indeed, his experience of the vegetables that he grows at the dam seems to demonstrate this. K refers to them as his "sisters" and "brothers" (Coetzee 113), and experiences them in a relationship based on empathy.

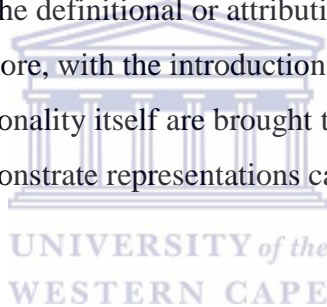
However, for Heidegger there is a second-order disclosure that occurs in the clearing, and this takes place in language. Similarly, Hall suggests that language is "the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning" (18). It is perhaps Coetzee's ability to represent these first and second-order disclosures in language that draws our attention to the medium itself. K's first-order disclosure of the clearing, or his way of experiencing things, is represented by the absence of language. Marais has suggested that his presence is "purely sensory and marked by the absence of language" (45). Yet, this representation which is free of language is still mediated through language because it is the medium of the novel. Furthermore, Heidegger's second-order disclosure of the clearing also occurs in language. For Heidegger, "[l]anguage is essential to the 'clearing'" (442). He "sees language as what opens access to meanings. Language discloses" (442). This is similar to Hall's suggestion that language is "the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning" (18). Coetzee's novel, I would suggest, provides a space where he can use language to explore (and play with) the experience of being and the

construction of meaning. Coetzee demonstrates the medium's ability to gesture to what is beyond, to what we imagine to be pre-linguistic, but he also critiques the structures it uses to create meaning, and in this way we perhaps witness a more open view of representation, namely, one that is not limited to the real or the political. In many ways, his representation can be seen in terms of Heidegger's "expressive-constitutive" (433) view of language, where in an expressive form like the novel we do not just create meaning by defining things or attributing properties to things, we also produce meaning by acting them out on an emotional level, or a relational level, and by giving things value. As Taylor suggests:

We express our emotions, and establish our relations, and body forth our values, in our body language, style, and rhetoric; but we can articulate all of these in poetry, novels, dance, music; and we can also bring all of them to descriptive articulation, where we name the feelings, relations, and values, and describe and argue about them.

(Taylor 441)

In this sense, Coetzee seems to make use of the full range of the resources we call language, or perhaps discourse, by playing the definitional or attributional off against the expression of the experience of being. Furthermore, with the introduction of the Medical Officer in part two of the novel, the resources of fictionality itself are brought to bear on the narrative, and it is this which allows Coetzee to demonstrate representations capacity not to be tied down to two limited or oppositional meanings.



In this respect, and as I have suggested, Coetzee's representation of the moment where the Medical Officer comes to find meaning in Michael K functions on many levels in language and in the space of the novel. From a structuralist linguistic perspective K has no meaning as he provides no opposition to the other terms (the other representations of humans) in the system of the narrative. Furthermore, from a poststructuralist perspective he represents meaning as fluid and unstable. And, from a narratological perspective K does embody meaning, but this is what the reader discovers from the text through the adventure of language in narrative. It is these levels of meaning in language and narrative that, I would suggest, Coetzee plays with. Interestingly, Marais observes that

by drawing a contrast between the medical officer's entrapment in language and K's proximate mode of being beyond language, the novel must draw attention to its linguistic medium and thus to the fact that it creates the impression that K's life on the farm is free of language in language.

(Marais 47)



Indeed, in K's second experience at the farm "he relates to the farm in the virtual absence of language," (45) in that his experience is mostly sensory, evoked by the smell and touch of things rather than their descriptions or names. In fact, he has a limited knowledge of his context because he does not know the names of things. Instead, he operates by sight, smell and texture and by overcoming "his linguistic separation from the world" he "becomes like the world, part of it" (45). Marais defines this way of experiencing the world as "mimesis as a form of preverbal cognition" (46). In other words, it is the negation of "the being or presence of things through language" and "human systems of order" (46). Furthermore, Marais observes that "K does not name entities: he relates to them sensuously and immediately" (46). An example of this can be seen below:

He no longer needed to keep to the paths in his movements around the dam. A sense less of sight than of touch, the pressure of presences upon his eyeballs and the skin of his face, warned him of any obstacle. His eyes remained unfocussed for hours on end like those of a blind person. He had learned to rely on smell too. He breathed into his lungs the clear sweet smell of water brought up from inside the earth. It intoxicated him, he could not have enough of it. Though he knew no names he could tell one bush from another by the smell of their leaves. He could smell rain-weather in the air.

(Coetzee 115)

Coetzee uses the medium of language itself to represent K's life on the farm as "free of language" (47), as representing his sensory experience of things, of things "less of sight" than of "touch" and "smell" (Coetzee 115). Furthermore, by not naming things K skirts the linguistic traps of language whereby the name refers to the concept of the thing and not the sensory experience of the thing itself. However, Coetzee is also able to use the same medium to represent "the medical officer's entrapment in language" (47). He thus creates two contrasting views using the medium of language for different ends.

It follows that "the medical officer's entrapment in language" (47) is signalled by his attempt to define K along political lines. Linguistically speaking, meaning is about opposition. The sign is distinct from another sign and when we compare them there is only opposition between them. For example, if K's existence in the mountains is not in the service of the army, then it means that K is part of the guerrilla faction. The Medical Officer's view thus seems to be based on a linguistic perception of meaning. Although Saussure is well-known for his argument that "in language there are only differences" (183 *CGL*) he goes on to point out that when it comes to the sign as a whole (the signifier and the signified) "there is only *opposition*. The entire mechanism of language, with which we shall be concerned later, is



based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply” (183 *CGL*).<sup>36</sup> The Medical Officer is described as a man of letters. His first person narration reads at times like a diary, a record of his experience at the army’s rehabilitation camp in Kenilworth. This section is dominated by his encounter with K who seems to be immune to his care, and his diagnosis. His struggle is to find the meaning behind K’s evasiveness as well as K’s ability to survive. However, K’s actions and mode of being can only become meaningful to the Medical Officer if they share the same system of values, and K’s system of values, as Marais observes, is beyond language, and therefore beyond the Medical Officer’s corpus.

