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## Coetzee's *Dusklands*: The Mythic *Punctum*

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J. M. COETZEE begins his 1973 paper on his fellow South African novelist Alex La Guma by quoting the critic Lewis Nkosi's tellingly pertinent, discouraging, and much discussed conclusion about the recent work of the nation's black novelists: "[i]t is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigor of the imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by the conditions in South Africa" (Coetzee, "La Guma" 116). One might argue that the situation in South African letters has changed considerably since Nkosi's 1967 comment and that an increasing number of black South African writers—Ellen Kuzwayo, Zoë Wicomb, and Njabulo Ndebele come immediately to mind—are indeed responding to the problems of their country with significant imaginative vigor and the deft use of modern technical resources. Coetzee could certainly join in the celebration of these new talents; his critique of Nkosi's finding is based on other grounds.

Coetzee questions the implicit assumptions that inform Nkosi's statement. Thus he takes issue with the idea that the writer's task is to begin with social fact ("the problems posed by the conditions in South Africa") and to transform that fact into a (necessarily politicized) work of art. He further questions the underlying premise that this transformation can properly take place only through the interaction of indigenous social concerns with the resources of the imagination heightened by an undefined but curiously Western concept of technical mastery. Insofar as this notion presupposes both a correct response to specific problems and the universality of the values Nkosi espouses, it is, at the very least, naively posed.

In raising Coetzee's rebuttal of Nkosi in this context, I do not wish to take issue with Nkosi, for although his trenchantly voiced stands on black South African fiction recur prominently in much of his early work, he has since qualified them.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I evoke Nkosi's name as a convenient shorthand for a specific position often associated with that writer and defined in more general terms by another South Afri-

can writer and critic, Richard Rive: “There is a current theory that not only can the black writer do both [write superior fiction and take an active part in the political struggle], but that in South Africa he must. The idea emanates from the safety of certain American and Canadian universities and tends to prescribe from the outside what the writers’ role must be inside” (1, 32). One can argue, like Rive and Coetzee, that such a position is reckless as well as facile—one could also argue that it is uncharacteristic of Nkosi’s more complex later stance, were it not that the issue refuses to disappear. It relates to the problem, focused from both the inside and the outside, of wanting a usable tradition for postcolonial struggles and to the intellectual difficulties of reconciling that desire, that need, with an abiding concern about who is legitimately entitled to use this tradition and how.

One typical response to Coetzee’s own fiction has been framed in just such terms of usefulness. The novels persistently seem to inspire charges that Coetzee lacks commitment to the reality of South Africa. In this respect, the reception accorded him has been quite different from that given other internationally known nonblack South African writers—for example, Fugard and Gordimer, whose application of imaginative vigor and technical resources to the specific problems of their country have been much applauded. Coetzee’s ambiguous, anguished narratives are often criticized as too tenuously connected to specific social and political issues. Right thinking is not enough, the accusation goes; unless it is accompanied by correct action, the work gives evidence of bad faith. Abdul R. JanMohamed’s brief indictment of one of Coetzee’s novels is apposite:

Although the novel is *obviously* generated by white South Africa’s racial paranoia and the guilt of its liberals, *Waiting for the Barbarians* [Coetzee’s third novel] . . . *refused to acknowledge* its historical sources or to make any allusion to the specific barbarism of the apartheid regime. . . . *In its studied refusal to accept historical responsibility*, this novel . . . *attempts to mystify* the imperial endeavor. (73; my emphasis)

Like Nkosi, JanMohamed grounds his critique on the premise that the South African novelist should

reflect verifiable social fact and dedicate imaginative endeavor directly toward resolving the atrocious situation in that country. Anything less, in JanMohamed’s highly charged language, constitutes a refusal to acknowledge or, worse, an attempt to mystify. In this indictment JanMohamed is not far from the more rhetorically neutral call to action embodied in Nkosi’s carefully hedged and much cited suggestion that “[i]t may even be wondered whether it might not be more prudent to ‘renounce literature temporarily,’ as some have advised, and solve the political problem first rather than to continue to grind out hackneyed third-rate novels” (“*Home*” 132).

The typical response to such critics—and JanMohamed and Nkosi are only two in a long and distinguished line—is to accept the major premise and to attempt to disprove its relation to the writer under analysis. This is the approach Stephen Watson takes when, writing before JanMohamed, he acknowledges the potential for mystification in Coetzee’s work but argues powerfully not only that Coetzee’s novels are all “definitely grounded in a certain historical position” but that Coetzee “has provided more insight into the colonizing mind, as well as the dissenting, colonizing mind, than any of his contemporaries.” Furthermore, “even if this were not enough, there remains that passionate hunger in all four [now five] of Coetzee’s novels to escape the warped relationships that colonialism fosters” (390). Coetzee, according to this critic, does respond in a conscientious and committed manner to the specific problems raised by the conditions in South Africa.

There is another response to critics demanding social commitment, one that Coetzee himself suggests in his regrounding of Nkosi’s conclusions. “What,” he asks at the close of his paper on La Guma, “is the ‘correct’ mode for a society which, self-divided, swings uneasily from the Geneva of Calvin to the Manchester of 1830 to the Los Angeles of today in search of an identity it may never find?” (124). Coetzee leaves this question open, implying that there is no answer, correct or incorrect, to such an uneasy oscillation. And, oscillation aside, the issue of “correctness” is itself vexed, involving both prescriptive political response and a definition of value. Coetzee, in fact, challenges Nkosi’s major premise on precisely this basis

(117–18): (1) Is it valid, even strategically, to frame a literary issue in terms of a specific ideal of political “correctness”? (2) To what degree does such a prescriptive charge color the question of the social implications of art and the social responsibilities of the artist?

