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Ventriloquism & Idleness in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

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Abstract: This essay is concerned with the resonances of idleness and repose in Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. It brings two contexts to bear on the novel. The first of these is the European settling of South Africa's Cape peninsula as it is described in the first essay in Coetzee's *White Writing*, on 'Idleness in South Africa'. The second is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp', a poem alluded to by Coetzee in the 'Idleness' essay as well as in *Youth*, his second semi-fictional autobiography. The essay argues that acts of ventriloquism and what Coetzee calls 'the scandal of idleness' are central to Michael K's politics, and that a correct consideration of these issues exposes a dark side to the novel that has not been observed by its criticism to date.

Keywords: Coetzee, Michael K, idleness, ventriloquism, inertia, reverie, blankness, Romanticism, Coleridge

Essay Length: 8,496 words

He would sit or lie in a stupor at the mouth of the cave, too tired to move or perhaps too lackadaisical. There were whole afternoons he slept through. He wondered if he were living in what was known as bliss.¹

Moving across terminologies of mental disorder, apathy, alienation and finally ecstasy, casting Michael K's inertia as alternately shortcoming, repose and revelation, this moment of cave-side contemplation encapsulates something of the range of significances attached to idleness, to repose, and to contemplation within J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). On first observation, that 'bliss' might reside in the complete absence of occupation, or in an indulgence in a problematic 'stupor', would seem to degrade that state to simply a withdrawal from the scene of labour and responsibility. Bliss would then be the temporary absence of societal bonds, or the giving in to one's inherent flaws. And yet, on further consideration, that what appears to be the dull 'stupor' of a vacant mind, or the plain and pervasive apathy of one comprehensively alienated from his labours, might in fact conceal realms of exultant bliss, renders this moment potentially transcendent, perhaps even a wholesale challenge to societal priorities. Blank inertia, viewed from within, may in fact represent a style of being denied to social, labouring man.

This essay is concerned with the resonances of idleness, and with the styles of thought equated with pervasive repose, in Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. In order to explore this territory, it will bring two contexts to bear on Coetzee's novel. The first of these is the European settling of South Africa's Cape peninsula as it is described in the first essay in Coetzee's *White Writing*, on 'Idleness in South Africa', which was first published just a year before *Michael K* in 1982.² The second is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp' (1795), a poem alluded to by Coetzee in the 'Idleness' essay as well as in *Youth* (2002), his second semi-fictional autobiography. I will begin by outlining these contexts and their exploration of the idea of idleness, before demonstrating the manner in which their concerns lie at the very

heart of Michael K. In this way I will contend that in both form and content the novel restages the problem of the idle contemplator's opacity that Coetzee identifies and examines in *White Writing*. In order to begin this exposition, then, and to see what is at stake in any portrait of idleness, we must turn first to Coetzee's account of the history of European writing in South Africa.

White Writing, Coetzee's 1988 collection of essays 'on the culture of letters in South Africa', begins by sketching out a historical chain of events taking place on South Africa's Cape peninsula that is highly significant for the present analysis. From 1652 to the mid-nineteenth century, a series of European encounters with the Cape's native inhabitants lead to the latter's classification as barely human, as having more in common with 'cattle' or 'turkey-cocks' than with their observers.³ The unifying features of this series of analyses over the course of two centuries are the natives' persistent and all-consuming 'idleness', and what Coetzee terms the 'anthropological scandal' that ensues:

despite the fact that nothing remoter or more different from European Man can be imagined than the Hottentot, the Hottentot, on closer inspection, turns out to yield an extremely impoverished set of differences to inscribe in the table of categories. Where he ought to be generating data for the categories, he is merely lying about. Where he ought to have Religion, there is a virtual blank. (pp. 22-3)

If humanity is located in European Man's activity — here cast as both religious and economic — then the Cape's native communities completely fail to register on this scale. The Nama here are thus a 'blank' rather than an alternative human community, their lives simply not corresponding to the attributes and values cherished by their observers. Stylistically, it is worth noting that Coetzee locates the cause of this scandal in the blindness

of the European settlers, rather than in the reality of Nama life. His use of the outdated and racially derogatory term ‘Hottentot’ as opposed to the more modern ‘Nama’ takes care of this, rendering the European settlers’ inability to comprehend the encounter of a piece with the racist ideologies of colonialism.

Using travellers’ and settlers’ writing from these centuries in a similarly ironic vein, in order to observe the intellectual positions such figures never take up and the questions they never pose, Coetzee’s commentary on this scandal of incompatibility attempts to ‘open’ (p. 35) a way of understanding idleness diametrically opposed to these reports. In a conspicuously lyrical passage following an extensive series of quotations from European settlers and travellers, for instance, Coetzee invokes a range of possible alternatives to their censuring of native idleness:

Nowhere in the great echo chamber of the Discourse of the Cape is a voice raised to ask whether the life of the Hottentot may not be a version of life before the Fall [...], a life in which man is not yet condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but instead may spend his days dozing in the sun, or in the shade when the sun grows too hot, half-aware of the singing birds and the breeze on his skin, bestirring himself to eat when hunger overtakes him, enjoying a pipe of tobacco when it is available, at one with his surroundings and unreflectively content. [...] Certainly no one dreams of asking whether what looks like Hottentot dolce far niente may not be the mere outward aspect of a profound Hottentot contemplative life. [...] No one bothers to put, save rhetorically, the ethical question: which is better, to live like the ant, busily storing up food for the winter, or like the grasshopper, singing in the sun all day, heedless of the morrow?
(pp. 18-19)