For the Medical Officer his system of values is primarily based on what is known as the linguistic turn. It seems apt that this section of the novel reads like a diary and contains a three page letter, addressed to “Michaels” (149), because Coetzee, using the devices of fiction, is able to explore what it means to be entrapped in language. This language of entrapment is the same language that he uses to represent the Medical Officer’s experience of attempting to understand K. The failure of his system of values to provide a basis for an insightful explanation of K is first signalled in the absurdity of the story he tells of K. “The story is that he was picked up all by himself in the middle of nowhere in the Karoo, running a staging post for guerrillas operating out of the mountains, caching arms and growing food, though obviously not eating it” (129). This explanation reads like a synopsis for a proposed fiction. Furthermore, the Medical Officer’s assessment is that there “is every evidence of prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos” (129), and this is the discourse of medical science in service of the courts, or state, or from evidence extracted from a crime scene. K is starving, and his weight drops from forty kilos to thirty in the course of his stay at the camp. The absurdity of a man charged with feeding the rebel faction, who is himself starving does not seem to dawn on the Medical Officer. This blind spot represented by the clear-cut language he speaks is that of the scientist-bureaucrat. Instead, his system of assigning value in a categorical way means that there can be only one explanation, definition or meaning to K’s existence in the mountains, and this meaning stands in direct opposition to the army’s existence. The world as seen from the Medical Officer’s point of view is structured on a system in which the grand narrative of politics and history takes centre stage. No one can

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<sup>36</sup> See “Introduction: Theoretical Paradigms”

presume to be unaffected by the historical moment, or by the sequence of events that forms a man's story, and that places him or her at the centre of the world, and from which all understanding is seen in relation to man's central position. In this historical moment, in the midst of this revolutionary civil war, K's existence in the mountains can only be seen in opposition to the state, regardless of the absurdity of the facts.

However, after the medical officer spends some time with Michael, he begins to come to the conclusion that "he was too stupid or too innocent" (130) to be involved in any insurrection.

As he reasons to himself:

One tries to imagine him running a staging post for insurgents and one's mind boggles. More likely someone came along and offered him a drink and asked him to look after a gun and he was too stupid or too innocent to refuse. He is locked up as an insurgent, but he barely knows there is a war on.

(Coetzee 130)

The more time the medical officer spends with K, the less he thinks K is part of the rebellion. Nevertheless, it his desire for a coherent structure in his system of values that drives him to search for the elusive meaning to K's existence, and thereby to know his story, as he writes in his letter to K. The Medical Officer's inability to reason with K or to persuade him to his way of thinking, drives this desire to continue with his examination of K. Furthermore, this desire is intensified, not because of K's unwillingness to eat, but because of his inability to hold it down. After discharging K, he is soon back in a hospital bed after exhausting himself doing physical exercise. Here he says, "I am not going to die ... I can't eat the food here, that's all. I can't eat camp food" (146). In a last effort to persuade K to eat the Medical Officer says:

It would be easy for me to tie you down and strap your head and put a tube down your throat and feed you, but I am not going to do that. I am going to treat you like a free man, not a child or an animal. If you want to throw your life away, so be it, it is your life, not mine.

(Coetzee 147)

As K does not respond, he makes one last attempt whispering: "What sort of food do you want? ... What of sort of food would you be prepared to eat?" (147). Still, K does not answer.

The next day the Medical Officer buys "a butternut squash from a hawker" and cuts it into thin slices and grills it under the toaster (148). He props K up on a pillow and gives the following account:

He took a bite, and I watched him mumble it around in his mouth. 'Do you like it?' I asked. He nodded. I had sprinkled the squash with sugar but had not been able to find cinnamon. After a while, to spare him embarrassment, I left. When I came back he was

lying down, the plate empty beside him. I presume that when Felicity next sweeps she will find the squash under the bed covered in ants. A pity.

(Coetzee 148)

Eating seems to take on a symbolic meaning in this section. It becomes a way of entering K's consciousness. This can be read, literally, in the sense that if the Medical Officer knew the sort of food K would eat he would perhaps be able to get him to eat, and thereby understand the way he thinks. Consequently, if K eats the food the Medical Officer will have understood the reason for K's refusal to eat. He would have understood that it was the type of food that was at issue, and thus understand how he thinks and what he means when he says certain things. This is the reason for the Officer's attempt to persuade him to eat by buying "a butternut squash from a hawker" and grilling it with a bit of sugar under the toaster, to see if by declaring that he cannot eat "camp food" (146) K meant the type of food and the way the food is made. However, when he still does not eat and does not die, but surprisingly escapes from the camp, eating becomes a metaphor for gaining knowledge, for knowledge of the spirit of K, or of what drives him and sustains him if not food. In this respect, the Medical Officer's observation that there is meaning to K is because of the way he assimilates his experience of K as a form of acquiring knowledge, if K eats he would have understood how he thinks and what drives him. He would also then be able to digest K's story. However, Derrida suggests in an interview with Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, that there is a limit to what one can digest, or to what one can know. It is this limit, perhaps, that Coetzee uses to expose the Medical Officer's entrapment and subservience to language.

Eating and its relation to understanding has a long tradition in Western thought. Moreover, eating and understanding are forms of incorporation that Derrida places within what he calls the "tropes of cannibalism" ("An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion."<sup>37</sup> 2). He observes that:

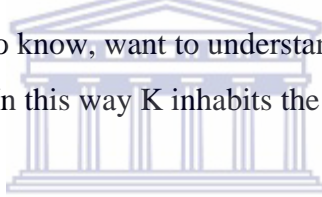
The figures of incorporation in hermeneutics and speculative philosophy are what I call the "tropes of cannibalism." Nowhere is this clearer than in Hegel, but these tropes are at work everywhere in Western thought. Eating is, after all, the great mystery of Christianity, the transubstantiation occurs in the act of incorporation itself: bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ. But it is not simply God's body that is incorporated via a mystical eating – it is also his words.

(Derrida, *JDL D* 2)

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<sup>37</sup> This interview shall be abbreviated as *JDL D* ("An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the limits of Digestion").

It is perhaps this cannibalistic incorporation that the Medical Officer seeks. He wants to know K's story so that he can understand what K stands for and thereby add this incorporation to his system of knowledge. The mystery of why K will not eat triggers the Medical Officer's desire to know. He would like to 'eat' of K's words, and asks K: "What sort of food do you want? ... What sort of food would you be prepared to eat?", but K does not answer (Coetzee 147). K's ability to persevere without eating and the fact that he does not seem to be preoccupied with understanding anything at all, seems to challenge the importance that someone like the Medical Officer, who as a servant of medical knowledge, places on food and knowledge. The Medical Officer's desire for knowledge allows him to become obsessed with discovering K's meaning to the extent to which he is unable to put into practice what he has learnt from his experience with K earlier. In the end the Medical Officer and Noël, the Major in charge of the rehabilitation camp, remain as they were, where they are leading the same lives as before. Ultimately, the Medical Officer is unable to make K eat real food, and yet it makes no difference to him whether K lives or dies. It is K's resilience, perhaps, that makes the Medical Officer want to know, want to understand, and want to eat of K's knowledge, experience, or story. In this way K inhabits the alluring nature of meaning to him.



Furthermore, the comparison of eating with understanding leads to the inversion of another metaphor recounted earlier in the novel. In Captain Oosthuizen's raid on the Jakkalsdrif camp he compares the camp dwellers to parasites. It is this comparison that K reflects on in his last days by the dam, and before he is interned at the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp. The narrator observes that:

Parasite was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdrif, a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back. Yet to K lying idle in his bed, thinking without passion (What is it to me, after all? He thought), it was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite, camp or town. If the worm devoured the sheep, why did the sheep swallow the worm?