The crucial issue of value implies a rate of exchange on both literal and literary stock markets. According to JanMohamed, “colonialist discourse ‘commodifies’ the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a ‘resource’ for colonialist fiction” (64). For Nkosi, writing from the other side of the commodity market, the exchange value of black literature in South Africa is somewhat different. He hints that writers cash in their blue-chip literary stocks to invest in the risky potential boom in political activism. There is no doubt that focusing on the dynamics of a narrative’s exchange value offers critics a justifiable method of analysis, one with premiums of its own on the literary-critical market. But are particular critics “justified” in applying this method to particular articles? Is it the “correct” approach? To what degree are JanMohamed and Nkosi “commodified” by the resources of their individual choices of literary code, by the analytical traditions they so ably manipulate? To what extent does this value system in itself recommodify the native subject into yet another version of the stereotypical object of a Westernized gaze, a version in which a non-Western critic enters a system that many other non-Westerners have found, with good reason, to be peripheral, if not totally alien, to their traditional views? Or, following Nkosi’s suggestion in a later work (see *Tasks and Masks* 79), one might rephrase the question: To what degree is the adulated black writer (or critic, Rive would add) neatly inserted into a white, Eurocentric critical discourse through the distortional, patronizing mythologies of the quaintly exotic? In what respects does that writer unconsciously comply with this insertion? To what extent, Kwame Anthony Appiah would add, is the valued indigenous tradition itself produced and reified by European thinkers and their rebellious postcolonial heirs?<sup>2</sup>

There is, furthermore, the problem of linguistic slippage signaled by the telltale quotation marks around the word *correct* (the immensely complex question of political slippage we can set

aside for the moment). Coetzee, a careful writer and rigorous thinker, notes that “in language there are no stable and positive elements. Elements achieve definition only through their reciprocal differences, and all shift their boundaries continually with the passing of time” (“First Sentence” 48). To some degree any ordering process distorts what it purports to define, twists what it intends to set straight. What this means, most obviously, is that behavior considered correct in one age is a clear atrocity in another. In a more philosophical sense, as Appiah reminds us, “this nativism in theory . . . grounds a politics of reading on a spurious epistemology of reading. And the talk of theoretical adequacy—which is both the carrot and the stick—is seriously misleading” because it ignores the multiple “productive modes of reading” in favor of an ill-defined and insufficiently grounded “search for Mr. Right” (171).

Coetzee’s bracketing of “correctness” points to a still more fundamental and unresolved issue relating to the culturally imposed limits on slippage, an issue JanMohamed defines as the ultimate inability of colonialist texts to comprehend the other: “Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture. . . . [H]owever, this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one’s very being . . .” (65). In cultures so strange as to seem almost completely alien to Western eyes, some residue remains unintelligible, certain crucial distinctions escape notice because they are not amenable to Western categories of thought, and innumerable possibilities of interpretation elude our systems of representation. Says Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka: “[T]he essentiality of our black being remains untouched. For the black race knows, and is content simply to know, itself. It is the European world that has sought, with the utmost zeal, to redefine itself through these encounters, even when the European has appeared to be endeavoring to grant meaning to an experience of the African world” (769). Both Nkosi’s criticism of black South African writers and JanMohamed’s of Coetzee imply a commitment to the revolutionary social and political role of the writer but ignore the implicit as-

sumptions of the positions taken: Nkosi, for example, marks the authority of Jean-Paul Sartre and Lucien Goldmann; and JanMohamed privileges discourse filtered through the perceptions of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. Their work, inevitably, reflects the orthodox Western worldview, a narrative context so familiar and so canonical that it passes unquestioned even in journals attentive to the nuances of “‘race,’ writing, and difference.” (In saying this, I am merely reiterating Coetzee’s point; see “La Guma” 116–17. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s poignant recognition of the necessary double voicing of his own academic texts is also highly relevant in this regard.) As Gunnar Myrdal writes,

There must still be . . . countless errors . . . that no living man can yet detect, because of the fog within which our type of Western culture envelops us. Cultural influences have set up assumptions about the mind, the body, and the universe with which we begin; pose the questions we ask; influence the facts we seek; determine the interpretations we give these facts; and direct our reaction to these interpretations and conclusions. (qtd. in Gould 25)

How, then, can one even pose the question of the intersections between a culturally defined literary blackness and Soyinka’s essential blackness?

More specifically, in this context, the concept of a politically or morally “correct” response to apartheid is part of a single reality that includes, as it suppresses, that reality’s most typical manifestations, what Jacques Derrida has called “the archival record of the unnameable” (“Racism’s Last Word” 291). For, as Derrida observes in a later note, “the history of *apartheid* (its ‘discourse’ and its ‘reality,’ the totality of its *text*) would have been impossible, unthinkable without the European concept and the European history of the state, without the European discourse on race—its scientific pseudoconcept and its religious roots, its modernity and its archaisms—without Judeo-Christian ideology, and so forth” (“But, beyond” 165). Derrida has blown apartheid’s cover in recognizing the doctrine as the quintessential product of the West. For this reason, apartheid carries a particular charge of uncanny horror, of a negativity distanced and bracketed off from us

as “unnameable,” “impossible,” “unthinkable.” It is likewise untenable, unjustifiable, insupportable, unreadable, but at the same time, nevertheless, powerful in its repressed familiarity, disavowed but still potent. It signals a rejected self-knowledge anguishing to the noncasual Eurocentric supporter of the black struggle. This one word, then, subsumes the basic questions of value and linguistic slippage and, with “a neat condensation here, an odd displacement there” (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 49), delivers us over to an unthinkable (sub)text that cannot be dismissed or commended as a specific response to the barbarism of a specific regime at a specific moment in the history of a specifically circumscribed and geographically bounded bit of the globe.

*Dusklands*, the first and least studied of Coetzee’s five novels to date, contains the author’s implicit response to criticism advocating a moratorium on metaphysics and encouraging more “realistic” committed writing; it is also perhaps the most immediately relevant to this discussion of the value or validity of a certain anguished post-colonialist discourse. *Dusklands* appeared at approximately the same time as the La Guma article and reflects similar concerns. The book presents itself as a colonialist narrative that is obviously, unambiguously, double-voiced. Yet, neither of the two dominant narrative voices proposes itself as a theoretical re-creation of the voice of the other, a shadowy presence at best and one that retains an unreadable silence in all Coetzee’s novels.<sup>3</sup> The first part of the book, “The Vietnam Project,” narrates an unstable humanist’s mental breakdown following his questionable contribution to the American military efforts in Vietnam; the second, “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” tells of the meaningless wanderings and senseless butchery perpetrated by an illiterate Boer in Namaqualand, colonial South Africa. In both parts, then, the narrative voice is given over to the pseudoautobiographical celebration of atrocities committed against this silent other, who exists in the tale principally as a background on which force is exerted.

The novel’s strong and idiosyncratic double voicing of the Western explorer—divided into practitioner (Coetzee) and theoretician (Dawn, who seldom leaves his desk, much less the con-

tinental United States, also indicates that he has “an exploring temperament” [31]—implicitly enters into dialogue with the muted voices of traditional travel-exploration literature, in which the European narrators conscientiously efface themselves from the surfaces of the texts. As Mary Louise Pratt writes, “[n]o conventional textual space calls on the Europeans to portray their interactions, recount their dialogues, report the Others’ voices, or display the concrete working out of relations on the spot” (127). One function of Coetzee’s frankly brutal monologues is precisely to provide a necessarily mediated glimpse of the other, effaced voice of European conquest, the inhuman counterhistory denied by the depersonalized colonialist narrative, the underlying motivations buried in the conventions of scholarly publication or hidden in eyewitness accounts like the one helpfully appended to his novel.

