Blind Injustice: J. M. Coetzee and the Misapprehension of the Ecological Object

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to develop a concept of ‘ecological misapprehension’ by means of an object-oriented ecocritical analysis of several works by J. M. Coetzee. Noting Coetzee’s profound, often overlooked interest in nonhuman, nonanimal ecological existents (on the one hand), and his neomodernist propensity to interrogate the viability of signification (on the other), I argue that his works repeatedly gesture towards an ontological reality of ecological objects that is necessarily extratextual. I further argue that if human ‘readers’—both of and within Coetzee’s fiction—are inextricably entangled within modes of discourse by which meaning is made of those objects, the encounter between human subject and ecological object always takes place across a discursive threshold best understood in terms of the ‘irreducible gap’ that object-oriented ontology identifies between an object’s being and its perception. This gap problematises our apprehension of the ecological object as such, thus rendering ecological misapprehension inevitable—and, by extension, demanding that we remain attuned to the character, density, or degree of our propensity to misapprehend. Variants of this dynamic—and its troubling ramifications—are illuminated by means of close readings of a range of Coetzee’s texts, with particular attention paid to Disgrace, Life & Times of Michael K, and the short story ‘Nietverloren’, and are subsequently compared with examples of misapprehension in the world beyond the page. By developing this concept and identifying examples of it both within and without Coetzee’s works, the thesis aims to illuminate a fundamental obstacle to productive modes of environmental thinking in the Anthropocene, to suggest the activist potential of metafiction and the postmodernist reading practices it encourages, and to reaffirm the potential social utility of literary scholarship when it is conducted with an awareness of its own tendency to misapprehend.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; Life & Times of Michael K; ecocriticism; object-oriented ontology; postcolonial theory
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List of Key Abbreviations

\[\begin{align*}
B &= \text{Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life} \\
D &= \text{Disgrace} \\
DtP &= \text{Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews} \\
EC &= \text{Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons} \\
MK &= \text{Life & Times of Michael K} \\
N &= \text{‘Nietverloren’} \\
S &= \text{Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life} \\
WftB &= \text{Waiting for the Barbarians} \\
WW &= \text{White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa} \\
Y &= \text{Youth}
\end{align*}\]
This enterprise is a curious one in one respect: that the fellow beings on whose behalf we are acting are unaware of what we are up to and, if we succeed, are unlikely to thank us. There is even a sense in which they do not know what is wrong. They do certainly not know what is wrong in the same way that we know what is wrong [...] So, even though we may feel very close to our fellow creatures as we act for them, this remains a human enterprise from beginning to end.

— J. M. Coetzee, ‘Voiceless: I Feel Therefore I Am’ 2

Introduction: Resetting the Scene

At the beginning of J. M. Coetzee’s short story, ‘Nietverloren’, the protagonist ponders a curiosity encountered during childhood visits to his family’s farm in the Karoo, South Africa’s vast, arid ‘interior plateau’ (Attwell, Life of Writing 64). ‘For as long as he could remember, from when he was first allowed to roam by himself out in the veld, out of sight of the farmhouse, he was puzzled by it: a circle of bare, flat earth, ten paces across, its periphery marked with stones, a circle in which nothing grew, not a blade of grass’ (N 25). He thinks of it ‘as a fairy circle’ akin to those in his ‘picturebooks’ (N 25-6) but, finding this interpretation wanting—‘What would fairies do with themselves in the daytime, in the stunned heat of summer, when it was too hot to dance…?’ (N 26)—he takes his theory to his mother for confirmation. ‘It can only be a fairy circle, she replied. He was not convinced’ (N 26). Eventually it is his father who untangles the mystery, informing his son that the circle of earth was formerly a threshing floor. But
the protagonist remains unsatisfied, his father’s explanation no more persuasive than his own formative conclusions: ‘That was the best his father could offer: not a fairy circle but a threshing floor, until the great drought came; then just a patch of earth where nothing grew’ (N 29).

Like so many of Coetzee’s characters, the protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’ is an interpreter—not of one language into another, but of an entity that defies his understanding into some manner of intelligible form. Moreover, as is often the case in Coetzee’s fiction, his interpretative efforts meet with frustration: it is thirty years before an old photograph reveals to him the threshing floor as it once looked, and still longer before his ‘investigation’ (N 32) finally leads him to a conclusion as counter-intuitive as it is logical: ‘all those years ago this had been a self-sufficient farm, growing all its needs’ (N 33). Like the wooden slips that flummox the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, the patch of earth out in the veld is an object that seems to harbour a meaning deeper than itself, access to which has been obstructed by the passage of time.