This passage, significantly, functions in much the same way as my opening quotation from Michael K. Both contain the possibility that the outward appearance of torpor or inertia might conceal ‘bliss’. There, this was the case for one individual and his ‘lackadaisical’ ‘stupor’. Here, a whole community’s indolence might mask an Edenic, contemplative way of life, ‘at one with’ their ‘surroundings’, ‘unreflectively content’, and ‘heedless of the morrow’. The fact that no European even ‘dreams’ of asking this questions serves to reinforce the potential opposition here. It is between a life of satisfied day-dreaming and one so narrowly

businesslike that dream-like possibilities do not even occur. This passage thus invokes a version of the ‘noble savage’ as a counter to European rationality and its attendant work-ethic. To be at one with one’s surroundings, untroubled by futurity, and ‘unreflectively content’ recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s suggestion, in his *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), that ‘the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature’.⁴

Turning away from *White Writing* itself for a moment, I want to note what will be a useful historical analogue between Coetzee’s treatment of Nama idleness and the contemplative literature of the late eighteenth century. For the assumptions regarding labour and idleness of the Cape’s European settlers are also those of Adam Smith, in many ways the creator of the discourse of political economy. Like the Europeans Coetzee describes, Smith’s *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) considers human life to be characterized entirely by its labours and by its intense levels of activity and productivity. From this perspective, manifestations of prolonged idleness such as those among the Nama — and Smith’s work makes reference to the settling of the Cape as well as to contemporary anthropological evidence from all around the world — expose the ‘barbarity’ of the communities concerned. So Smith considers idleness to stem simply from the ‘want of a sufficient encouragement to industry’, and the Cape to have been ‘inhabited by a race of people almost as barbarous and quite as incapable of defending themselves as the natives of America’.⁵ The term ‘barbarous’ here performs the same role as the blankness and bestiality reported in *White Writing*. It signals an almost complete absence of those qualities that make up ‘humanity’.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, however, the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, with its celebration of labour and its wholesale denigration of idleness, in fact leads to a flowering of literature and philosophy concerned with examining the intricacies and possibilities of idleness in terms that challenge both Smith’s assumptions and conclusions.⁶

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp', to take one of the most well-known of these reactions, proposes, albeit tentatively, that the style of thought attendant on unadulterated idleness might contain types of knowledge, and intensities of experience, unavailable to labouring man. In this poem's first incarnation as 'Effusion XXXV', in 1795, such a possibility forms the 'effusion' of the poem's title:

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
 Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon
 Whilst thro' my half-clos'd eyelids I behold
 The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
 And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
 Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
 And many idle flitting phantasies,
 Traverse my indolent and passive brain
 As wild and various, as the random gales
 That swell or flutter on this subject Lute!
 And what if all of animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
 At once the Soul of each, and God of all?⁷

Stretching his limbs at noon, ceasing even to control his mind, allowing thought to come across him 'uncall'd and undetain'd' from an undefined elsewhere, Coleridge's poet equates complete idleness with significant insight here. For, in the last sentence of this quotation, such relaxation invokes thoughts concerning man's place in the world that follow on from his repose both thematically and syntactically. Might it be the case, the poet asks, that the idle mind, swept into thought like an 'organic Harp' in the breeze, offers the image of the human relationship with God? — that all objects 'tremble into thought' under the influence of 'one intellectual Breeze', [p]lastic and vast'?

Significantly, Coetzee's lyrical passage containing idleness's potentially positive manifestations in White Writing's 'Idleness' essay seems to operate in reference to this Coleridgean motif. To be 'dozing in the sun', to be 'at one with' one's 'surroundings and

unreflectively content', to be 'half-aware of the singing of the birds and the breeze on' one's 'skin', to be played upon by the physicality of one's environment but with mind elsewhere, that is: these are the parameters of idle thought as Coleridge lays them out in 'Effusion XXXV'. Invoking them, even if unconsciously, at this moment in Coetzee's analysis, equates the possibilities of non-European idleness at the Cape with the many explorations of that style of thought occurring in the poetry and travel writing of the turn of the nineteenth century. More specifically, Coetzee's 'opening' of a way of thinking about idleness in other ways than as an absence of the characteristics that define European humanity takes place in a distinctly Coleridgean register.

It is conspicuous, after noting the similarities between Coleridge's 'Effusion' and Coetzee's interjections in *White Writing*, that there are other moments in Coetzee's work that seem to operate along the lines of this connection as well. If one turns to one of the climaxes of Coetzee's second semi-fictional autobiography, *Youth*, for instance, to the young John's reverie on Hampstead Heath, one finds a similar motif of idleness and its attendant insight:

Tired out, one Sunday afternoon, he folds his jacket into a pillow, stretches out on the greensward, and sinks into a sleep or half-sleep in which consciousness does not vanish but continues to hover. It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady wheeling of the earth. The faraway cries of children, the birdsong, the whirr of insects gather force and come together in a paean of joy. His heart swells. At last! he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All! Fearful that the moment will slip away, he tries to put a halt to the clatter of thought, tries simply to be a conduit for the great universal force that has no name.