These two parts, taken in isolation, stand as a stringent critique of an orthodoxy that once tolerated and still tolerates the murderous frenzies of a Vietnam-era Eugene Dawn or an eighteenth-century Jacobus Coetzee as commonplace, acceptable, even commendable. The book, however, is more complex; the two parts are variously hedged and framed, both by designated readers within the text (named Coetzee in each part and identified as scholars) and by the pseudoscholarly apparatus of epigraphs, introductions, prefaces, and appendixes. Early in the novel one of the four Coetzees recommends that Eugene Dawn write “some kind of introduction in which you explain in words of one syllable the kind of procedure you follow—how myths operate in human society, how signs are exchanged, and so forth; with lots of examples and for God’s sake no footnotes” (4). Thus this game theorist clearly, casually, and brutally articulates the underlying theoretical debate about the role of fiction in South African reality and suggestively positions the novel within that debate. As Dawn notes with a characteristic lack of insight into the implications, “mythography, my present specialism, is an open field like philosophy or criticism because it has not yet found a methodology to lose itself forever in the mazes of” (31). Without the methodology, Dawn’s report is unreadable. With it, the report is lost in the mazes of the Western worldview; burdened, as this slim volume is

burdened, by the scholarly apparatus of translation, commentary, and footnotes; distorted by the pressures of diverse readers—not only the educated Coetzees but also “a much ruder crew” impatient with academic flourishes (4).

Like the game theorist and, in a different way, like the ruder crew solicited as the real audience, the mythographer Eugene Dawn is necessarily an outsider to the myths he documents, dealing in examples rather than in felt realities, manipulating the exchange of signs rather than reflecting on the constitutive power of mythic language in human society. The first Coetzee character’s sardonic admonition prefaces the novelistic re-creation of a prefabricated mythographic process laid bare. Without releasing the academic reader from the temptation of the theoretical, the foreshadowed demystification points toward the culturally driven imperatives of yet another unreflective movement from the empirical realm into a domain that conceptualizes partial bits of knowledge as human “universals.” Yet the mythic substance itself remains recalcitrant to such co-option and, indeed, is barely alluded to in the novel as a whole. Thus Coetzee’s injunction remits the reader to the beginning—or to a particular beginning of a particular narration—that only seems to explain the operation clearly, “in words of one syllable,” with “no footnotes.” As we advance, almost imperceptibly at first, along the trajectory between the ultrarational and the completely mad, the project of identifying an authoritative (authorized) voice becomes increasingly untenable. “How can the question of authority . . . be posed in the interstices of a double inscription?” asks Homi K. Bhabha, following a positional assertion defined, through an appeal to the authority of Derrida, as a “dis-location,” a displacement from and between two disproportionate and divergent scenes of enunciation: “To recognize the *différance* of the colonial text occupies that space of double inscription hallowed—no, hollowed—by Jacques Derrida” (150). Authority, the hallowed, is evoked and instantly undercut in its echo, the hollowed (a grotesque Halloween), while retaining the ambivalent marker of difference: the name Jacques Derrida.

In part 1 of the novel, Eugene Dawn writes a detailed report on methods of employing local myth to achieve American objectives in the Viet-

nam War. Yet this suggestive positioning of the narrator within a specific historical and social framework serves only to emphasize the character's moral and ideological displacement. Blind to the cause of his self-division, he writes about myth without conscious awareness of the mythic foundation that informs his projections, and as a result he slips dangerously from myth to fantasy. At the outset the displacement is minimal: ostensibly a scholar whose main resource is the library (i.e., the written word), Dawn derives his actual, unscholarly inspiration from three photographs he carries with him constantly. His retreat from the "facts" contained in books to the visionary experience of the photographs prefigures other displacements that intimate his final retreat into madness, and his tale, like Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, defines a methodology for the deconstruction of powerful myths in human society.

For Roland Barthes, myth is susceptible to three readings: the unambiguous literalization of the journalist; the distorted alibi of the mythologist; and the dynamic, ambiguous response of the Barthesian reader of myth (*Mythologies* 128). The first two readings demystify myth while reconstructing the spectacle from which it derives; and this spectacle, as Barthes notes in a later book, may be interesting, perhaps educational, possibly even compelling, "but [it] does not *prick* me" (*Camera* 43; my emphasis). The mythic other is for all intents and purposes "a pure object, a spectacle, a clown" of unredeemed exoticism. Only the third reading both consumes and remythifies the myth and in this reconstitution of a dynamic presence produces, critically, "the best weapon against myth" (*Mythologies* 152, 135).

Coetzee would agree that myth is something against which weapons are needed. In saying this, I recognize not only Coetzee's long-standing and well-recognized debt to Barthes but also and more crucially his specifically African reading of the French writer, an interpretation that finds Barthes's categories useful while recognizing that "myth," like the "exotic," is a cognitive construction—or deconstruction, as the case may be—accessible to the author, and to his repugnant characters, only as filtered through a Westerner's fetishism (and I deliberately signal my own com-

mitment to Western academic discourse in using *fetishism*, a word that shares the ideological context of *commodity* and *value*). Certainly one of the most powerful parallels with Barthes's theoretical work on mythology lies in Eugene Dawn's evocation of the three shocking photographs of atrocities committed in Vietnam. The scenes are chosen with deliberation, and, as Joan Gillmer notes, "variations on these images and their metaphors recur and expand" throughout Coetzee's oeuvre (108). Dawn finds the gruesome pictures titillating rather than horrifying; during times of depression he relies on them to "give [his] imagination the slight electric impulse that is all it needs to set it free again" (13). The reader of the novel is horrified by Dawn's insensitivity to suffering, a readerly horror that, significantly, does not extend to the graphically described scenes. These pictures have an "overconstructed horror" (Barthes's phrase, *Eiffel Tower* 71) that prohibits empathy, and this distancing of affect through a highly wrought artifact (a photograph or a novel) is precisely the point: examples do not necessarily permit access to an alien reality, and distanced violence offers no penetrating photographic *punctum*, no poignance.