(Coetzee 116)

In the extract, we are exposed to K's thoughts which show how interchangeable the terms parasite and host can be. The town needs the workers to provide cheap labour and the camp needs the town to provide food and shelter for their families. In a sense they both live symbiotically, off each other. This is the same for the sheep and worm. In a mutually beneficial relationship who is to say which is host and which is parasite. Furthermore, Attwell contends that "[a]ccused of being the parasite, K turns out to be the host ... of the predatory authorities in his own universe" (144). This is because K does not live or feed off the

authorities. Instead he wants to get away from them. The authorities on the other hand want things from K. They want K to work, initially for the Railways and later at the Jakkalsdrif camp. Furthermore, at the rehabilitation camp in Kenilworth Noël wants information on the insurgents hiding in the mountains from K, because the insurgents “have been misbehaving” and “are making a nuisance of themselves,” and “[they] need to catch them, have a talk to them” (Coetzee 137). As Noël says to K, “[w]e want you to tell us about your friends: where they hide out, how we can get to meet them” (138). The authorities would like to feed off K’s knowledge, fatten themselves at his expense, but he has no knowledge of the insurgents and eventually they give up and concoct some plausible story that will get the police off their backs. It is perhaps the Medical Officer who becomes the real parasite. It is through his obsession with wanting to discover K’s meaning, of wanting to understand what moves or governs K, that turns him into the parasite, and K, the host. If as Derrida suggests, eating can be compared to understanding, then the Medical Officer’s struggle to understand K’s story, to define his meaning, is a form of parasitic feeding on K himself. The metaphor of eating transforms the metaphor of parasite and K now becomes the host who feeds the Medical Officer, and who nourishes him by providing meaning for him. However, there is a limit to what the Medical Officer can know and it is this limit that Coetzee exposes by using the resources of fictionality which frames the slippage and movement of meaning in language itself.

In a passage at the end of part two of the novel, Coetzee demonstrates the limit of what one can know. The Medical Officer is concerned about Noël and the fact that he is drinking too much. His concern for Noël is the catalyst for the idea that perhaps the two of them “should take a leaf out of Michaels’ book and go on a trip to one of the obscurer reaches of the Karoo for example” (160). The idea of getting away from the rehabilitation camp and taking a trip with Noël, in turn develops into an imaginary escape with Michael K. It is, he thinks, the only chance he has of escape. As the Medical Officer reflects: “The night that Michaels made his break, I should have followed. It is vain to plead that I was not ready. If I had taken Michaels seriously I would always have been ready” (161). It is within the contemplation of an imaginary event, in which he attempts to follow K as he escapes, that “the pharmacist turned makeshift medical officer turned foot-follower” (162), takes the opportunity to tell K how he has become meaningful to him, just before K finally escapes. The Medical Officer narrates the passage below which may give us some insight into the complexities involved in the



establishment of meaning, and should be seen in relation to the Medical Officer's later view of K's life story.

And standing in the doorway I would turn my bleakest stare in upon myself, seeking by the last means I knew to detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction—the wish, let us say, for example, to be the only one to whom the camp was not just the old Kenilworth racetrack with prefabricated huts dotted across it but a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world.

(Coetzee 165)

The passage describes the medical officer's scrutiny within himself for any "germ of dishonesty" in his conviction or his wish, which is "to be the only one to whom the camp was not just the old Kenilworth racetrack ... but a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world" (165). By the end of the page, the medical officer does not seem to detect any germ of dishonesty in his conviction or wish, and we can thus assume that his conviction is true.

However, unless meaning is attached to a secure anchor in reality, the only way for it to be meaningful, or true, is if it is a meaning that is shared by other people. Otherwise this meaning is private and subject to whatever one wishes it to be. It is no more than an opinion. Furthermore, the medical officer's conviction is based on him being "the only one," and here again the truth value of his conviction is called into question because it is not shared by anyone else (165). Similarly, in the extract where he offers an explanation of K's story, the meaning that he gives is not shared by anyone else in the novel, not even by the observer situated in K's mind. However, the Medical Officer's explanation of K's meaning might be shared by the reader. Apart from the reader, then, the meaning that the Medical Officer gives is narrated in the first person and therefore, from his rather subjective point of view. The representation of K's meaning in the first person narrative mode, from the point of view of the Medical Officer, allows Coetzee to frame the limit of what the Medical Officer can know, or digest, unless it becomes part of a shared meaning. In the last moments of the Medical Officer's imagined escape with K, just before K runs away, the Medical Officer calls out K's meaning to him, by saying:

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed.

(Coetzee 166)

However, K begins to throw his "most urgent energies into running ... to escape the man shouting" (167) at his back. In the end, K does not speak, does not answer back, and the medical officer is left shouting impotently: "Am I right?" and "Have I understood you? If I



am right, hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left!” (167). The only person that can validate this meaning in the space of the novel is K, and the reader. It seems that the calling of K’s meaning is not for K to answer, because in the narrative K never does answer, only the reader who shares the experiences of the *Life & Times of Michael K* can validate whether this meaning is true or not. The meaning the Medical Officer gives ultimately evokes a response from the reader, but not from K, and which adds to the unsettling and elusive nature of meaning as embodied by K as the protagonist.

Consciousness allows us to be aware of other beings and of ourselves as conscious beings, but it does not allow us to be conscious of another being’s consciousness unless he or she communicates something of it to us. In other words, we cannot be inside another person’s head, or know what they are thinking. Our knowledge of them is purely based on what they communicate to us. This is the limit of digestion, that irreducible element that Derrida speaks of. In light of this, he suggests that:

What Heidegger calls the ‘ontological difference’ between “being” (*Sein*) and “beings” (*Seienden*) – which is of course the very essence of his philosophy – indicates such a limit. Being always remains inaccessible. Being is never given as *a* being, a thing in the world that can be named and captured with the question *What?* Being transcends beings – it evades linguistic naming.

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(Derrida, *JDL D 2*)

It follows, that the Medical Officer can never know what K is thinking at any point. Equally he has no inside knowledge of who K is. His being is beyond names and linguistic or philosophical frames. More importantly, in the realism of the narrative, even the meaning that the medical officer has given to K is not fixed because he gets no response from K. The instability of this meaning is highlighted by Coetzee’s narrative structure, as the Medical Officer’s attempted escape with Michael K is an imagined event within the narrative of the novel. It is the story of an escape he imagines within the narrative of the novel. From this perspective, from the point of view of the characters in novel, the event does not actually take place and K is not actually there to offer any affirmation to the Medical Officer’s explanation. However, we as readers are still privy to his story and the meaning that he gives to K, because he narrates it to us using a common medium. What does become clear is that the Medical Officer’s understanding of K cannot be based on K’s consciousness or his state of being, as he has no access to either of these. His explication can only be based on what he knows, and which is perhaps only K’s story or the one that K chooses to tell him.