Having recourse only to specific representations and modes of discourse—from fairy stories to forgotten photos and, later, the historical narrative of South African farming practices—the protagonist attempts to supply the earth with contexts by which it might disclose its meaning. Absent the appropriate context, the circle remains ‘just a patch of earth’, the diminutive functioning as an imperative for him to redouble his hermeneutic contortions. Understanding it as a mere ‘patch of earth’ is insufficient. It must signify something beyond the literal, the self-evidently material—or, rather, it must be made to do so.

In this way, the story functions as an example of what David Attwell calls ‘situational metafiction’: ‘a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation’ (Politics 20). The protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’ is a subject overtly engaged in an act of interpretation, the object of which is an entity that proves unintelligible without reference to historical modes of discourse. Indeed, it is the discourse of history itself that finally furnishes the protagonist with the context required in order to make meaning of the enigmatic circle. ‘Nietverloren’ is thus self-reflexive in a characteristically Coetzeean fashion: it is a ‘staging’ of an interpretative performance reliant upon discourses which are themselves historically contingent—and, moreover, which are accessible only via the media of extant representations.
The use of situational metafiction is a hallmark of Coetzee’s neomodernism, which consistently foregrounds the subjectivity of perception and relentlessly interrogates the referential authority of language (and acts of signification more generally). By dramatising hermeneutic processes, Coetzee not only muddies assumptions of representational fidelity; he also thematises the fraught interpretative encounter between a perceiving subject and an object perceived. The present paper is concerned with this encounter, specifically when it features a certain type of object—a type that is present throughout Coetzee’s *oeuvre*, and exemplified in ‘Nietverloren’. Before it is a ‘fairy circle’ or a ‘threshing floor’, the ‘circle of bare, flat earth’ is an *ecological object*: a material constituent of the story’s literary ecology. Initially, this particular ecological object presents as merely itself, as sheer being: an infuriating, indefinable *thing* that elides the protagonist’s limited intellectual reach. As we have seen, however, this is deemed impermissible. Having once been physically manipulated—its shape and infertility are both consequences of human behaviour—the patch of earth is subjected to a range of figurative manipulations conducted through the prismatic ‘lenses’ of extant modes of discourse. These manipulations, I argue, occasion a dynamic that I call *ecological misapprehension*.

The term ‘misapprehension’ is a response to a word whose import is emphasised by Rob Nixon in his landmark work of postcolonial ecocriticism, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2013). Referring to ecological crises that develop in barely perceptible increments and on near-unthinkable scales, Nixon asks how literary representations can ‘bring home—and bring emotionally to life—threats that take time to wreak their havoc’ (14). ‘*Apprehension* is a critical word here,’ he suggests, insofar as it is ‘a crossover term that draws together the domains of perception, emotion, and action’ (Nixon 14; emphasis in original). Conscious of the same imperative to which Nixon’s work is a response, this thesis will explore the ways in which ecological objects might be apprehended—or, rather, misapprehended—in and through a selection of Coetzee’s works. Given that Nixon does not employ ‘apprehension’ as a fully-fledged

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1. To claims that Coetzee’s work should be defined as ‘postmodernist’, Attridge replies that ‘neomodernist’ or ‘late modernist’ would be more appropriate, since ‘Coetzee’s work follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth’ (6). While I agree with Attridge on this point, I prefer ‘neomodernist’ to ‘late modernist’, since the latter seems to tacitly overlook poststructuralism entirely.

2. The term ‘literary ecology’ refers to *the representation of ecology in a literary text*—that is, as it is understood in Glotfelty and Fromm’s influential anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. This is distinct from Alexander Beecroft’s notion of literary ecology as developed in his *An Ecology of World Literature*, in which the ‘comparative study of the interactions between literatures and their environments’ (28) is framed as a form of ecosystem in itself.
theoretical concept, and as such does not proffer a thoroughgoing definition of the term, what might it mean to ‘apprehend’ ecology? For the purposes of this paper, I suggest that apprehension refers to the perception and resultant understanding of *the thing itself*: of ecological existents[^3] as entities in their own right, and on their own terms. It follows, therefore, that misapprehension refers to the interpretation—that is, the ‘reading’, in the broadest sense of the word—of those existents in such a way that perception of ‘the thing itself’ is obstructed. Phrased differently, misapprehension describes a tendency to make ecological objects stand for something *other than themselves* by forcing them into predetermined discursive schema, thereby obscuring their literal materiality.