The first photograph, which Dawn captions "Father Makes Merry with Children," shows Clifford Loman, "6' 2", 220 lbs., one time linebacker for the University of Houston . . . copulating with a Vietnamese woman, . . . possibly even a child . . ." (13). If the description below a picture in an album or a magazine usually serves to orient the viewer to the subject, Dawn's perverse title for this photograph, the only titled picture in his small collection, has exactly the opposite effect. In this most graphic of penetrations, the mocking caption disorients with its evocation of an innocent family game—as if, reality having incongruously failed to adapt itself to nostalgic dreams, literature can only approach genocide through displacement.

In the second picture, two clean-cut young American soldiers solemnly pose in a quiet Vietnamese village with their collection of severed heads "taken from corpses or near-corpses" (15). The picture unexpectedly stimulates Dawn's sense of the ridiculous, and his nervous giggle, like the wildly mismatched title for the first photograph,

catches us by surprise. We cannot proceed with impunity after our obligatory solemn shudders as right-thinking liberals; rather, we are caught by Dawn's twisted inflection of the scene. Instead of eliciting predigested horror displaced by a corruptingly distanced, touchingly affective comment, the picture is distorted by a scandalous emotional response. As Elizabeth Reichel observes, the giggle reminds us of our propensity to collect and display hunting trophies and to appoint ourselves custodians and curators of stolen native artifacts—African masks, Aztec gold, Egyptian mummies, stuffed rain-forest birds—for the delight and education of schoolchildren (Reichel, personal communication).

The third of the three central pictures focuses on the eye of a tortured prisoner of war in a tiger cage. Dawn dreams of probes literal and figurative as he fingers the smooth surface of the photograph, yearning to penetrate the glint in the photographed eye through the pressures of his exploring hand and the probing of his imagination, made acute by night and sleeplessness (16–17). The prisoner, after torture, should be empty, as extinct as the Annamese tiger; yet, disturbingly, the glint remains, resisting analysis.

Dawn's interrogation of his pictures recapitulates the distorting focus of the mythologist that Barthes describes in discussing the myth of mythical valorization. "Myth is a *value*," he says; "truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi . . ." (*Mythologies* 123). In this phrase, Barthes strips away the cushioning remove of difference and distance to which we too easily recur: it was not I; I was not there; I was only passing by. At question here, in this process of exemption and self-extraction, is a departure not from the truth but from the world itself. This ambivalent delimitation then reconstitutes itself in the creation of another, pristine world, of an insistent value that articulates itself through the unrecognized agency of excess, a prodigious alibi. The photographs described by Dawn are an index of this distortion, but they also reference a desired ideology figured in the mythographer's perverse deciphering of their signification.

J. M. Coetzee's primary purpose in providing shock photos of an untenable reality is to release the silenced, unimaginable other, the pictorial

"ghosts or absences of themselves," from the spectacle of horror that imprisons them (*Dusklands* 17) and to create an alternative surface—what Knox-Shaw calls an "imaginative tumescence" (78)—to prick and, poignantly, to be pierced. The fictive surface, yielding to penetration as the tiger-cage photograph does not, releases lacerating horror, bruising the reader, who can, finally, *feel* the point that description alone cannot provide, releasing her into a vigilance through or beyond the text.<sup>4</sup> As Derrida says in his catalog copy for the exhibition *Art contre/against Apartheid*, these paintings (or photographs) cast "a continuous gaze (paintings are always gazing) at what I propose to name a continent. Beyond a continent whose limits they point to, the limits surrounding it or crossing through it, the paintings gaze and call out in silence" ("Racism's Last Word" 299). Both subject and object, Coetzee might add, further complicating the issue, are available only to the illusory gaze reflected through a prism of conflicting mythologies or through a distorted reciprocity mediated by violence, of which literature may be one of the more common forms.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes refines his examination of the mythic aspect of photography and distinguishes between two orders of involvement in the spectacle of the photograph. The first, less intense level is that of the *studium*, which belongs to "the order of liking" (or dislike) and represents "a kind of education (knowledge, civility, 'politeness')," an analytic tool for reconciling the dangerous myth of the photograph with socially accepted practices (26–27). Dawn's tortuously formulated duty as a mythographer lies in the realm of *studium*: "I make extracts, check references, compile lists, do sums. . . . I see things and have a duty toward history. . . . It is my duty to point out our duty. I sit in libraries and see things . . ." (6, 28). Stephen Watson documents the degree to which Dawn's obsessively redundant emphasis on adherence to scholarly duty informs the structure of his report and, by extension, of the novel as a whole. In his pseudoscholarship, Watson says, Eugene Dawn is the literary heir of Nabokov's Kinbote and Borges's many scholarly protagonists (371); and, I might add, his obsessions place him in a direct line of descent from George Eliot's Causabon as well. Furthermore, the very structure

of the novel is determined by literary allusion. Watson writes:

Quotation is basic to [Coetzee's] fictional practice. In the first half of *Dusklands*, for example, one finds a few transposed lines from a John Berryman poem amid other sly allusions to William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and Franz Kafka. . . . Eugene Dawn himself mentions Bellow's *Herzog* and Patrick White's *Voss*. It is even more evident that Coetzee has read Hegel, is well acquainted with structuralist linguistics, and has a thoroughgoing knowledge of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. (371)

The list could be considerably expanded to include, for example, Barthes, Heidegger, W. E. B. Du Bois (the title of Coetzee's novel and the name of one of his protagonists echo Du Bois's title *Dusk of Dawn*), Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and also, significantly, Beckett; for Jacobus Coetzee's curious interest in stones (102) serves as a repressed echo of Molloy's ubiquitous sucking stones. This tissue of suppressed reference indexes a parodic reflection on "duty" to the scholarly forms of the literary, historical, and philosophical *studium*. Furthermore, it determines the very texture of the novel, providing a grounding that all too logically supports later murderous frenzies.