It lasts no more than seconds in clock time, this signal event. But when he gets up and dusts off his jacket, he is refreshed, renewed.⁸

This episode takes place in the immediate aftermath of the protagonist's resignation from IBM and withdrawal from the world of work, and thus serves to contrast the type of experiences that occur in idleness with the disappointments of city labour. More specifically, it recreates the central motif of Coleridge's 'Effusion'. Lying in one sense in a state of repose, in another in one of exalted attention, in a state of 'half-sleep' reminiscent of

Coleridge's with his 'half-closed eyelids', both perceiving and ignoring his surroundings, Coetzee's younger self undergoes an epiphanic, 'ecstatic unity' with 'the All'. Just as the experience of the 'Effusion' led to the seemingly holistic knowledge of 'all of animated nature', and equated the idle body with the Eolian Harp, the instrument for God's reverberations, Coetzee attempts to render himself a simple 'conduit for the great universal force that has no name'. Further, where almost every experience in *Youth* is narrated with a kind of sardonic withdrawal, in this 'signal event', with its consequent 'refresh[ing]' and 'renew[ing]' of its protagonist, that tone is significantly more difficult to isolate.

There are of course several other works in Coetzee's oeuvre that engage with key motifs of Romantic thought in a comparable manner, or that depict intense states of passivity that approximate those to be found in *Michael K* and *White Writing*. The politics of inter-species and inter-personal relations in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), for instance, are framed by John Keats's notions of 'blank receptiveness' and 'negative capability'.⁹ While both phrases are deployed in broadly pejorative terms, the novel's engagement with the possibilities of such inertia is nevertheless sympathetic and serious. *Disgrace* (1999) also makes use of a series of Romantic allusions, through David Lurie's role as 'adjunct professor' at the 'Cape Technical University' and the 'special-field' course he offers in 'the Romantic poets'.¹⁰ And *The Childhood of Jesus* (2014) might also be said to depict a kind of blank inertia in its repeated depiction of David eerily calmed by Inés's embrace.¹¹ These episodes and ideas are certainly germane to the concerns of this essay.¹² The present focus on *Michael K*, however, is motivated by Coetzee's more sustained exploration of idleness and inertia in that novel, and by the extent to which it fundamentally complicates and challenges the Coleridgean motif of passive receptivity. *Michael K*, as we shall see, puts pervasive idleness and its attendant blankness at the heart of its concerns, and uses this category as an emblem of a much darker notion of sociability than that espoused by *Elizabeth Costello*.

The two contexts necessary for understanding Coetzee's handling of the idea of idleness in *Life & Times of Michael K*, then, are as follows. On the one hand we have what Coetzee denominates the 'anthropological scandal' in which pervasive inertia rendered Nama life utterly invisible to the European consciousness structured by ideas of activity and productive labour. On the other, we have the Coleridgean paradigm in which extreme idleness engenders reveries that border on epiphany. It is with these two clusters of ideas in mind that I want to look at *Michael K*. For it is this novel that takes seriously Coetzee's observation, in *White Writing*, that '[t]he challenge of idleness to work, its power to scandalize, is as radical today as it ever was' (p. 34).

Let us begin by looking at the form of the novel, and specifically at Derek Attridge's insightful analysis of the narrative logic at work in those parts of *Michael K* that describe Michael's thoughts. Attridge observes that

[t]he language in these accounts is not necessarily that which K would use in articulating his thoughts—indeed, we often suspect that what are represented as 'thoughts' scarcely exist in an articulated form. We frequently encounter sentences that begin as statements about K's mental world but which carry on in language that hardly seems his.¹³

The accuracy of this analysis means that there are countless examples of this phenomenon in the novel. The most pertinent for a consideration of the novel's handling of idleness is to be found in the passages that describe Michael's second residence on the Visagie farm, that period during which the protagonist's contemplative life takes centre stage in the novel. The following, for instance, encapsulates the style of thought associated with Michael's rural idleness:

But most of all, as summer slanted to an end, he was learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flowerbed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body [...] (p. 115)

Because, as Mike Marais notes, the ‘novel repeatedly stresses the tenuous nature of K’s grasp of language’,¹⁴ several key phrases and clauses in this passage must conform to Attridge’s description. Thus, ‘stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth [...] from involuntary labour’, ‘surreptitious thefts’, and the most striking image of the passage, ‘time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body’, all seem to approximate, or interpret, Michael’s thoughts rather than report them without mediation. The narrator in this passage might consequently be understood as a particularly active, or sensitive, interpreter, as one who translates the subtlest of thoughts into poetic images.