This tendency is problematic on several counts. As I will demonstrate at greater length in my Conclusion, conceptualising ecological objects via popular modes of discourse—political, economic, religious, or otherwise—threatens to derail efforts to address the manifold environmental crises with which we are currently confronted, including anthropogenic climate change. The potential ramifications of ecological misapprehension are thus cause for serious concern. This tendency does not merely pose a qualitative challenge, however; it also poses a quantitative challenge on the basis of its ubiquity. If the perception of something is always already a representation of that thing, then the perception of something *per se* (that is, ‘apprehension’ proper) is, by definition, impossible. Misapprehension may not be merely pervasive, but *all-pervasive*. We are therefore not dealing with a binary opposition between apprehension and misapprehension respectively, but with the mode, density, or degree of a tendency to misapprehend that is, to all practical intents and purposes, inevitable. Coetzee’s work represents optimal terrain on which to explore this problem, not only because of its consistent preoccupation with the so-called ‘natural’ environment, but because of its aforementioned propensity to ‘stage’ acts of misapprehension in which we are all by definition engaged. In other words, it is precisely Coetzee’s neomodernist aesthetic that occasions the thematisation and problematisation of environmental ‘reading’ practices. He illuminates what Arif Dirlik calls our ‘ways of seeing’, an understanding of whose complexities may prove pivotal to the ‘radical activity’ required in order to avert environmental disaster.[^4]

[^3]: Following Michael Marais (see ‘Literature and the Labour of Negation’) I use the term ‘existents’ as an umbrella term to denote ecological entities, forces, constituents, and agents when these more specific terms are insufficient in their scope.

[^4]: The radicalism of the issue of culture lies in the fact that culture affords us ways of seeing the world, and if the latter have any bearing on our efforts to change the world then it is essential that we confront
Any discussion of the extent to which readers—be they readers of Coetzee’s fiction, or characters within that fiction—misapprehend ecological existents requires a standard against which judgements can be made. This paper employs object-oriented ontology (or OOO) as such a standard, on the basis that it affords objects an ontological status that is not reducible to perception or interaction. As a form of speculative realism, it rejects the correlationist equation of existence with experience. According to OOO’s de facto founding document, Graham Harman’s *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, there is always a dark side to the object, a fullness of being that overspills the limits of conceptualisation and refuses to be co-opted into modes of discourse by which one might attempt to make sense of it; there is therefore a gulf between an object’s being and the perception of that being (1-12). As I will demonstrate, Coetzee’s texts repeatedly gesture towards this ‘hidden surplus’ (Harman, *Tool-Being* 2) of the ecological object by grasping at it and never gaining a firm grip, much in the way that a simile’s attempt to describe something automatically reinforces its difference from the thing for which it is intended to stand. The futility of this grasping, I suggest, reasserts the ecological object’s presence beyond the boundaries of the discursive schema through which human subjects are bound to approach them. On these terms we can discuss ecological existents *per se*, and the inevitability that one’s apprehension of them will always be problematised.

To readers familiar with the central themes within Coetzee scholarship, OOO may initially seem a counter-intuitive choice of theoretical vocabulary. As I have already noted, Coetzee is intimately familiar with ‘the textual turn in structuralism and our ways of seeing ... To avoid the question of culture is to avoid questions concerning the ways in which we see the world; it is to remain imprisoned, therefore, in a cultural unconscious, controlled by conditioned ways of seeing ... without the self-consciousness that must be the point of departure for all critical understanding and, by implication, for all radical activity’ (Dirlik 13-14).