The safe, polite interest of the *studium* contrasts with the intense pleasure-pain of the *punctum*, which "will break (or punctuate) the *studium*" (*Camera* 26). The *studium*, then, allows a buffer zone between the spectator and the photograph, an institutionalized distance that cushions against the penetrating *punctum*. Dawn, the archetypal scholar, prefers this safe fiction to reality, prefers a slight electric shock to a goad; he refuses a trip to Vietnam as irrelevant or actually detrimental to his research. In the *punctum*, by way of contrast, pain—whether suffered by the spectator or the photographic subject, self-inflicted or inflicted by others—intensifies and flourishes beyond volition or tolerance. Significantly, Barthes's key words for this experience are also central to an understanding of Coetzee's novel:

[I]t is not I who seek it out . . . , it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed

instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of penetration. . . . [*P*]unctum is also: string, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (*Camera* 26–27)

*Pierce, prick, wound, bruise, poignant, points*—these terms are central in *Dusklands*; the concepts they designate expand as the novel progresses, indicating its ideological thrust, its intent to puncture the pretensions of colonialist discourse with short, incisive stabs. More specifically than Barthes, however, Coetzee presents the *punctum* as gendered, as a penetrating force associated with markedly male aggression—with rape and its metaphorical equivalents. The opposition of pierced and impenetrable surfaces forms the basis of Eugene Dawn's ambiguous and frequently contradictory meditations. His dreams, as opposed to his sense of duty, involve violence against an entire alien, explicitly female or feminized creation: "I sit in the depths of the Harry Truman Library . . . from which impregnable stronghold of the intellect I send forth this winged dream of assault upon the mothering earth itself" (28). Such imagery, notably, is not impregnable. In fact, earlier in the report, Dawn reverses the terms: he finds the library impenetrable to his imagination; it stifles him; he can do no creative work there. Only in a state of early-morning "poignant regret (*poindre*, to pierce)" can his brain master the exigencies of his body (6). "I am pierced," he says later, "by the desolation [*poignancy?*] of my plight" (39). The photographs' prickling of Dawn's imagination merges with the sadistic tortures of Vietnam's front line and with the stabbing of his own child. It becomes one as well with the explorer's lancing of the carbuncle ("my offspring" [89]) in the second part of the novel and with his murderous frenzy against the "impenetrable world" of the Hottentots (106), who must be destroyed because they cannot be assimilated to a white man's self-perception. From the security of the insane asylum, a substitute library, Eugene Dawn's dream of impregnability is allowed to wing forth once again: "[W]hile I am behind these walls with my doctors at hand I am as strong as a fortress and they know they [the tormenter from the Vietnam photo-



graphs, the doctors, the various Coetzees that haunt the novel, the accusatory children, the murdered Hottentots?] cannot penetrate me" (48).

The alienating combination of poignancy and piercing violence punctuates the novel as a whole. The impregnable walls of the library and the asylum yield to the poignancy of the Bushmen girls, who, although brutally and repeatedly raped, cannot be impregnated; and the violent attack imagined in Dawn's mad report is echoed in the piercing obscenity of S. J. Coetzee's afterword to the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee. The resistant surfaces of the (nonwhite) body submit to rape, to penetration by a knife, to wounds inflicted by "the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we know between ourselves and our objects" (17). Coetzee's history of the copula differs markedly from the version sketched by such thinkers as Jacques Derrida. In *Dusklands*, the copula never approximates or inaugurates a fertile *jouissance*; instead, it consistently manifests itself in rape and genocide. Only the photographs, obscurely impenetrable, refuse to bend to the demands of the mythographer; as Elizabeth Reichel notes, they "silently but eloquently visualize the unacceptable violence between cultures at war" (personal communication). Dawn is clearly aware that, despite his meticulous descriptions of the pictures' details, the photographic essence eludes him—as, in the absence of an alternative, positive interpretation of the copula, it must politically continue to elude the reader as well. Even the mock-poignant title "Father Makes Merry with Children" fails to capture the force of his compulsion. Yet in two of the photographs the point where description rests and interpretation is arrested is the same, though Dawn does not remark on this correspondence. In the tiger cage, the glinting point of light in the right eye of the prisoner compels Dawn's attention. In the copulation photograph, "a blank television screen winks back the flash of the [unknown photographer's] bulb" (13). Thus in both pictures a flash of light in the dusklands signals the point that wounds Dawn, the point where passivity before a formalized display of power is displaced into a penetrating force: the unrecognized photographic *punctum* that description lacks. "They are indeed right about the word *flash*," Dawn muses as he clutches his five-year-old son to him. His

readers are his photographers. And immediately, as if action stemmed necessarily and logically from his thoughts, he continues, "Holding it like a pencil, I push the knife in. The child kicks and flails" (42). The chain of association completes itself in the stabbing: as Loman is to the Vietnamese woman, so is the photographic flash to Dawn's imagination, the pencil to the unfinished report, the knife to the child. The flash of light is profoundly inhuman, figuring in brief the immense problem that writing against torture and genocide presents for Coetzee. In order to write at all, he must remystify pain into a manageable fantasy while holding the text open to flashes of unspeakable violence.

The second part of the novel repeats this chain of association in a specifically South African setting, inverting the relation between the mythographer and the examples. Whereas the first part of the novel emphasizes the mythographer's report, the corresponding figure in part 2, S. J. Coetzee, is relegated to the afterword, a long, pseudo-scholarly footnote to the entire novel. The bulk of the second half of *Dusklands* is given over to an expansion of the brief "Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee" (which is provided in a thoughtfully tongue-in-cheek appendix aimed at future mythographer-interpreters) into "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" as "translated" by a character identified as J. M. Coetzee, in whose hands the truthful plot becomes a subversive—yet an all too plausible—tale. Dawn's assault on mother earth is repeated in the explorer's rape of the unknown lands of the interior of the continent. Loman-Dawn's copulation with the Vietnamese girl is reenacted in the frontiersmen's unfeeling rape of Bushmen girls: "[S]he is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away" (61). Jacobus Coetzee's assumption that his body is an impenetrable surface, a labyrinth with no interior, echoes Eugene Dawn's sense of his impenetrability behind the walls of the asylum and the library. Coetzee, too, like his counterpart in the first section of the novel, is mesmerized by light: "My gut would dazzle if I pierced myself," he says prophetically (78). Eventually he does pierce his carbuncle and his knife-pen, like Dawn's, brings enlightenment and permits the poisoned matter of his dreams to flow out into the report or narrative. Once again, the

wound that thematizes the narration cannot be closed without foreclosing the narration itself, the narrator's life.

Similarly, like the mythographer, who wants only to love that which he destroys, the explorer interrupts his slaughter of the Namaqua tribe to wonder whether, in his fury, he "[m]ay . . . not have killed something of inestimable value" (106). This perverse appeal to, and reappropriation of, value in the context of an unleashed homicidal frenzy pricks us uncomfortably once again, making explicit the pseudomoralistic, reflexively focused rationalizations for destruction as well as the parallel, self-servingly empty movement of remorse. Like Dawn, who is attracted beyond comprehension to the iconographic photographs of the Vietnamese, Coetzee alternately insists on his unique ability to pierce their reality—"for penetration you need blue eyes" (97)—and rages with frustration at the pleasures he cannot understand: the Hottentots "comprise an immense world of delight . . . impenetrable to men like me" (106). Finally, again like Dawn, Coetzee realizes his essential being only through the mediating force of the gun, the knife, or violence against children. The adult tribesmen, appalled by the violence with which the explorer responds to a childish prank, force him to leave the village where they have given him refuge, crying, "Have you no children of your own? Do you not know how to play with children?" (91). For Gillmer this accusation "seems to point to the irony of Dawn's caption to his first photograph" (111). It also points back to Dawn himself, who does have a child of his own, the child he stabs.