But in the context of Coetzee’s ‘Idleness’ essay, it is striking that this narrator’s activities appear in a rather different light. We saw how the opacity of Nama idleness led Coetzee to imaginatively open up that community’s intellectual life, to speak for and ventriloquize the thoughts of those who were mute and ‘blank’ to their European observers. And we also observed the manner in which that act of ventriloquism operated in Coleridgean as well as Biblical terms, as a fantasy of blissful repose. But the very existence of these Biblical and Coleridgean discursive frameworks in Coetzee’s analysis signals that the potential thoughts he attributes to the Nama can only act as a kind of imaginative imposition. That such discourses must stand at a considerable distance from any Nama frame of reference locates Coetzee as commentator very much on the side of the European settlers in the meeting of these two communities. The reality of Nama intellectual life is as invisible to Coetzee as it is to the settlers who considered that life a ‘blank’.

In Michael K then, because the novel's narrative does not, and cannot, give unmediated, unproblematic access to Michael's consciousness, because its narrator imaginatively ventriloquizes Michael's thoughts in an intellectual manoeuvre very similar to that taking place in the 'Idleness' essay, the novel must be understood to restage and enact Coetzee's intervention into the Nama 'scandal'. Its narrator, performing the same role as Coetzee himself took up in *White Writing*, simultaneously reports and interprets Michael's thoughts in a gesture that is at once revelatory and problematic. Further, what is problematic in Michael K is of a very similar order to what was problematic in the 'Idleness' essay. For the novel's summer idleness passage I have just quoted in fact draws attention to its narrative ventriloquism and to the Coleridgean reveries it seemingly falsely attributes to Michael, as we will see now.

The key element of the quotation above is its description of Michael 'yielding' himself up 'to time'. Let me quote it slightly more fully. It describes the 'idleness' that Michael is 'learning to love' as a 'yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids' (p. 115). The first thing to notice here is that 'time' is depicted in terms of a kind of universal life-force. It is figured as the fundamental ground of human existence, as the one thing that remains of human life when every social bond and material possession has been stripped away. It is for this reason that Mike Marais draws analogies between Michael's state here and the state Emmanuel Levinas denominates the *il y a*:

The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal[.]¹⁵

Now it is striking and highly significant that these visions of a fundamental, essentialized existence, of life experienced simply as a ‘universal’ ‘field of forces’, are very similar to the central moment of Coleridge’s ‘Eolian Harp’ and to the Coleridgean moment in *Youth*. In the former, the poet’s epiphanic reverie, experienced in a moment of intense idleness like this moment in Michael K, is one in which he considers human life to be at bottom an experience of the ‘intellectual Breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all’. It is for this reason that the famous later addition to the poem celebrates ‘the one life within us and abroad’.¹⁶ Both inner human life and all life outside of man are reducible to the same life-force in this vision. In *Youth*, likewise, the young protagonist’s moment of epiphany fits this pattern. It is the ‘moment of ecstatic unity with the All’ that Coetzee positions at the heart of the episode’s reverie. Life stripped of all its ephemeral trappings, in other words, is fundamentally an experience of a universal ‘field of forces’.

When Michael ‘yields’ himself up to ‘time’, therefore, we are in a similar territory to these episodes. What is being depicted in the environs of the Visagie farm is an ecstatic moment of reverie akin to those to be found in *Youth* and in the ‘Idleness’ essay, where the Nama contemplator is imagined as ‘at one with his surroundings’ and ‘heedless of the morrow’. Now it is by no means the case that the description of Michael’s ‘yielding himself up to time’ could not directly and accurately represent Michael’s intellectual world in this position and under these circumstances. I am not attempting to judge the realism of philosophical complexity at this point in the novel. But bearing in mind Attridge’s analysis of the form of the novel, Coetzee’s role in the ‘Idleness’ essay, and the novel’s frequent pronouncements about its protagonist’s difficulty with words, this moment begs to be read rather differently. In that context, Michael’s experience of time here would seem to be the narrator’s interpretation of, or imposition on, his consciousness. This is especially so because, in a passage occurring just after Michael’s ‘yielding up of himself to time’, his

contemplations are figured strikingly differently. There, one finds a set of sentences focused more on the minute activities comprising Michael's idleness — rather than on their wider philosophical import — which are narrated in a more direct and straightforward manner:

He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open, staring at the corrugations in the roof-iron and the tracings of rust; his mind would not wander, he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy; he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. (p. 115)

Because they contain a larger proportion of action than those lines we have just been considering, these sentences do not bear the imprint of the narrator's consciousness and frame of reference as clearly as those appearing just before them. Even the final sentence here, which does report Michael's contemplation, is made up of repetitively short clauses that seem to stand closer to unmediated representation than the sentences featuring Michael's 'yielding up of himself' to 'time'.