It follows that Derrida separates the psychic system (consciousness) from the social system (language). He illustrates this separation in his critique of the self-presence of speech and auto-affectation of the voice, where the fact that one speaks does not necessarily provide evidence of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Coetzee, we see how he frames the separation of consciousness and language through his representation of K in the first person. In this regard we as readers have no access to K's consciousness as we do in the first and third parts of the novel, because the narration in the first person is from the point of view of the Medical Officer, which does not make us privy to K's thoughts. In essence we cannot know if K agrees or disagrees with the medical officer's reading of who he is because K is unable to communicate his thoughts to us. As such, the fact that we can never be sure if K agrees with the Medical Officer's explanation or not makes the meaning he gives to K unstable. Doubly so, perhaps, because in the world of the novel the event actually never takes place. In this sense it is not tied to any secure foundation in the reality of the narrative.

Furthermore, Derrida's separation of consciousness and language seems to be similar in nature to Heidegger's separation of being and beings. As we saw earlier, Heidegger suggests that: "Being always remains inaccessible. Being is never given as *a* being, a thing in the world that can be named and captured with the question *What?* Being transcends beings – it evades linguistic naming" (Derrida, *JDL D* 2). Here it seems that being can be seen as separate and distinct from beings. This is because of the "ontological difference" between the two terms being and beings; it is the difference in the nature of their existence in the world (2). Beings, as with objects like desks, chairs and cars can be captured and named because they are entities. However, being is not an entity and it cannot be captured and named, and because of this it "transcends beings" and "it evades linguistic naming" (2). It is perhaps this nature of being, which transcends beings and evades linguistic naming, which is evoked in the representation of K's experience in his life on the farm. It is a representation that is "free of language" (Marais 47) that depicts K's sensory experience of things, of things "less of sight" than of "touch" and "smell" (Coetzee 115). Again, as Marais suggests, "Coetzee's K does not name entities: he relates to them sensuously and immediately" (46). This, then, frees him from language within language, and perhaps, this is a true representation of the nature of being.

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<sup>38</sup> See the chapter "Introduction:Theoretical Paradigms."

However, there is the occurrence of movement to both being and consciousness. Our experience of being may be private but being makes other beings accessible in the world. Similarly, our consciousness becomes accessible through language. This is confirmed by Derrida when he argues that:

The ontological difference is the boundary between what can be assimilated and what is already presupposed in all assimilation, but which itself is inaccessible. This is the most profound and most difficult to comprehend movement in the Heideggerian concept of being. Being makes beings accessible in the world, yet itself withdraws. This movement is what Heidegger called *das Ereignis* – the event (or “the coming-about”).

(Derrida, *JDL D 2*)

The movement contained in Heidegger’s concept of being is what Heidegger calls “the event (or ‘the coming-about’)” and is due to *being* making “beings accessible in the world, yet itself withdraws” and “is inaccessible” (2). What this movement underlines is the boundary between what can and cannot be eaten and digested. The boundary is the “ontological difference” between beings (or entities) and being which transcends entities (2). In this respect because entities become accessible through being while being itself remains inaccessible, entities or beings can be assimilated, eaten and digested while being cannot be. This is the limit of digestion defined by Heidegger’s boundary of ontological difference. It follows that there is a limit to what can be known, understood or digested about other beings. While being opens oneself to other beings there is always a part that is irreducible or indeterminate; it is that part of being that withdraws while at the same time making other beings accessible.

Similarly, the necessity of language that we share – “broadly the same conceptual maps” (Hall 18) – means that it has access to our consciousness. Indeed, even the linguistic sign accesses our consciousness, as Saussure has argued earlier, “both terms involved in the linguistic sign [the signifier and the signified] are psychological and are united in the brain by an associative bond” (178). However, as Niklas Luhmann suggests, language does not determine consciousness and therefore “psychic processes are not linguistic processes” (qtd. in Wolfe 21). Instead, “meaning simultaneously enables consciousness to understand itself and continue to affect itself in communication, and enables communication to be referred back to the consciousness of the participants” (21), through the privileged medium of language. Language is therefore the operative link which allows consciousness to become

accessible, but another person's consciousness is in itself still inaccessible. I have suggested, we can only know what another person communicates to us, but we can never truly know the truth of it. Ultimately, the experience of another person's consciousness remains inaccessible. This is the basis which allows someone to tell a lie, because we cannot truly know what another person is thinking. Again we can only know what they communicate to us. In relationship to the text, Derrida suggests, that:

It would mean respect for that which cannot be eaten – respect for that in a text which cannot be assimilated. My thoughts on the limits of eating follow in their entirety the same schema as my theories on the indeterminate or untranslatable in a text. There is always a remainder that cannot be read, that must remain alien. This residue can never be interrogated as the same, but must be constantly sought out anew, and must continue to be written.

(Derrida, *JDL* 3-4)

It is this “residue,” this “remainder that cannot be read” and “must remain alien,” which entraps the medical officer in language (4). This is because Coetzee does not represent K's consciousness or thoughts in part two of the novel. K's thoughts are thus hidden in this part of the novel and as such he cannot validate the medical officer's meaning or produce his own meaning. The silencing of K's voice alongside the structured representation of K's meaning from the point of view of the medical officer, can, in terms of poststructuralist thought and the fictional device of allegory produce a meaning that is elusive and open to interpretation. The text thus represents a meaning that is indeterminate because there is a part of his representation that is unknown or alien to us. Literally, in this case, his consciousness. Moreover, this alien part of K's meaning allows representation to produce new meaning. This is because trying to define or determine what is unknown, alien and therefore untranslatable will always have an aspect of uncertainty, and this means that any meaning we provide will always have an element of uncertainty too, and leave a remainder that cannot be read. For this reason K's meaning will never be complete, and there will always be a part that is absent and therefore susceptible to the conception, or the interpretation of another meaning.

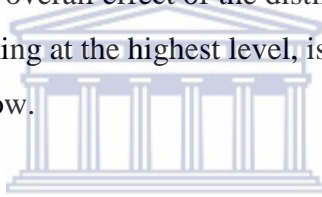
The medical officer's depiction of K's *raison d'être* is given in the terms of the literary and the linguistic. He resorts to the literary devices of allegory and symbol to represent K's meaning, as well as terms from poststructuralist linguistic theory. It therefore seems apt that the medical officer would use the resources of fiction and the language appropriate to storytelling to explore K's meaning, because as it was suggested earlier the medical officer does not have access to K's consciousness or state of being. He can only know K's story and

what K has said about himself. Furthermore, the meaning that the medical officer arrives at, which was quoted earlier, is again recounted below.

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed.