The photographs, then, mirror the report or narrative in the most profound sense; reduced to the barest elements of a descriptive passage, they are stilled types, metonyms for the whole novel, ghosts captured on film while the absent selves rush out in a blinding flash of light, "a rupture, in time, in space" (17). The gun and the camera—shot and snapshot—reveal similar efforts to master time and space, to capture the other, excluded self. The intense separation of surface and solid, of effaced others and monolithic self, reflects parallel divisions. Peter Strauss's brilliant article has documented "the blatantly explicit dramatizations of the master-slave relationship and its effects on

the reality-sense of the participants" in Coetzee's later novel *In the Heart of the Country* (124). In *Dusklands* the dramatization is equally explicit, but the emotional charge of a desire refracted onto the revealed nothingness of the savage is far more piercing. "Myth is a *value*," says Barthes, but the mythic value, like the desire, has no meaning without self-alienation in the law of the master. Torture, as both Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee come to realize, functions only insofar as it enhances the reality of the torturer; in imposing himself as master on the tortured body of the victim, he forces recognition of his self, of his desire as the desire of the other. Where this identification falls short, mastery fails; the other remains alien, inscrutable. Says Kojève, "Therefore, to desire the Desire of another is in the final analysis to desire that the value that I am or that I 'represent' be the value desired by the other: I want him to 'recognize' my value as his value" (7). But in this recognition, what inestimable value is lost? And of what value is recognition by a thing of no value—by a "nothing" (says Jacobus Coetzee [61]), by a "ghost or absence" (says Eugene Dawn [17])?

Around these black holes of lost selves, the novelist encodes his "anti-documentary" (Knox-Shaw 66). For Eugene Dawn, the gun is a symbolic presence, a metaphor for the copula that sustains the master by linking him to the object of his mastery. But Dawn is a library researcher and a mythographer, not an anthropologist or an explorer. The metaphor of the gun is not realized in concrete terms until the second part of the novel, with the introduction of Jacobus Coetzee and his tasteless, chummily explicit detailing of the genocide in which he and his companions cheerfully engage. Dawn sustains himself with imagination and the one violent act against his own son; Coetzee's narrative is a conscienceless chronicle of willful murder. Both narrators suffer from an identical malady, however: the slow leaching of self when not supported by the exercise of brute power. Both use the same metaphor to describe the sustaining sense of control. As if completing the meditation of his twentieth-century counterpart, Jacobus Coetzee writes, "The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. . . . The gun is our mediator with the world. . . . It [lays] at our feet all the evidence we need of a dy-

ing and therefore a living world" (79). Recognition of and by the other in the moment of death substitutes for a felt lack in the self, but ironically the only revealed difference is possession of the gun or camera that permanently freezes existence. "Where they had once been is now only a black hole through which they have been sucked," says Dawn of the prisoners in tiger cages (17), a "recognition" not too distant from Jacobus Coetzee's self-identification: "I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun" (79).

The master, then, is at an existential impasse. By sucking life out of the animals and the savages he kills or enslaves, he achieves dominance over them, but the victory is a hollow one—no meaningful confirmation of self can be elicited from an empty husk. He feels compelled to go on torturing and killing; the instant of the shot (camera or gun) provides the single moment when the issue of the master and the other is in some way resolved. "The death of the hare is my metaphysical meat," says the explorer (79); "Meat for your Master," proclaims the fashion model in the *Vogue* photograph (13). The dead savage permits the living master to speak, but only of the ineluctable blank, the hole or mark created by violent penetration.

The copula torturer-victim inextricably binds the documenters of myth to the cadavers of the oppressed, and in the abysses of desire "the language which does not want to die" becomes the "speaking corpses" of a degraded significance (Barthes, *Mythologies* 133). "If they refuse to see me," says Dawn, "I will become the ghost of their corridors . . ." (33). Jacobus Coetzee says flatly, "A world without me is inconceivable," but he almost immediately qualifies his statement: "[B]ut when the day comes you will find that whether I am alive or dead, whether I ever lived or never was born, has never been of real concern to me" (107). The masterful text (the report, the narrative) achieves permanence only with a sacrifice of the self parallel to that of the slave. The pen is a knife or a gun turned on the self. Yet the text is not, as Strauss realizes, a simple metaphysical game and "not simply a critique of the human situation but a critique of western civilization" (126). The narrative violence, like the photographic flash, bedazzles the reader, forming the narrative counterpart of Dawn's glint in the eye, a point of entry into the

abysses and labyrinths of the text, a poignant reminder of the condemnation threatening a merely analytical reading of any mythic spectacle.

The shock photographs, as filtered through Eugene Dawn's descriptions and J. M. Coetzee's novelistic art, are all surface, degraded significance, resistance to mythic valuation. Nevertheless, like the shutter of the camera or the trigger of the gun, they function in the text as temporal and spatial copulas between the mythographer and his subject. Interest in them is, thus, not historical, nor is it merely technical: it is pierced by the poignancy of a launched desire that confronts a "historical" text with the intractable "I" of the desiring self. As Brooks says, "the individual . . . makes raids on a putative masterplot in order to remedy the insufficiencies of his own unsatisfactory plot—unsatisfactory because unclosed, hence incompletely illuminated [as if by a photographic flash in the darkness] by significance" (79). Echoing throughout the text, the snapshots are its sustaining mythology; as they provoke Dawn to write his mythographic report, so the narrative (or report) of Jacobus Coetzee inspires S. J. Coetzee's historical afterword, and so the shocking multiple reports pierce the readers, other ghosts wandering in other library corridors searching for the penetrating pleasure-pain of a novelistic *punctum*, itself a master myth of subverted history. This mythic master plot is the necessary fiction that eases the force producing the dazzling, unclosed, wished-for wound of the layered narration and interpretation of narration, the many-tiered assault on the self. "For the rest," Barthes acutely remarks, ". . . all we can say is that the object *speaks*, it induces us, vaguely, to think. And further: even this risks being perceived as dangerous. At the limit, *no meaning at all* is safer . . ." (*Camera* 38). Resistance, except to the safely distanced formalizations of myth, is nearly invincible.