The details of Michael's contemplation, therefore, which appear in this less mediated portrait, can be seen to stand at a considerable distance from the kind of extrapolating, wider philosophical reverie that characterizes the earlier sentences. Michael's 'mind would not wander'; 'the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy'; 'the rust was merely rust'. This is contemplation shorn of its ambition to understand or picture the world by analogy. This contemplation is bare, stark and simple, by comparison with every instance of idle thought sketched out above. The fact that this contemplation does not 'transform' lines 'into pattern or fantasy', in other words, means that Michael's version of idle thought rejects the dominant tendency of 'The Eolian Harp', of Marais' and Levinas's *il y a*, as well as of Coetzee's depictions of contemplation in the 'Idleness' essay and in *Youth*. For all those examples draw on patterns of information to create a fantasy of human connection with the 'all' in one form or another. Even more immediately, however, Michael's mode of

contemplation here rejects the philosophical extrapolation performed by the novel's narrator in the lines immediately before these. The final two clauses of my quotation — regarding 'time' 'bearing' Michael 'onward' — would thus seem to be the narrator's attempt to link Michael's bare contemplation with the extrapolation that has just been made. But the import of these clauses has just been undermined by the plainness of the protagonist's contemplative action. If 'the rust [is] merely rust', then this episode does not encapsulate an essential feature of all human existence, no matter how often its narrator strives to make it do so. Michael's idle thought should thus be classified as a species of contemplation without any need for reverie. It is an engagement with objects that does not strive to understand the whole of human life by analogy, that does not arrogate to itself the status of emblem, or exemplar, of a correct or pure mode of being.

These passages describing Michael's idle, contemplative life at the Visagie farm thus point towards two separate narrative currents at work in the Michael K's first, and longest, section. On the one hand there is the matter-of-fact reportage that depicts Michael's actions in straight-forward terms. The novel begins firmly in this mode, for instance. On the other, there is the reverie-infused poetic extrapolation that gradually becomes more prevalent. The second of these currents holds a key function in the novel, of drawing out the implications of what is being depicted, of interpreting the action in the light of a set of concerns that Michael himself does not have easy access to. But this second current is also problematic in that it undermines certain aspects of the first current, as we have seen in the above example. Much like Coetzee's role in his 'Idleness' essay, the novel's narrator ends up imposing a set of concerns onto the action being described that obscures something important about that action.

To identify this discrepancy in Michael K, and to see the novel following the logic of Coetzee's 'Idleness' essay, also offers a chance to challenge Mike Marais' reading of the text that was briefly alluded to above. In his essay 'Literature and the Labour of Negation', Marais draws attention to the 'structural change' that takes place in Michael's 'commerce with the land' during the course of the novel, and to the attendant 'change' in the protagonist's 'consciousness'. On Michael's first sojourn on the Visagie farm, for instance, his acts of taking up residence in the farmhouse and of killing a goat out of hunger signal a conventional 'subject-centred consciousness', one that experiences the world by the 'labour of negation':¹⁷

[The farmhouse] serves as a complex symbol of settlement, ownership and mastery which implies, inter alia, that the relation between subject and place that is depicted in its occupation by K is not autochthonous but located within the history of the development of controlled, commodified property in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — a development which, in its turn, was linked to the emergence at this time, in Europe, of an increasingly autonomous subject which sought to dominate nature.¹⁸

Upon returning to the farm later in the novel, by contrast, Michael's dwelling not in the farmhouse but 'in a burrow in the earth', and his gardening instead of butchering, are matched by a 'langu[id] and somnolen[t]' consciousness that 'does not produce objects for experience through a labour of negation'. For Marais, this shift opens up the 'possibility of a mode of subjectivity [...] in which the self is not dependent on its negation of the other for its constitution as a subject'.¹⁹

Situated in between Michael's two residences at the Visagie farm, the novel's cave-side episodes fit this pattern. The impractical but striking rejection of hunger that Michael practises there (see p. 66) serves as a counterpoint to his earlier graphic and problematic killing of the goat. The quotation with which I began this essay could thus be described as one of the first moments of Michael's second consciousness. Marais's identification of

Michael's initial mode of being as fitting with 'the history of the development of controlled, commodified property in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' likewise supports the affinities I sketched between White Writing and the reactions to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

And yet Marais connects Michael's second consciousness, as we've seen, with Levinas's *il y a* in order to describe the extent to which the novel highlights and lauds a purer and more responsible mode of being in the world. The two currents we have identified as at work in the novel's narration, however, and its re-enacting of the problems inherent in Coetzee's 'Idleness' essay, mean that the second consciousness Marais identifies in fact resides in the concerns projected by the novel's narrator onto its protagonist, rather than in Michael's actions themselves. And while this is a subtle distinction, it is nevertheless a significant one, because it leads to the novel being an altogether less positive entity than Marais allows. So where Marais considers Michael K to 'impl[y] the possibility of restructuring subject-centred relations in society', the reading I have constructed here renders the novel more of an ironic account of such positivity. If Michael was a figure whose reveries grandly challenged social norms and the political status quo — as the extrapolations made in 'The Eolian Harp' or in the 'Idleness' essay do — then the novel could celebrate idleness, contemplation, and the power of reflecting on social relations from afar. But since, when the novel focuses on Michael's contemplations in most detail, they turn out to be bare, stark, and completely shorn of wider philosophical significance, the novel positions its reveries of alternative modes of being as fantasy impositions rather than realities. Idleness, repose, and contemplation are as impenetrable, and thus as scandalous, in Michael K as they were for the Cape's European settlers.