(Coetzee 166)

The medical officer suggests that K's "stay in the camp was merely an allegory" (166), and then goes on to specify that it was an "allegory—speaking at the highest level—" (166), which perhaps signals the importance of this distinction because it qualifies the initial statement that K's "stay in the camp was merely an allegory" (166). His need to repeat (perhaps because he calls it "merely") and then specify that it is an allegory speaking at the highest level seems to suggest that this distinction is important. Furthermore, the distinguishing detail of the allegory is highlighted and thus emphasized by being placed between two long em dashes. The overall effect of the distinguishing detail of the allegory, namely that it is an allegory speaking at the highest level, is that it stands out and cannot be ignored. I will expand on this below.



Furthermore, in Charles Taylor's explanation of the constitutive view of language he suggests that "constitutive theories" try to incorporate "the full range of expressive forms," what Cassirer had called the "symbolic forms" (440). Taylor elaborates on the constitutive view of language by suggesting

that language introduces new meanings in our world: the things which surround us become potential bearers of properties; they can have new emotional significance for us, e.g. as objects of admiration or indignation; our links with others can count for us in new ways, as "lovers," "spouses," or "fellow citizens"; and they can have strong value.

(Taylor 438)

In other words, Taylor is suggesting that language allows us to introduce new meaning in the world apart from just the "attribution of properties to things" (441). He lists "three other ranges of meanings which are opened to us by language: the properly human emotions, certain relations, and strong value" (441). Added to this, "each of these is carried on the three levels of ... the projective, the symbolic (in works of art), and the descriptive" (441). He explains:

We express our emotions, and establish our relations, and body forth our values, in our body language, style and rhetoric; but we can also articulate all of these in poetry,

novels, dance, music; and we can also bring all of them to descriptive articulation, where we name the feelings, relations, and values, and describe and argue about them.

(Taylor 441)

Meaning is not just created through the attribution of properties to things. It involves performance, activation and evocation. In other words, K is more than the attribution of stupidity or innocence to Michael K, which the medical officer eventually realizes. It is also more than just the opposition of terms as Saussure would argue. For the medical officer, K is best understood as allegory, but more specifically an allegory “speaking at the highest level” (Coetzee 166), and this means a form of expression that is highly theoretical, refined, and beyond the everyday language. His meaning is obscure and not easily decoded. The difficulty in deciphering the allegory perhaps points towards another understanding of allegory which is closer to what we understand as symbol. In this regard, within the full range of expressive forms, what Cassirer calls symbolic forms lies “another sub-range ... the work of art, something which is neither expressive projection nor description” (440-41). Taylor observes that

the work of art played an even more important role in the development of expressivism than what I have been calling projection. We can see this in the conception of the symbol, as opposed to the allegory, which played an important role in the aesthetic of the Romantic period and, indeed, since. As described, for instance, by Goethe, the symbol was a paradigm of what I have been calling constitutive expression.

WESTERN CAPE (Taylor 441)

Taylor considers an allegorical work of art as providing “us with some insight or truth which we could also have access to more directly” (441). As an example he suggests that an “allegory of virtue and vice as two animals, say, will tell us something which could also be formulated in propositions about virtue and vice” (441). In contrast to this, he suggests that “a work of art had the value of a symbol when it manifested something which could not be thus ‘translated.’ It opens access to meanings which cannot be made available any other way. Each truly great work is in this way *sui generis*. It is untranslatable” (441). In this way, the Medical Officer’s perception of Michael K as allegory points to Coetzee’s project of writing fictions with an acute sense of the need to use the full resources of language. It is a meaning that has the overdetermined value of symbol and demonstrates how the creative spirit works. This is because K’s meaning is untranslatable, and it needs to be so, otherwise it would become another term in the system, another cog in the machinery, or a figure as an instrument and therefore without interest.



The Medical Officer appears to insist on K's meaning working on the level of allegory and not symbol. However, it is the marked phrase "—speaking at the highest level—" (Coetzee 166), whose significance and importance we have pointed out earlier, that suggests the level to which the medical officer refers. Taylor's distinction between allegory and symbol, is one where he uses the word "symbol" in the manner that

is generally used by the tradition which starts in Goethe's time. But the opposed terms symbol/allegory are not always applied in the same sense. When, in the "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger says that the artwork is *not* a symbol, he is accepting a use of the term which is synonymous with "allegory" in the terminology I am using here, something which points beyond itself for its meaning. In the standard distinction, this kind of "symbol" is called allegory, and is contrasted with what I am calling "symbol," something whose meaning cannot be made manifest by some other route.

(Taylor 453)

What Coetzee seems to be doing here, and what the medical officer seems to mean by allegory at the highest level, is that the allegory is closer to that of symbol. This is a similar view which we see in a more conventional reading of Heidegger. More importantly, it demonstrates how Coetzee has framed Michael's meaning in the Medical Officer's narration. K's meaning within the medium of language, and within linguistic theory too, is one that resides in a system without becoming a term, or a word in it. The poststructuralist theoretical paradigm which the Medical Officer's language seems to allude to is used to describe how K's meaning defines the movement and slippage of meaning in language. This is why the Medical Officer says: "Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed." (166). It is because the explanation he offers of K refers to the elusive nature of meaning itself, and of how it slips away as soon as you try to pin it down. The mode of narration also makes it impossible to pin K's consciousness down as we have no access to it. This coupled with a narrative that is framed as a story of an imagined escape within the narrative, perhaps, makes K's meaning untranslatable, obdurate, and therefore an allegory "speaking at the highest level" (166).

The slippage of meaning is contained in the clause, "how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166). The meaning that is defined here is what Derrida would define as the "*différence* of this irreducible difference" (SSP 241). Here *différence* comes from the word "*différer*, in the sense of 'to postpone,' 'put off,' 'defer' (Notes of SSP 242). In Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics," he argues that "in language there are only differences" (182).

Furthermore, difference “applies only to the comparing of two sound-images, e.g. *father* and *mother*, or two ideas, e.g. the idea ‘father’ and the idea ‘mother’” (183). Moreover, “a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*” (182). He goes on to say, “[b]ut the statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately; when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class” (182). In this sense, Saussure suggests that a

linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas; but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass of thought engenders a system of values; and this system serves as the effective link between the phonic and psychological elements within each sign

(Saussure 182)

K’s meaning, his concept, his idea, or his definition, is never mentioned apart from standing on the level of symbol and the untranslatable. He has meaning but his meaning is a *différence* of his difference, a postponement of what distinguishes him from others. His identity is unstable and without a solid reference. If this was not so, the idea of Michael K would be paired with an acoustical sign and his meaning would therefore become a term in a system of values. The meaning of K would then help add to and fortify the structure of the system. As the Medical Officer observes, Michael K is a meaning that “can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (Coetzee 166). Coetzee demonstrates his commitment to, and understanding of, writing by denying readers access to Michael K’s consciousness in this part of the novel. It is literally the “irreducible difference,” (Derrida, *SSP* 241), because his consciousness is the “remainder that cannot be read, that must remain alien” (Derrida, *JDLLD* 4). It is in the Medical Officer’s story of their imagined escape that the impossibility of K’s meaning is revealed. Coetzee uses the medical officer’s desire for categories or clear structures in a system of values to create a meaning that evades definition or being fixed or firmly secure. It is a desire for a positive value in his system of values, in order to distinguish Michael K’s meaning in opposition to others that ultimately results in a meaning that is anything but fixed or secure. Furthermore, it is a meaning that is translated by using linguistic theory, and played out in the medium of language itself. This perhaps signals Michael K’s meaning working on the level of symbol, or the untranslatable, in the story of what we call fiction.