Although OOO overlaps significantly with the ‘new materialism’—as Manuel DeLanda says, ‘Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds’—the latter broadly insists that ‘all objective entities are products of a historical process, that is, their identity is synthesized or produced as part of cosmological, geological, biological, or social history’ (qtd. in Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism* 39). This emphasis on the conditions under which the object is produced diminishes the import of the object itself, and thus undermines the very terms on which misapprehension can be discussed. Given its interest in Coetzee’s preoccupation with the subjectivity of experience, his innovative use of focalisation, and his propensity to stage hermeneutic procedures, this thesis also clearly engages with phenomenological concerns. My argument, however, hinges upon the distinction between an ontological being as *such* and a phenomenological being as *experienced*—a distinction that is central to OOO. As such, although the relevance of phenomenology to this thesis is clear, it is treated here as part of a broader dynamic. The distance between objects and their perception may also double as a space from which an ethical response to objects can be derived. The ethical dimension of ecological misapprehension, which owes a substantial debt to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, will be discussed in Chapter Two.
poststructuralism’ (Attwell, *Politics* 1), demonstrates a profound engagement with questions of referentiality, and is routinely cited for the self-reflexivity of his prose. What Attwell eloquently refers to as ‘deconstruction’s process of infinite deferral’ (*Politics* 100) is not only a formal feature of Coetzee’s fiction, but is actively and routinely thematised within his novels as well. Does the intense preoccupation with textuality evinced by Coetzee’s works not thus preclude those works from the kind of object-oriented approach suggested here? The first chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to exploring this question, in an attempt to justify the elaboration of a concept of ecological misapprehension in the context of Coetzee’s fiction. This justification will be achieved by identifying important parallels between the inaccessibility of the ‘hidden surplus’ of ecological objects *per ooo*; the frustrated ‘longing’ for an unmediated access to ecology *per se* that informs Coetzee’s critical and *autre*biographical works; and instances in Coetzee’s fiction where bodily pain proves untranslatable into verbal language. Far from locating the ontological certainty of objects on the level of textuality—where they would be vulnerable to attack by familiar poststructuralist critiques of referentiality—*ooo* locates that stability *outside the text*. Like Coetzee, *ooo* knows the risks of ‘naturalisation’ all too well, and thus gestures towards a reality that necessarily lies beyond the reach of textualisation—that is, beyond the same discursive frameworks among which the perceiving subject is necessarily entangled, and which that subject enlists in efforts to make meaning of ecological objects. The basis for my object-oriented re-reading of Coetzee’s work is thus not superimposed on his texts from without, but is rather derived by engaging with the terms of the poststructuralist responses those texts clearly invite.

Building on the theoretical conclusions elaborated in the first chapter, I will in Chapter Two perform close readings of a selection of Coetzee’s novels in order to identify and investigate examples of ecological misapprehension by Coetzee’s characters. While *Disgrace* will figure prominently, special attention will be reserved for *Life & Times of Michael K*, not least because critical responses to *Life & Times* often evince a tendency to subjugate the novel’s vast array of ecological existents to

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7 A book-length study of this feature of Coetzee’s writing was recently published: Marek Pawlicki’s *Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism: Self-Reflexivity in the Chosen Novels of J. M. Coetzee*.

8 The ‘assimilation of the text into a literary system of intelligibility, a discursive order deemed acceptable or natural to the interpretative community to which the reader belongs. This hermeneutic procedure, referred to by structuralists as “naturalization,” forms the basis of all stories of reading’ (Marais, ‘Languages of Power’ 40).
human(ist) concerns. For all that its overt preoccupation with ecological matters may seem to render *Life & Times* a rather obvious choice for an ecocritical analysis, numerous critics have preferred to view the novel’s literary environment less as an entity deserving of attention in its own right,⁹ and more as a consideration within broader discussions about its protagonist’s ‘otherness’, his problematic ontological status, and his evasion of inscription or definition by a range of third parties. These discussions are then often referred back to the socio-political situation in (post-) apartheid-era South Africa.¹⁰ While the value of this scholarship should not be underestimated, the increasingly vociferous and persuasive demands to address pressing questions of environmental justice—questions that are latent in Coetzee’s writings—mean that a shift in critical emphasis may not be just timely, but overdue.¹¹

Interestingly, one might think of this shift in emphasis as a response to instances of ecological misapprehension on the level of critical discourse, since it is premised on a general propensity among Coetzee’s critics to read literary ecologies through the lenses of extant theoretical perspectives. While animals stare out from Coetzee’s works with the insistence of Derrida’s famous cat,¹² other ecological existents—bodies of water, mountains, patches of earth—are liable to be overlooked by Coetzee scholars: ignored entirely, enlisted as critical collateral in readings that foreground postcolonial concerns, or else relegated to the role of two-dimensional ‘scenery’, ‘setting’, or ‘background’ against which human narratives unfold.¹³ One might argue that such interpretative moves are justified insofar as they are responses to fiction writers’ own propensity to deploy ecological objects as a means to some further end. Any given storyworld is almost certain to host a range of ecological entities and forces, which are then liable to be charged with accomplishing some manner of textual work: assisting in the creation of verisimilitude, engineering plot developments, or functioning as vehicles

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⁹ There are of course exceptions to this trend. Among the most notable is Anthony Vital’s ‘Toward an African Ecocriticism’, to which I will return at length in Chapter Two.