I have so far been concentrating on the first, longest section of the novel, and have not touched on its briefer second or third sections. But the narrative activities of Michael K's second narrator, the anonymous medical officer, exactly mirror what we have just picked out in its first section. This mirroring occurs in three significant ways. First, both the first and second sections of the novel slide from matter-of-fact reportage into lyrical ventriloquizing of Michael's supposed contemplations. Compare, for instance, the straight-forwardness and accuracy of this early passage in the second section —

Though he looks like an old man, he claims to be only thirty-two. Perhaps it is the truth. He comes from the Cape and knows the racecourse from days when it was still a racecourse. It amused him to hear that this used to be the jockeys' dressing room.
(p. 130)

— with the more abstract, fanciful and impassioned concerns of this later one:

You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing.
(p.149)

Clearly, in this comparison, this second passage attempts to harness the medical officer's powers of interpretation, to speak for Michael, and thus to find a suitable analogy for his position in the world. Yet the distance a passage such as this maintains from the reality of Michael's existence is signalled by the incorrect name with which the medical officer is addressing the novel's protagonist. And as with the many comparable analogies the medical officer makes, Michael eludes the attempted classification, maintaining instead the qualities of impenetrability and blankness. The second similarity between the novel's first and second narrators is consequently that both strive to gradually move towards a closer focus, and a

higher level of insight, into the novel's protagonist. The first section's climax is thus the summer idleness passage we considered above, the passage that offered its narrator's ethical extrapolation of Michael's second consciousness alongside the protagonist's starker, blanker, and more isolated mode of contemplation. This stick insect passage from the medical officer's narrative thus functions in the same manner as the first narrator's 'oil' stretching from 'horizon to horizon'. And thirdly, therefore, as we have seen, both narrators in fact fail to access, or to pin down, the essential features of Michael, despite their opinions to the contrary.

The medical officer is thus used by Coetzee to draw even out more dramatically the pattern of representation we have already observed in the novel's first section. It is therefore by no means a surprise that the medical officer also takes up Coetzee's own role from the 'Idleness' essay. We saw, for instance, Coetzee characterize Nama life in that piece as beneath European classification. We also observed the manner in which his own engagement with the questions undreamt by European settlers allowed him to tentatively position native life as above such classification. The medical officer replicates this intellectual manoeuvre so exactly, that the following passage can only be read as an allusion to the 'Idleness' essay. Again, however, because this passage must occur towards the end of the novel's second section for the logic we have identified to remain intact, it must also take place in the impassioned tone that acts as a kind of shorthand for its speaker's lack of purchase over Michael himself:

Listen to me, Michaels. I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are [...] a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask.
(p. 151)

Much like Coetzee's interjections in the 'Idleness' essay, therefore, these statements are again at once revelatory and problematic. The Michael that has emerged from the novel's first section does indeed seem to be above and beneath standard classification. Likewise, he does seem to incarnate the possibility of life 'untouched by doctrine'. And the novel's first section might be described as having followed the 'stirring' of Michael's 'wings' in these senses. But yet such extrapolations are also impositions on the Michael who is in fact a blank, whose bare contemplations seems unconnected to the ideological and philosophical posturing at work in the medical officer's images, and who is uninterested in the kind of grand display of transcendence figured in 'a soul stirring its wings', about to escape its 'stiff sarcophagus'. This dramatic flight, breaking through the rigid social codes that entomb the individual in a gesture of Messianic significance, must read as an even more convoluted version of Coetzee's biblical analogy in the 'Idleness' essay, therefore. To compare this millennial image with the bare facts of Michael's chosen alternative life is thus to see its absurdity. Recall the following: 'his mind would not wander, he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy'. Michael's contemplations without reveries do not arrogate to themselves the revolutionary remit of the medical officer's image, or of a poem like 'The Eolian Harp'. Where Coleridge used that poem to pose the question of whether the reposing contemplator might offer an image powerful enough to dispense with conventional social relations, Michael K ironizes the attempts of its narrators to approach a similar agenda. The medical officer's lyrical reveries are thus rendered absurd, and the novel — in the hands of both its narrators — is more bathetic than epiphanic.

We saw Marais contend for Michael K's revolutionary agenda: Michael's action and style of being in the world apparently open up 'the possibility of restructuring subject-centred relations in society'. Derek Attridge considers the novel in comparable terms, as offering an 'invitation' to its reader to 'follow [...] a consciousness unaffected by many of the main currents of modernity' including the 'preoccupation with [...] measuring and exploit[ing] [...] time' and with 'profit and progeny'.²⁰ The direct link between Coetzee's 'Idleness' essay and the novel that we have observed here, however, exposes an invitation like this as fundamentally problematic. This is because Michael K both gives access to a consciousness 'above and beneath' classification and casts that access as a fantasy or an illusion. The novel's narrative is thus in one sense a thinking through the possibilities beyond such norms as 'productivity'. But in order to achieve that it is also a series of imaginative impositions on Michael akin to Coetzee's romanticized ventriloquizing of Nama idleness. '[W]hich is better', Coetzee asks in the 'Idleness' essay, 'to live like the ant, [...] storing up food for the winter, or like the grasshopper, [...] heedless of the morrow?' To describe humans as animals — as with the European settlers' comparison of the Nama to 'turkey-cocks' — is to signal their illegibility. In this context, even seeing beyond the intellectual paradigm of 'reverie', as the novel does in Michael's second residence at the Visagie farm, must stand at a considerable distance from the realities of idleness. Michael thus functions above all as a blank, a foil, a mirror, even for the novel's first narrator, and even as the novel stages its investigation of the possibilities of idleness.