Quite clearly, the resistance to meaning reflects preconceived notions of the master myth of history, a willed blindness that Dawn describes as his intermittent intimation of "the highest happiness" deep in the lowest subbasement of the gray, windowless library (6). Yet this intellectual happiness, which should make the library a paradise, is insufficient. He yearns for another paradise, figured

for him in the impenetrable photographs. Strauss explains:

Here “being,” excluded by consciousness and language—in particular, the book—is primeval paradise; [yet] . . . absolutely unattainable. This exclusion . . . was already preordained in the colonizer’s technology, and this technology already implied in the invention of the book, and that in writing, and that in language—to look at it that way, consciousness in itself is enough to exclude man from being. And, moreover, absolutely. (126)

What Strauss defines as a division between consciousness and being reflects the tension inherent in history itself. In Barthes’s view, “[h]istory is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it” (*Camera* 65). Ironically, it is the alien self, the savage, who by merely “being,” by sustaining a meaningless life and death, offers the creative nexus for a historical reconstruction that only the master (writer) can systematize in the book, thereby traducing that experience and condemning it to incomprehensibility, an incomprehensibility conditioned by the writer’s longing for the copula, for an end to the hysterical exclusion from the history recorded in the text. For as bizarre as the photographs or report or narrative or afterword may be, as alien from “civilized” experience, still these monstrous descriptions seduce the writer (Dawn, S. J. Coetzee, the character J. M. Coetzee) and us. Movement turns inward from the acknowledged scandal of visualized surface horror to the unacknowledged horror and complacent illusions of our code of behavior.

Within the novel, such misplaced nostalgia is punctuated by the narrators’ perversely erotic attraction to the other: loved, hated, destructive, destroyed. “The *punctum* [of the erotic photograph] is a kind of subtle *beyond*,” says Barthes (*Camera* 59). Violating the viewer while pricking desire, it may or must undo his being. In *Dusklands* the ramifications of this desire directed against consciousness and being are crucial. Dawn speaks with distaste of the “spasms in the various parts of [his] body” that inhibit the “creative spasm” that produces his work (5). Such creative urges are never physical: sex with his wife is mere “evacua-

tion . . . into the futile sewers of Marilyn’s reproductive ducts” (6), provoking nothing more than a tired disgust. In contrast, the distant napalm strikes of the Vietnam War offer Dawn the possibility of an “orgasm of the explosion” in an ecstatically compelling communal rape of the earth mother herself. But the air raids in Vietnam remain mythic products of a scholarly mind deranged by erotic overstimulation. For Dawn, the pricking of consciousness is finally relieved only in his attempted murder of his son.

The mythographer’s imagined rape of mother earth is carried out in the second part of the novel by Jacobus Coetzee, whose solitude during his return trip to the civilized regions of the country fills him with wild joy: “I yodelled, I growled, I hissed, I roared, I screamed, I clucked, I whistled; I danced, I stamped, I grovelled, I spun; I sat on the earth, I spat on the earth, I kicked it, I hugged it, I clawed it. Every possible copula was enacted . . .” (95). Indeed, Jacobus Coetzee in almost every instance enacts what Dawn only dares to dream, the intermittent flashes of Dawn’s madness. In this respect the two halves of the novel—mythologized dream and historical fantasy—stage as well the frenzy of the incompleting copula across the impregnable barrier of the intervening section division. Dawn distastefully does his duty by his wife while imagining the heightened eroticism of an encounter between the American linebacker and the Vietnamese child-woman (8); Coetzee, whose experience in brutalization is immense beyond even Dawn’s most chilling images, reveals the underlying reason for the attraction to the other. The Bushmen girl or the Vietnamese woman “is the ultimate love you have borne your own desires alienated in a foreign body and pegged out waiting for your pleasure,” he says (61). Violating her is an act of self-love, self-recognition, a tautological interpenetration of an interior void and an external nothingness, a circular clause in which the captive-free subject perpetually merges, in violence, with the liberating-imprisoning predicate.

For Jacobus Coetzee, as for Eugene Dawn, being and the void are intricately linked by an unbearable copula; not the little death of rape, but Death, the metaphor figured in the gun. As the explorer notes, savages are savages by definition because they do not have guns, and without guns

they are condemned to a paradisiacal continuity with all space (80). The explorer or the mythographer, made hysterical by historical consciousness, alienated from the world by introspection, desires as he despises the unmediated being of the silent, undifferentiated other.

Death is the ultimate stake, the final catastrophe, the lacerating point of the narrative *punctum*—death, that is, as figured in language. To write genocide is to write death; to image the metaphorical, metaphysical, linguistic copula as a gun is to enforce death unilaterally; to speak is, for Coetzee, to come up against the unspeakable. In his brief essay “A Note on Writing,” Coetzee discusses a paradigm of writing reflected in the sentence “I / am writing / a note.” This example, he says, conceptualizes the lack of relation between subject and verb, between subject and object (12), in effect visually representing how a denial of the copula stunts language. *Dusklands* depicts such willful crippling transposed into the realm of terror, enacted in the face of a projected or an anterior end, and points to its motivation. The printed word, says Dawn, “is sadism and properly evokes terror.” Furthermore, “print-reading is a slave habit” (14). The word speaks death. Print, so understood, possesses the power and authority to exhaust the possibilities of human existence, to relate subject and object in a promiscuous, murderous coupling, to make of the master a slave.

The master looks to the savage for recognition, for an acknowledgment of a particular mythic value, but the value the savage recognizes is not the one the master wishes to accept as his own. Thus, the master, to retain his mastery, denies the other's difference even in apparently insisting on it. The savage, in punishment for failing to acknowledge the master's sense of being, is annulled and remystified as pure lack, as an expressionless void waiting to be filled, counterposed to the master's assumed fullness. The meaning produced by the copula must be sublated into either “a failure of imagination before the void” (102) or the unrefined bloodlust and anarchy “whose story would fill another book,” allowing the writer “to translate myself soberly across the told tale . . . in which only an infinitely diminishing fraction of myself survived, the fictive echo of a tiny ‘I

whispered across the void of eternity” (98–99). Violence become banal reduces to the infinite terrorism of a narrative form that must not be closed. The options are limited to a choice of voids. “I / am writing / a note” becomes “I / am writing / death” or simply, terrifyingly, “I am death” or, impossibly, “I (will) die.”