¹⁰ See, for example: Gordimer; Attwell, *Politics*; Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’; Barnard; Helgesson.

¹¹ It should be noted that this shift in emphasis is exactly that: a movement away from, rather than an outright rejection of, traditional critical approaches. As the field of postcolonial ecocriticism attests, environmental concerns are in no way extricable from the social, political, and economic issues that have traditionally dominated the realm of critical theory. In bringing an ecocritical perspective to bear on the work of an author more readily associated with the problematics of postcolonialism—and by retaining a focus on characteristically Coetzeean questions of textuality—the present paper positions itself as a development of the critical heritage in which Coetzee’s fiction is embedded.

¹² See Derrida 369.

¹³ The ecocritical import of the foreground-background distinction has been discussed by numerous scholars, including Timothy Morton, whose work is an important touchstone for the present thesis. His *Ecology Without Nature*, for example, revisits this distinction on multiple occasions.
for symbolic meaning, for example. The type of work ecology performs is of course
dependent on genre, and the expectations a genre typically engenders.\textsuperscript{14} If there is little
to prevent one from bringing such expectations to bear on Coetzee’s fiction, however,
I suggest that there is little in his fiction to recommend such a manoeuvre. As I intend
to demonstrate, Coetzee’s metafictional ‘stagings’ of the interpretative encounter
between human subject and ecological object double as cautionary tales for readers who
insist on predetermining the dynamics of their own encounters with the literary
ecologies in his works.

That the ecocritical attention Coetzee has attracted during the ‘environmental
turn’ has tended to concentrate on the role of nonhuman animals in his fiction is
understandable. Notoriously private in many respects, Coetzee has been vocal in his
advocacy of animal rights: this paper’s epigraph is taken from a speech penned by
Coetzee to mark the opening of an art exhibition run by Voiceless—an animal rights
organisation of which Coetzee is a patron—while his interest in questions pertaining to
the treatment of animals, both physically and conceptually, is evident throughout his
body of work.\textsuperscript{15} By contrast, however, the lack of attention paid to ecological existents
that are neither human nor animal is less easily justified. Seldom prominent, they are
nevertheless pervasive; and although they might lack a ‘face’ by which to address
humans, the advent of the Anthropocene suggests that they may yet present an ethical
imperative to the humans who misapprehend them.\textsuperscript{16} With this in mind, the present
paper declines to discuss nonhuman animals—or their misapprehension by human
characters—and opts instead to concentrate on ecological objects that have not yet
enjoyed such sustained scrutiny by Coetzee scholars.

Just as readers of Coetzee are liable to deny the ‘final value’ of ecological
objects by granting them ‘instrumental value’ in the development of interpretations to
which they are ultimately incidental, so Coetzee’s characters are prone to do likewise.
As we will see in Chapter Two, the protagonist of \textit{Disgrace}, David Lurie, is particularly

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\item[14] Rain, for instance, functions rather differently on the mean streets of a hardboiled detective novel
than it does in a work of Victorian fiction. Although foregrounding rain as rain—that is, as a material
ecological existent—might in both cases cast new light on the text, neither example appears to \textit{invite}
this stripe of ecocritical analysis. As such, the usefulness of performing such a reading is debatable.
\item[15] This interest is one Coetzee shares with Kafka—whose story ‘The Burrow’ was the subject of an
essay by Coetzee in 1981 (see \textit{DhP} 210-32)—and is articulated with particular fervour in Coetzee’s
responses to Paola Cavalieri’s \textit{The Death of the Animal} (85-6, 89-92, 119-22).
\item[16] The idea of ‘the face’ is a major feature of Levinas’s theory of the ‘other’. As we will see in Chapter
Two, Levinas’s philosophy may provide a useful means by which to consider the ethical demands that
these existents are now making on the humans who have abused and/or neglected them.
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culpable in this respect, especially when contrasted with his daughter, Lucy. The radical difference between the respective attitudes of father and daughter towards ecological existents renders their juxtaposition a useful microcosm of the dynamics of ecological misapprehension more generally. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, meanwhile, different strands of ecological misapprehension are not so easily delineated. Arguably Coetzee’s most enigmatic protagonist, K undertakes a journey through the heartland of a speculative South Africa in the grip of civil war, misapprehending ecology while himself being misapprehended by a variety of perceiving subjects. K’s attempts to escape ‘hermeneutic capture’ (*Attwell, Politics* 92) ultimately lead him to enact a form of ecological misapprehension quite different from those I identify in Coetzee’s other works—one which threatens to occasion the collapse of a discursive space in which the possibility of a Levinasian ethical relation between human self and ecological other might be engendered.\(^{17}\)