Reading Michael K alongside Coetzee's 'Idleness' essay thus renders the novel significantly darker, and significantly more troubled by acts of interpretation, than it has hitherto appeared. And we are now in a position to see that readings like those of Marais and Attridge — that invest Michael's consciousness with a profound political or philosophical significance — in fact restage versions of the problematic acts of interpretation that the novel

itself repeatedly dramatizes. Marais and Attridge align themselves, in this sense, with the novel's medical officer (and indeed its first narrator), claiming to 'see' Michael 'for the original soul' he is, finding in him a way of being in the world 'blessedly untouched by doctrine' and 'history'. In the same way that Coetzee is complicit in European misinterpretation in his description of Nama contemplation, Marais and Attridge are complicit in a mode of reading Michael as emblematic, transcendent other.

There is of course a key racial component to the acts of problematic interpretation that the novel and the 'Idleness' essay dramatize. Michael's race is not clearly defined by the novel; and even moments that seem to hint at such definition are brief and undeveloped. Early in the narrative, for example, Michael is classified in almost incidental fashion as 'CM' (p. 70), presumably referring to him as coloured male, though this is never confirmed. Despite this pervasive ambiguity, however, there several ways in which the novel casts its action as Michael throwing off the features of European life and moving towards a mode of being that seems more autochthonous. Take, for example, the following extract from Michael's cave-side thoughts:

When he thought of Wynberg Park he thought of an earth more vegetal than mineral, composed of last year's rotted leaves and the year before's and so on back till the beginning of time, an earth so soft that one could dig and never come to the end of the softness [...]. I have lost my love for that kind of earth, he thought [...]. It is no longer the green and brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard. I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. [...] I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. If I were to die here, sitting in the mouth of my cave looking out over the plain with my knees under my chin, I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand. (pp. 67-8)

This passage makes a set of distinctions that Coetzee also makes in the introduction to *White Writing*. In that piece, African land is either readable in a European 'pastoral' sense, as 'a network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom ruled over by a benign patriarch with, beneath him, a pyramid of

contented and industrious children, grandchildren, and serfs'. Or, 'there is a rival dream topography [...] of South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face'. This latter image of the land is one suited not to the 'working garden' of the Cape, but to the 'land of rock and sun' that can be found inland.²¹

In the passage from Michael K, likewise, the earth can either be 'cool and dark and damp and soft' — suited, that is, to the pastoral settlement by Europeans and their frames of understanding — or it can be 'hard', 'dry', 'yellow' and 'red'. This latter classification relates to the older, pre-European imagining of South Africa, not least because both passages make reference to the preservation of remains 'bedded in' the land's 'rocks': the novel figures Michael himself as being 'preserved whole', 'dried out by the wind in a day'. Michael's role as a gardener that is being remembered in this extract thus equates him, for large sections of the text, with the 'topography' of the pastoral, and with the European division of labour. This Michael would seem to belong in the direct line of labourers Coetzee identifies, of apparently 'contented and industrious children, grandchildren, and serfs'. The Visagie 'grandson', remember, strives to render Michael his 'serf'.²² But the passage also dramatizes throwing off that role and accessing its opposite. At the cave's side, that is, the idle, inert, contemplative Michael, the Michael in a lackadaisical stupor that would seem to hide complete 'bliss' in a posture of subservience and apathy, is also one subverting the European model of human activity and capability. If one were to attempt to inscribe his powers and attributes in European man's 'table of categories', he would fail to register. The novel's oppositions between the Cape and the Karoo and between gardening and idling thus also function as distinctions between a division of labour and something like a pre-commercial state of nature. Thus in much the same way that Coetzee's description of Nama contemplative life invoked the idea of the 'noble savage' — the idealized, whole individual

in contrast to the mechanized, alienated European — Michael K positions its protagonist as stepping outside of the division of labour, and returning to a historically distant but psychologically pertinent mode of existence. Transcendence and race are thus entwined by the novel.

There is an important qualification to be made to these statements, however. Because we have already looked in detail at the representational politics of Michael K, we can treat the novel's version of noble savagery — a kind of racial essentialism — with the scepticism Coetzee's handling of it requires. In a text where narrative statements are exposed as problematic interpretations, characterized by their slippage rather than their grasp of the novel's protagonist, the interpretive model that is the 'noble savage' is also rendered significantly unstable. The ideas of evading the division of labour and returning to a purer mode of being (in the last passage I quoted), of 'reclaiming freedom' and 'yielding' oneself up to 'the face of the world' (in the summer idleness passage), of being 'blessedly untouched by doctrine' or 'history' (as the medical officer has it), of embodying an alternative mode of being (Marais), of being 'unaffected' by the 'main currents of modernity' (Attridge): these preoccupations tell us more about the narrative frameworks of the novel and its commentaries than they do about Michael himself. The protagonist's considerations, ambitions and powers are necessarily invisible and untranslatable. Idleness and inertia function in the novel as markers of genuine impenetrability. And they are markers that are intimately associated in the novel, as in *White Writing*, with ideas of race. What lies at the heart of Coetzee's novel can in this sense only be approximated, even by its narrators. And such approximations must, at least partially, miss their mark. The 'noble savage' is cast as one of many convenient and seductive fictions by Michael K, therefore. Racial essentialism is rendered as problematic, and as inaccurate, as it is in Coetzee's description of Nama inertia.