“Over them I pronounced sentence of death,” says Jacobus Coetzee (101), producing death by his sovereign word but at the same time producing a recognition of death—not for the continuous existence of the savages but for the intellectualized consciousness of the writer—that cancels their death (“the prisoners were being boring” [103]) by preserving it in the inalterable text of the narrative and, moreover, by preserving its power over the assassin while releasing the victims. Thus from the master's point of view, it is quite accurate to signal the “absolute abomination” of the gunless benighted savages who “didn't ask to see [an explorer's] visa, or offer to kill him . . .” (Bosman; qtd. in Gray 93). The only possible satisfactory closure for the copula *is* death. In Blanchot's words, “[t]he writer . . . is one who writes in order to be able to die, and he is one whose power to write comes from an anticipated relation with death” (93). To recognize the power of the more than metaphorical *punctum* in the Eurocentric value system is not to condone it, even as I feel its force pulling at my own text, and I would object strenuously to the curious inversion of values figured in Wood's observation that Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn are in some sense “victims”—victims of a Cartesian heritage, “of attempting to live in accordance with a suspect image of themselves” (“*Dusklands*” 17). They do, however, clearly illustrate the existential impasse figured by their attachment to the peculiar closure spelled in the metaphors by which they live and, pointedly, have died—as is clearly true of Jacobus Coetzee and “the late Dr. S. J. Coetzee” (55).

“Imagination about travel . . . corresponds to an exploration of closure,” says Barthes (*Mythologies* 65), and the final closure is that most insistently foregrounded in this novel with the narrativization of death and its metaphors: the inescapable *punctum*. To highlight the implicitly masculinist, aggressively terroristic underpinnings of an unequivocally accepted value system is nei-

ther trivially metaphysical nor morally escapist. Or—and here I return to my point of departure—to pick up a pen to deconstruct a dangerous myth is no doubt as politically “correct” as taking up a gun. What Coetzee’s portrayal of the explorer-mythographer cagily suggests, however, is that the domination of the write-or-fight dichotomy is in itself part of a specifically defined conceptual space requiring deconstruction, this time not of the dark other within Western man, nor of the “exotic” projection of some racially different other smoothly incorporated into the intellectual tradition of the Western academy, but rather from the vantage of the other accepted as other, in the essential, self-knowing otherness described by Soyinka. Coetzee, wisely, attempts not to fill this blank—to commit another illicit penetration—but only to evoke the absence. Coetzee’s work forces us to recognize our own lack. In Derrida’s words, quoted out of context, “[n]o intuition can be realized in the place where ‘the “whites” [blanks] indeed take on an importance’” (*Grammatology* 68).<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Consider the following: “Unless literature is assumed to be important in itself, for its own sake, unless it is assumed to be its own justification, there was no reason whatever why anyone in our generation should have wanted to write. It seems to me that literature begins where life fails. . . . [W]e had not the time nor the driving necessity to create a literature for ourselves.” Or: “[B]lack fiction has renounced African tradition without showing itself capable of benefiting from the accumulated example of modern European literature. To put it bluntly nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans—no tradition, whether indigenous . . . or alien. . . .” Or: “Ironically enough, in South Africa, while Black writers, and to some extent writers of the left, vie with one another to utter the most banal political clichés in feeble and extremely unmemorable language, the so-called White ‘bourgeois’ writers . . . have sometimes succeeded in providing us with the most powerful images of what it means to be a member of a decaying class . . .” (Nkosi, “Home” 13, 131, 163).

More recently, in *Tasks and Masks*, Nkosi reflects on the controversy surrounding his earlier statements and modifies his stance somewhat: “African writers take themselves a lot more seriously than their works sometimes justify. In any case, in retrospect I think I overstated my case and tended to underplay to an unacceptable degree the writers’ role in any ideolo-

logical struggle. Nevertheless, then as now, my main thesis seems to me to have been unassailable . . .” (preface, n. pag.). And: “The whole critical approach to writing by black South Africans has in recent years unnecessarily hardened into a received doctrine which in time can only prevent a proper response to works of literature whose energies are political. These tendencies, I now realise, could only have been encouraged by the hard tone I assumed in a much-quoted essay on fiction by Black South Africans. . . . While it is true that the range and depth of South African fiction has often seemed too narrow and limited, it is also truer still that much of this literature is more ably written and much more substantial in its achievements than a great deal of the ‘masks’ and ‘kola nut’ school of writing which is unhappily pouring out of the presses at an unprecedented rate and is so frequently applauded by European critics in search of the exotic” (78–79).

<sup>2</sup>Appiah’s thought-provoking reading of the “topologies of nativism” is tellingly pertinent: “British colonial officers . . . collected, organized, and enforced these ‘traditions.’ . . . Ironically, for many contemporary African intellectuals, these invented traditions have now acquired the status of national mythology; and the invented past of Africa has come to play a role in the political dynamics of the modern state.” Furthermore, “we must not fall for the sentimental notion that the ‘people’ have held on to an indigenous national tradition, that only the educated bourgeoisie are ‘children of two worlds.’ At the level of popular culture, too, the currency is not a holdover from an unbroken stream of tradition; indeed it is like most popular culture in the age of mass production, hardly national at all.” He concludes, “Indeed, the very arguments, the rhetoric of defiance, that our nationalists muster are, in a sense, canonical, time tested. . . . Nativist nostalgia, note well, is largely fueled by that Western sentimentalism so familiar after Rousseau; few things are less native than nativism in its current forms” (164, 160, 162).

<sup>3</sup>According to one reading, the pointed and mysterious silence of the black characters (a silence especially notable in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe* as well as in *Dusklands*) would respond to a politically correct refusal to ventriloquize across the unbridgeable cultural gap in an attempt to reinvent imaginatively the black African *as such*. This interpretation, however, is the topic for another paper.

<sup>4</sup>I use the “her” advisedly. Throughout this essay, I use the feminine pronoun to refer to the penetrated or to the victim, the masculine pronoun to refer to the piercer, the master, or the torturer. Even where the victims are overwhelmingly male (the prisoners in tiger cages), I would argue that they are feminized (i.e., penetrable) in respect to the mythographer-explorer’s piercing force.

<sup>5</sup>This paper is greatly indebted to the magnificent *Critical Inquiry* special issue edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*, especially to the articles by Abdul R. JanMohamed, Mary Louise Pratt, Homi K. Bhabha, and Jacques Derrida. I also thank the *PMLA* editorial board and consultant readers for saving me from numerous infelicities of thought and expression and gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Elizabeth Reichel, whose thoughtful suggestions inform many of these pages.

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