As I have already intimated, my Conclusion marks a departure into the world beyond the page, as these forms of ecological misapprehension are held up against the problematics of attempting to make sense of impending ecological crisis. By identifying parallels between several ‘levels’ of misapprehension—by characters within Coetzee’s fiction; by readers of Coetzee who are confronted by the perennial undermining of his texts’ own authority; and by a global citizenry attempting to make sense of prospective environmental catastrophe—I aim to illuminate particular obstacles to practical and productive modes of environmental thinking. Phrased differently: by venturing to compare characteristically Coetzeean intra-fictional modes of environmental reading (one the one hand) with extra-fictional interpretative procedures that humans inevitably bring to bear on ecological objects (on the other), I aim to demonstrate the veracity and pervasiveness of ecological misapprehension as a significant obstacle to the kind of activism required in order to address a range of pressing environmental threats. In so doing, I also hope in some small way to reaffirm the activist potential and social utility of literary scholarship, especially when that scholarship is conducted in a spirit of attentiveness to one’s own reading practices. Coetzee’s situational metafiction not only invites analysis of the interpretative act on the level of text; it also encourages a metacritical awareness on the part of its own readers. If apprehension is practically

\(^{17}\) Levinas delimits his ethics in such a way that the ecological existents I discuss here fall beyond the remit of his philosophy. Following Graham Harman’s *Tool-Being*, however, I will later attempt to demonstrate that his theory of the ‘other’ might be fruitfully extended to encompass these existents.
impossible, ecocriticism itself must be attuned to its own potential to misapprehend the environment with which it purports to be concerned—and, moreover, must be prepared to investigate the calibre of this misapprehension. As we will see, this dynamic may prove most problematic when it afflicts those who claim to have the environment’s best interests at heart.

Chapter One: Preparing the Ground

1.1. ‘Every stone of it’: Coetzee and the South African Landscape

In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech of 1987, Coetzee addressed the ‘paradox’ of how ‘someone who … lives in so notably unfree a country as my own is honoured with a prize for freedom’ (DtP 96). Warming to his theme, Coetzee launched a startling broadside against those he deemed to be the agents of inequality in his home country, an argument in which the South African landscape was implicated. ‘At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa,’ he said, ‘is a failure of love’; their ‘excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards the land, that is, towards what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers’ (DtP 97; emphasis added).

Taking this quotation in isolation, one might be tempted to conclude that Coetzee deems ecological existents in themselves to be immaterial to the pressing social issues with which South Africa was grappling in 1987. The land, he suggests, functions metonymically: it ‘stands for’ the South Africa of the colonial imagination in such a way as to distract from more profound and troubling human issues; its ‘aesthetic appreciation’ functions as an ‘alibi for … hard-heartedness and inhumanity’ (Barnard 200). By naming physical, nonhuman features of the South African landscape individually, however, Coetzee deconstructs the discourse upon which this colonialist conceptualisation of South Africa relies. Having reduced it to its brute material constituents, the landscape is demythologised: Coetzee reveals it to comprise mountains, deserts, birds, animals, flowers—the meagre, unfeeling leftovers of a discourse stripped of its metaphoric power. Thus, far from dismissing the import of ecological materiality as such, Coetzee tacitly reinforces that import by expressing
frustration at the manner in which ecological existents are artificially activated to support a self-serving ideological agenda.