I want to conclude by observing two, highly significant things about the novel's narration that we are now in a position to see. First, we have considered how, in the medical officer's narrative, the misnaming of Michael as 'Michaels' serves as a shorthand for the lack of purchase the medical officer's interpretations have over the protagonist. We have also considered the extent to which this lack of purchase characterizes the novel's first and primary narrator as well. It is striking that in this context the first narrator's act of calling Michael by the first letter of his surname — 'K' — functions as a similar instance of misnaming. For when Michael is allowed to voice his own name, in conversation with the medical officer in the text's second section, he refers to himself simply as 'Michael' (p. 131). 'K' is thus a signifier very similar to 'Michaels', when the novel's acts of ventriloquism are correctly addressed. Like the term 'Hottentot', both are inaccurate names that serve to foreground the distance between speaker and subject.

The second and final observation I want to make goes against the grain of the tendencies I have spent the duration of this essay picking out of Coetzee's novel, but is nevertheless necessary in order to give an accurate picture of how Michael K handles problems of ventriloquism. The summer idleness passage, the climax of the first narrator's process of problematic interpretation, contains, as we have seen, the idea that 'time flow[s] slowly', for Michael, 'like oil from horizon to horizon'. This idea, and especially its phrasing, must be read as something like an act of interpretation on the part of its narrator. But, significantly, the novel eventually leaves the possibility open that this remarkable image does accurately represent the conception of its protagonist. Again, in conversation with the medical officer, Michael describes the music at 'Huis Norenius' as 'like oil over everything' (p. 132). Now, it is not the case that the two similes are identical. The latter is syntactically

brief, and suggestive but undeveloped. The phrase occurring in the summer idleness passage, by contrast, is the culmination of a lyrical, meandering, epiphanic sentence. The latter represents one instance of music's tendency to restrict thought; the former, as we saw, a supposedly fundamental experience of human life itself. It is therefore not the case that this second occurrence of an oil-based analogy verifies the first as also a precise statement of Michael's thought. Rather, this recurrence of 'oil' as a way of describing forces external to Michael opens up a glimmer of a possibility that the novel's first narrator was speaking something close to truth, in the world of the novel. If Michael uses 'oil' as an analogy in speech, then it might surely be possible for the first narrator's analogy to reflect key features of Michael's thought at that moment too. This tantalizing connection is very important in the scheme of Michael K as a whole. Because when Attridge and Marais discover versions of revolutionary consciousness in the novel, they are quite rightly opening up, and taking seriously, this glimmer of possibility that the novel sustains. The novel keeps alive the possibility that it does follow a consciousness unconditioned by modernity. But an accurate consideration of the acts of ventriloquism dramatized in the novel must make clear that moments like the second use of the term 'oil' are so rare as to be exceptional in Michael K. The novel ultimately dramatizes the same impenetrability of idleness that Coetzee records in White Writing's idleness essay, at the same time that it briefly and tentatively allows for the possibility that such idleness may indeed conceal realms of exultant bliss. The idea of the 'noble savage' haunts this text, therefore. Radical alterity is broached by the novel, but at the same time it is constantly positioned as a thorough fantasy on the part of the narrator in question, who is always cast as a representative of society's preoccupations and tensions.

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- ¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 68.
- ² *Social Dynamics*, 8:1 (1982), 1-13.
- ³ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 12.
- ⁴ J.-J. Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, ed. M. Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 85.
- ⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976), I, 335 & II, 635.
- ⁶ See [Author's name removed], [Title removed] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially pp. 68-132.
- ⁷ S. T. Coleridge, 'Effusion xxxv', in Keach (ed.), *The Complete Poems*, pp. 85-6, ll. 26-40.
- ⁸ J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 117.
- ⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 4 & 200.
- ¹⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 3.
- ¹¹ See, for instance, J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 160.
- ¹² A consideration of the wider relevance of passivity and inertia for Coetzee's thought would obviously need to go beyond the Romantic frame of reference I am focusing on here. Starting points for such a consideration might include Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1898) and Samuel Beckett's *Eleuthéria* (1947), both of which consider at length states of being shorn of any trace of activity, thought or energy.
- ¹³ Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), p. 50.
- ¹⁴ Mike Marais, 'Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 36: 107 (2001): 107-25 (111).
- ¹⁵ Levinas quoted in Marais, 'Literature and the Labour of Negation', p. 110.
- ¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp', *Poetical Works I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 23 vols. (Princeton University Press, 2001), vol. XVI, pp. 453-56, l. 26.
- ¹⁷ Marais, 'Literature and the Labour of Negation', pp. 107 & 110.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.
- ²⁰ Attridge, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. 49.
- ²¹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, pp. 6-7 & 1.
- ²² See, for instance, pp. 63-4.