In the narrative of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee has created a world in the midst of a civil war (a system and its unravelling) centred on man. It is a world where the meaning of the human is defined in relation to the war that has affected the whole country; in other words, it structures and defines the meanings of the human participants within it. Turning to Derrida in his analysis of the structure of systems, he argues that

the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible. *Qua* center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. At least this permutation has always remained *interdicted* (I use this word deliberately).

(Derrida, *SSP* 224)

In terms of Coetzee's creation of the figure of K, and the medical officer's attempt to explicate him, we witness the ways in which meaning is created through the introduction of a new meaning into a system. In other words, a meaning that does actually and must elude the system in order not to become a term in it, because if it becomes a term it will not demonstrate any movement. The centre "closes off the freeplay" (224). Furthermore, it is the point at which "the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible," not even the "permutation or the transformation of elements" is allowed, it is "forbidden" (224). Michael K as a figure who provides meaning to the concept of the human cannot become a term in it, because should he do so, and with the centre defined as man, he will be wholly a man but K cannot be wholly man (as seen with the prostitutes at the end of the novel). In other words, he is always an inadequate figure. His meaning is movement, he is elusiveness, and if he should become a term, his movement, and his substitution, will be "interdicted" (224).

However there is another movement of freeplay that does not involve the terms at the centre. The creation of new meaning means that the field of language can never be completely saturated, stabilised or totalised. As Derrida observes, "language and a finite language—excludes totalization" (236). Another way of conceiving nontotalization, Derrida suggests, is "from the standpoint of the concept of *freeplay*" (236). Furthermore, because of the nature of the field of language he suggests that:

This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions.

(Derrida, *SSP* 236)

As we saw with Saussure earlier, the “linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (178). The sign is therefore not united with a point of origin in reality. It is not a sign of an actual man or woman but rather the concept of man or woman. And because of this missing centre or point of origin there is nothing which “arrests or founds the freeplay of substitutions” (Derrida, *SSP* 236). Derrida also points out “that this movement of the freeplay, permitted by the lack, the absence of a center, or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*” (236). He observes that:

One cannot determine the center, the sign which *supplements* it, which takes its place in its absence—because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always something more, but this addition is a floating one, because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.

(Derrida, *SSP* 236-37)

In the diegesis of the story, K’s meaning supplements a lack in the idea, or conception of its human participants. It is this “lack on the part of the signified” (237) which allows this slippage of signification, and which usually explains “the superabundance of signifier, in relation to the signifieds” (237). As Brenda Marshall suggests, “[I]anguage becomes a slippage from signifier to signifier, rather than from signifier to absolute signified” (69). The conception, or the idea, of the human participants in the novel is not complete, and it is because of this lack that new meaning can be introduced in the form of Michael K.

However, it is the way Coetzee has immersed in, and abandoned himself to writing, and in his surrender to the play of signifiers in the creation of Michael K, which is significant. Coetzee’s achievement is not in defining K’s meaning. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman argued above, writing’s knowledge does not consist in linking the signifieds, the definitional meaning of words. Rather, the knowledge of the meaning of the text escapes the writer. In this way the writer, through knowledge that consists in linking the signifiers of the text, escapes his or her self-presence in the text (Clarkson 92-93). This is because the writer does not impose his or her authority on the text by prescribing its meaning, and through which his or her presence becomes noticeable. It is because of this that meaning is always open and rests on the reader’s perception, more than the writers’ control of the text. K’s meaning is a story, it is an “allegory,” not a term. In other words, K’s meaning is not defined by terms or words or even a sentence. Rather his meaning is defined on the level of story because an

allegory in its basic sense is a story that holds a hidden meaning. It does seem that signifiers refer to signifiers, but once activated by narrative or writing one gets an insight into the mode of signification Coetzee proposes. K's meaning is allegorical. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* an allegory is "a story, poem, or picture which contains a hidden meaning" (21). K's meaning, then, cannot be grasped in terms or oppositions but rather in the allegorical unfolding of his story, in particular, according to the Medical Officer, the story of his stay in the camp and of how his meaning takes up residence in the system without becoming a term in it. It would perhaps be better to look for K's hidden meaning, by looking more closely at the level of narrative, then.

For Roland Barthes, the level of meaning that operates on the level of narration is the sum of all the events and actions that occur in the novel. In this respect, if we are to define the meaning of Michael K we would have to read his story, and plot his meaning, from the events and actions he is involved in. As Barthes suggests, "everyone knows, linguistics stops at the sentence" (239). In other words, K's meaning cannot be defined linguistically, as proposed by the medical officer whose explanation as we have seen is one which is entrapped by language. Instead, if Michael K has a hidden meaning it can only be discovered by the reader who is stitched to the narrative of K through a process of simulation, which is a key operation of the mind (Hogan 14). Simulation allows us to imagine how events and actions in the novel might play out. These events and actions, like simulation, are always ephemeral or fleeting. Furthermore, when these events are emotionally charged they trigger the same brain regions and emotional response within the reader (4). We therefore feel with K through all the events and actions he encounters in the story. We are able to experience K's development, his internment, his coming to a self-awareness, and his reaction to the stabbing of the guard, for example. It is our experience of these events that allow us to discover a meaning for K, and one that is beyond the level of the sentence.

Furthermore, Barthes argues that "[t]he function of narrative is not to 'represent'; it is to put together a scene which still retains a certain enigmatic character for the reader, but does not belong to the mimetic order in any way" (271). The point here is that the scene becomes interesting for the reader once it evokes a response from him or her. One such enigmatic scene from the novel is perhaps the medical officer's imagined escape with Michael and where he reveals what K means to him. The meaning that the medical officer reveals is



contained within an imagined story within the narrative. In it the medical officer struggles to tell K what he means to him, but K escapes from his attempts without giving him an answer to whether his meaning is right or wrong. What is enigmatic about this scene is that even in an imagined event K would still not be able to answer the question because he is not really there. Whatever answer the medical officer receives would amount to the medical officer's own imagined answer. It seems then, that what this passage does is to evoke a response from the reader in that we have become a witness to the meaning the medical officer reveals and we are in a position to respond to whether his meaning is right or wrong. The function of a narrative it seems is not to mimic reality, but to evoke a response from the reader.