This reading is corroborated by Coetzee’s autrebiographical works,\(^{18}\) which evince a level of interest in the South African landscape (and, specifically, the Karoo) unparalleled elsewhere in his body of work. Indeed, the autrebiographies can be read as tracing a broad trajectory from a love of the land, through a growing disaffection with its inscription by external forces, to a disavowal based on its discursive misappropriation. *Boyhood*, for example, harks back to the author’s childhood visits to his grandfather’s farm at Voëlfontein (‘Bird-fountain’) and recalls the profound strength of feeling it evoked in young John. Coetzee writes that ‘he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name … It is not conceivable that another person could love the place as he does’ (*B* 80). As in the Jerusalem address, ecological existents are name-checked one by one. Here, however, those physical existents are evoked not as the remains of a dismantled discourse, but as entities deserving of John’s affection on their own terms.\(^{19}\)

*Summertime* evinces an equally sustained interest in the Karoo and its significance for the text’s author-protagonist. In one memorable scene, John and his cousin, Margot, spend a night in the wilderness after their truck has broken down; earlier, John tells her that ‘[t]his place wrenches my heart … It wrenched my heart when I was a child, and I have never been right since’ (*S* 97). This last line is notable insofar as it challenges the notion of an unproblematic love for a familiar wilderness; for Coetzee, it seems, the Karoo is not only formative, but also somehow disfiguring. Salt is poured into this metaphorical wound in the second section of ‘Nietverloren’, a story which, like the autrebiographical ‘trilogy’ to which it may be considered something of

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\(^{18}\) Coetzee discusses the distinction between auto- and autrebiography in an interview with David Attwell, in which the former prefix is associated with the use of the first person and the past tense, and the latter with the use of the third person and the present tense (*DtP* 391-395). Reading the autrebiographies for biographical insight and/or authorial intentionality is a tricky endeavour; as always, we must be careful not to conflate author and narrator (an issue with which Coetzee self-consciously engages). Nevertheless, I feel confident in following Attwell—a pre-eminent Coetzee scholar, and associate of the author—in drawing tentative biographical conclusions from the autrebiographical works (see *Life of Writing*), not least because the quasi-objectivity of Coetzee’s third-person ‘self’-representation is indirectly referenced within the works themselves. From *Boyhood*: ‘for an interval he can see the world as it really is. He sees himself in his white shirt … In a moment like this he can see his father and his mother too, from above, without anger’ (160-1; emphasis added). An excellent discussion of Coetzee and autrebiography is provided by Lenta.

\(^{19}\) As Attwell observes, ‘Coetzee loves this landscape yet has sought to detach his love from the ways it has been socialized by colonial history’ (*Life of Writing* 72). I suggest that the word ‘yet’ is misleading: to my mind, Coetzee loves this landscape and has therefore sought to detach it from its socialisation.
a companion piece, is written in the present continuous. When the protagonist expresses his feelings towards the Karoo, the change in tense is striking:

*I used to love this land.* Then it fell into the hands of the entrepreneurs, and they gave it a makeover and a face-lift and put it on the market. This is the only future you have in South Africa, they told us: to be waiters and whores to the rest of the world. I want nothing to do with it. (*N* 42; emphasis added)

The land, by virtue of its having been enlisted in a project to which the protagonist takes exception, has been compromised; the wholehearted love of *Boyhood*, problematised in *Summertime*, is now seemingly lost altogether. Reflecting on the passage above, Attwell discusses the double meaning of ‘Nietverloren’, which ‘doesn’t simply mean *not lost*; to Coetzee it means, *in turning my back on the Karoo I have lost nothing.* Karoo farming has lost its way, and so I can move on’ (*Life of Writing* 68, emphasis in original). And yet: to write of the Karoo once again, this time from the twenty-first century and a home half-way around the world in Australia, and to do so with a ferocity of feeling so fresh one can almost smell it—what kind of ‘moving on’ is this? In an example of the kind of ‘double movement’ (Parry 40) characteristic of his work more generally, the ties binding Coetzee—or, more accurately, his fictionalised alter-ego—to the Karoo are in fact reinscribed by the very justification of their supposed severance.

The Karoo is ‘the one place on earth he has defined, imagined, constructed, as his place of origin’ (*DtP* 393-4)—and in Coetzee’s work, origins are never unproblematic. One need only consult Coetzee’s reflections upon his relationship with his parents to know that *wanting* nothing to do with a facet of one’s heritage is quite different from *having* nothing to do with it.20 In fact, Coetzee has expressed precisely this sentiment in the context of his status as a white Afrikaner: ‘*Y*ou cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of your country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing* it’ (*DtP* 96; emphasis in original).21 This image neatly encapsulates Coetzee’s

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20 One example in particular raises a wry smile: ‘Will his mother not understand that when he departed Cape Town he cut all bonds with the past? … When will she see that he has grown so far away from her that he might as well be a stranger? […] He mentions that he has mislaid his gloves on a train. A mistake. Promptly a package arrives by airmail: a pair of sheep-skin mittens’ (*Y* 98).