Furthermore, Barthes suggests that “the passion that may consume us upon reading a novel” is not related to a vision or of seeing anything for that matter (271). Rather, he argues, “[i]t is the passion to discover meaning” that consumes us (271). It is perhaps for this reason that Coetzee creates a character like the Medical Officer who is obsessed with discovering meaning, in order to mirror our curiosity for discovering meaning. However, discovering meaning can also turn to determining meaning, defining meaning or extracting meaning which places the reader in a position of privilege. As Stefan Helgesson suggests

the novel associates me, the reader/critic, with the medical officer, places me alongside the scouts, interrogators, diagnosticians and cartographers of Empire as I focus my gaze on Michael K to determine what order of meaning can be extracted from him. I cannot hide from this fact, only concede my daunting privilege as an agent of reading.

(Helgesson 182)

In this respect, Coetzee's creation of the figure of Michael K seems to subvert even this position of privilege, because Michael K's symbolic power lies in his ability to elude meaning and thus deny anyone the privilege of defining him, whether it be the critic, reader or Medical Officer. In many ways the Medical Officer's desire and struggle to discover K's meaning can perhaps be seen as an analogy of the curious reader. The reader who through the activity of reading is an active participant in the discovery of meaning, and just like the Medical Officer he or she would struggle to pin K down too.

Ultimately Barthes' view on narrative is one that tries to provoke an active participation in the activity of reading. Narrative needs to be an adventure in language, as it needs to put together a scene that retains some enigmatic quality that evokes a response in the reader, and moreover it needs to ignite our passion for discovering meaning. Barthes remarks that:



Narrative does not make people see, it does not imitate; the passion that may consume us upon reading a novel is not that of a “vision” (in fact, strictly speaking, we “see” nothing). It is the passion to discover meaning, it is a striving towards a higher order of relation, which also carries its emotions, its hopes, its threats, its triumphs. What goes on in a narrative is, from the referential (real) point of view, strictly *nothing*. What does “happen” is language per se, the adventure of language, whose advent never ceases to be celebrated.

(Barthes 271)

Narrative, literature, dialogue and reading are all connected to the activity of language. It is through this “adventure of language” (271), that we discover meaning. What Michael K means is a conversation between the reader and the words on the page. It also seems to provoke what it means to be human, as language beings, and through a conversation in which we discover a shared meaning.



## Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to explore what novelists do with philosophical concepts concerning language and consciousness which seek to define “human.” In *The Road* (2006) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Cormac McCarthy and J.M. Coetzee respectively construct stories using abstract or theoretical ideas in narrative form. In this way they seem to be testing the traditional philosophical claim that language represents rational thought by exploring its effects beyond those of its conventional usage, and the normal assumption that language is no more than an instrument for thinking.

Because of the focus in this dissertation on the relevance of language to notions of the human, it is largely influenced by philosophers who share these concerns. It draws on Jacques Derrida’s thought on language and consciousness, Martin Heidegger’s conception of being, Charles Taylor’s linguistic-philosophical theory, Stuart Hall’s conception of culture and representation, Robert Alter’s critique of literary style and affect, Philip Snyder’s critique of hospitality, Carrol Clarkson’s work on narrative voice, and David Attwell’s work on J.M Coetzee and *Life & Times of Michael K*. Taken together, the works of these philosophers and literary critics demonstrate the powerful contribution of imaginative fiction over rational argument.

In *The Road*, poststructuralist theory is tested in narrative form. In his representation of an apocalyptic world, McCarthy explores the loss of both the natural and cultural world and in effect the virtual extinction of man. This loss of reality seems to be in line with poststructuralist thought where meaning is severed from its foundations in material reality. However, the novel does not revel in the notion of a meaning that is in flux, but rather the tone is one of sadness or despair for the loss of these secure foundations. This is why critics like David Holloway consider *The Road* (as well as *Blood Meridian*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *Cities of the Plain* and *All the Pretty Horses*) by McCarthy to be an example of late modernism because of its lament for the loss of traditional meaning. Postmodern works on the other hand tend to address the problem of signification in a playful or even a joyful way, whereas McCarthy, I have suggested, achieves an atmosphere of despair through his style of writing. Drawing on the auditory quality of words such as rhythm, alliteration and assonance, which function on the principle of subvocalization, the words of the text form a rhythm. This

rhythm is used either to create a tone of moral gravity or urgency in the novel. Cultural associations found within the literary work, are also examined and these include idiomatic expressions and symbols, placed by Robert Alter under the attributes of style. I argue that it is through these features of McCarthy's style, that he is able to create an affective meaning to his work.

McCarthy also generates atmosphere and feeling through his narrative in a process that psychologists refer to as simulation. The events that occur to the father and son, and the situations they find themselves in, have the same emotional impact on the readers as they would if they were experienced first-hand, although to a lesser degree. Furthermore, McCarthy heightens this emotional response because the father and son encapsulate the same shared cultural beliefs and values that have been lost to the other humans in the novel, and they do so by standing up as the "good guys," "carrying the fire" (McCarthy 136).

In this way McCarthy uses poststructuralist theory to test the validity of meaning in a world where the signifiers' referents have been etiolated. It is perhaps, for this reason that the affective meaning is as powerful as it is because the loss of meaning is coupled to the feelings of despair and sadness, and then contrasted with the protagonists, who still cling to the notion of the human with its basis in a tradition, inherited from Western thought. A tradition, in other words, that defines the human as special, not only because he or she is rational, but because in the Judeo-Christian construction he or she is made in the image of God and as such is endowed with human dignity.

Similarly, Coetzee also structures his novel in relation to the philosophical. The novel is set in the midst of a civil war, which can be read as the conflict between two systems of governance. Here he imagines an historical event which should polarize the country into the two factions: defenders of the state or guerrilla resistance fighters. However, in the midst of this conflict, where the meaning of the human participants are defined by the side they choose, Coetzee manages to show through the slippage of meaning how the elusive protagonist, Michael K, avoids either of the camps.

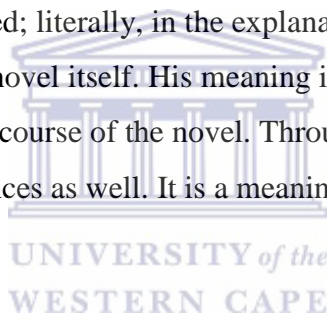
The representation of Michael K also seems to evoke poststructuralist theory. Coetzee poses questions of ontology through his experiments with both narrative voice and with literary devices such as allegory and symbol to create a character that eludes any definitive meaning. His style of narration that begins in the third person develops into a mode of narration where the narrative switches between a narrator located enigmatically inside K's head, and K himself. This switch in voices allows the reader access to K's consciousness at times, but the access is in the first person and this presents an unusually affective response to K's thoughts. However, Coetzee changes the point of view in the second part of the novel. Here the mode of narration comes solely from the first person point of view of the Medical Officer. This allows Coetzee to deny the reader access to K's consciousness in this part of the novel, and precisely where K's story becomes open to interpretation.

From a philosophical perspective, Heidegger suggests that Being opens us up to beings but, at the same time, it also withdraws from them. This withdrawal is what Derrida defines as the irreducible element, and as the limit to what we can know. Furthermore, individual consciousness seems to follow the same movement of opening and withdrawal. We can only know what other people are thinking through what they communicate to us. In this way, consciousness will always contain an element of irreducibility, as it always contains something in another person that we can never fully access.

Coetzee's manipulation of narrative voice allows him to play with this philosophical concept. In the second part of the novel, the Medical Officer tries to give a meaning to Michael K. However Coetzee's representation of this version of K demonstrates the dynamism involved in his understanding of the way meaning is produced. For the Medical Officer's reflection of his sense of who K is, arises out of his musing that perhaps "now would be a good time" for him and Noël (the Major in charge of the rehabilitation camp) to quit the camp. Through the logic of association, K is drawn into the medical officer's thinking, with the medical officer imagining that he had escaped from the camp with K. He then uses the situation of the imagined escape to tell K what K means to him. Michael K's meaning is accordingly represented in the form of an imagined event in the novel. In other words, it is read as a telescoped narrative, or as a narrative within a narrative. As David Attwell points out, "The medical officer in *Michael K* is correct in discerning what K stands for" (146). In other words, K is a person whose meaning eludes the system. However, the narrative structure

surrounding the narration of this meaning leaves us with a sense that even this reading is uncertain and fleeting. Furthermore, the narrative voice emphasizes the fragmentary nature of this sense of K's meaning and without the possibility to create any coherence out of it. This mirrors the indeterminate and elusive nature of K and which is emphasized by a narrative structure which in itself demonstrates the elusive nature of thought.

Coetzee does more than this, though. He uses the conceptual framework of literary devices such as allegory and symbol to literally describe K's meaning, but more importantly to demonstrate an original theoretical structure for the conception of a symbol in the literary form. By making K's meaning by necessity elusive, and therefore untranslatable, Coetzee creates a figure who essentially operates on the level of the symbol in the fiction. This is perhaps because K's interiority cannot be accessed in any other way, save through the medium of fiction, namely the language of literature. Ultimately, it is through narrative that Michael K's meaning is discovered; literally, in the explanation the medical officer gives of K but also in the narrative of the novel itself. His meaning is the sum of the events and his experiences that occur during the course of the novel. Through the process of simulation the reader is sutured to these experiences as well. It is a meaning that both Michael K and the reader have to discover together.



It is evident that both writers demonstrate the influence of philosophical theory in their work. McCarthy, however, seems to use the theoretical as a propositional framework, or as a means of creating boundaries or rules which define the space where he can play out the effects of the affective meaning contained in both his style and in the nature of his story. The apocalyptic vision of *The Road* allows McCarthy to portray a world in which the loss of culture and nature is a reality. With the loss of the force of the binary oppositions of nature and culture, and the tension which usually creates meaning, McCarthy has produced a landscape in which the validity of meaning can be tested. Coetzee's novel, on the other hand, seems to fuse the literary with the philosophical. His passages are layered with meanings that operate on various levels, ranging from the philosophical, through to the linguistic and the literary. In this way, his novel seems to be a fictional exploration of theoretical questions or ideas. The theories, though, percolate out of the story rather than being imposed on the fiction, and it is here that the intensity of his fiction lies, as for example in his portrait of K who is a character in the story filled with various theoretical possibilities.

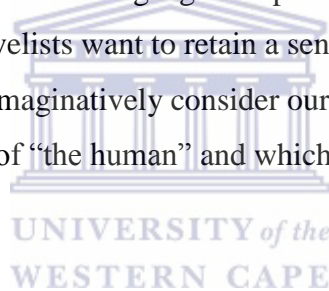
Thematically, both these novels seem to engage critically with the traditions in Western thought particularly around the meaning of the human. In both novels, a sense emerges that to be human is to take responsibility for the Other, and this, it seems, rests on the ability to feel compassion for others. This is a theme that seems to be an undercurrent in both novels. In McCarthy's work it is contained in the moral obligation of the father and the son, and in their belief that they are the "good guys" who are "carrying the fire" (McCarthy 136). In Coetzee's work the question of the responsibility for others is one which confronts Michael K throughout the course of the novel: "Do I believe in helping people?" (Coetzee 48). This impulse of caring for others, based on a meaning of the human inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition, seems to challenge the conception of the meaning of our responses as being merely subjective, arbitrary and always in flux. The human 'being' in this conception does not need to become anything. And does not need to become anything in order to justify their worth or value because this is preordained in the idea that humans are made in the image of God, and as such entitled to human dignity. This conception of the human seems to challenge Immanuel Kant's conception of the human in which the Modern man "tries to invent himself," and moreover where "modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being' but rather "compels him to face the task of producing himself" (Foucault 42). In this conception, the human is always becoming, always producing himself, and never just is. In McCarthy, we come across the father who appears as someone who just is and has always been so, whereas the son represents the possibility of becoming despite his desperate circumstances.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee represents a conception of the human based on discovering, or uncovering, a nature liberated in its being, but also in contrast to a human meaning based on becoming. *Life & Times of Michael K* is in many ways a novel of development or of becoming. K develops from a person who had "someone to tell him what to do next" (Coetzee 67) to a person who begins to make his own choices, and in so doing discovers his true nature. However, it is a nature based on protecting and nurturing the things that grow. This nature is perhaps the spur for K's resolution to begin helping other people, and thus nurturing a belief in the human being based on responsibility for the other. *The Road*, though, does not seem to portray a definition of the human founded on becoming, initially. In fact, the father and son do not want to become like the other humans they encounter, and for obvious reasons. Instead, they wish to retain a belief in the human founded



on intrinsic and altruistic values. However, although the father espouses these beliefs to his son, the novel portrays a man in conflict with his son, and possibly forced to become like everyone else around him in order to protect his son. It is the son, it seems, where the goodness and compassion of human 'being' is immanent, and that through him it may possibly continue.

It seems then that although *The Road* creates a world in which the fluidity of meaning can operate, and *Michael K* depicts a world based on the slippage of meaning, both novels contain a meaning of the human located in the tradition of Western thought, namely the idea of the human being founded on the notion of responsibility for the Other. It would seem, moreover, that outside the text or the novel, there is always a kernel or trace of the inside, namely Western thought. Indeed, there is no escape from how Western thought constructs meaning because of the way our language is embedded in it; for the novel this means the fiction is constantly at odds with its own language. In spite of all the insights of poststructuralist thought, both novelists want to retain a sense that reason can be used constructively by allowing us to imaginatively consider our place in the social world, and this I suggest remains a core element of "the human" and which lies beyond any linguistic or rational scrutiny.



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