21 Echoes of both this sentiment and ‘Farm Novel and *Plaasroman*’ combine in the following quotation from *Youth*: ‘Having shaken the dust of the ugly new South Africa from his feet, is he yearning for the South Africa of the old days, when Eden was still possible?’ (137).
enduring preoccupation with the ecology of the South African landscape—a preoccupation not so much inherent as adherent, clinging to Coetzee with a material insistence. A ‘symbolic resignation’, Coetzee says, is no more than a vapid gesture; only the (physical) act of removing (literal) dust from one’s feet might amount to a ‘proper’ resignation.\(^{22}\) In practice, however, even this proposition remains hypothetical. The resignation has already been declared impossible; it seems one is forever destined to fall ‘short of’ the closure promised by the palpable, verifiable act.

In the context of South Africa’s ‘foremost self-reflexive novelist’ (De Kock 284), an admission of, and an impulse towards, the potential efficacy of a tangible material reality is noteworthy. I am reminded of the question that concludes Coetzee’s 1986 essay, ‘Farm Novel and Plaasroman in South Africa’: ‘Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?’ (17). If we take ‘sound’ to denote presence, and ‘silence’ to denote absence, we can identify here a certain longing: a belief in an identifiable object—and, indeed, in the referential capacity of language to portray it as such—which is nevertheless fraught with concerns regarding how that object might be accessed without its being co-opted into the power relations of discourse—that is, how it might be properly apprehended. As we have already seen, a version of this same longing also pervades the Jerusalem address—in which Coetzee laments the cynical, autocratic textualisation of South Africa’s ‘mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers’—as well as the autrei biographies. As a boy, Coetzee’s love is trained on ecological materiality in itself: stones, bushes, blades of grass. As he grows older, however, that love has devolved into frustration at the manner in which that materiality has been drowned in referentiality, and an attendant longing for a return to the possibility of access to an ecology denuded of the discursive garb imposed on it from without. In all three examples, ecological objects have been placed under erasure, subjected to what Michael Marais calls the ‘labour of negation’;\(^{23}\) and, in all three cases, Coetzee tacitly poses the question of how (if at all) the ontological presence of those objects might be recovered and represented by linguistic means.

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\(^{22}\) It would appear that Coetzee has taken it upon himself to prove this theory: having emigrated from South Africa on several occasions, he claimed Australian citizenship in 2006.

\(^{23}\) See Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’. This dynamic is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.
This question leads us inevitably back to Coetzee’s neomodernism, whose interrogation of the viability and authority of signification extends to their own attempts at such. In such a context, the potential for a reading that presupposes a measure of ontological stability on the part of a given fictional ecology seems limited at best. We should note, however, that we have already accrued important evidence to the contrary. Not only does Coetzee repeatedly demonstrate an uncommon interest in the physical landscape *qua* ecological object; he also evinces an impulse towards an ecological ‘reality’ that, for ‘a product of the post-structuralist/postmodernist turn’ (Head, *Cambridge Introduction* 27), is perhaps only the more potent for the fact that it appears to be always-already thwarted. Nevertheless, we remain confronted by the fundamental question of whether that impulse is in fact destined to remain unsatisfied. I suggest that this is not the case, venturing instead that Coetzee’s self-reflexivity, while seeming to destabilise the (already fraught) relation between ‘word’ and ‘world’ beyond any prospect of repair, might in fact open a space in which ecological materiality might be located. In order to identify this space, Coetzee’s treatment of the body may prove instructive. As we will see, in Coetzee’s novels the limits of physical endurance double as the limits of language; if we are to locate a basis upon which to speak of a physical ‘reality’ in his works, it may be at these very limits.

1.2. A ‘Certain Presence’: The Ineffable Reality of the Body in Pain

If the contested authority of language is one of the central concerns of Coetzee’s fiction, the site of the human body is another. The two are often closely interrelated. According to Jonathan Lamb, Coetzee’s fiction displays a ‘preoccupation with the problem of truth and how it might be elicited and stated. Often it leads him to scenes that literalize Bacon’s metaphor of the torture chamber, in which reticent Nature is subjected to the vexations of art so that she may be induced to speak more freely’ (178). Readers of Coetzee will likely remember these scenes vividly, and will further recall that the ‘vexations’ of the torturer’s ‘art’ seldom result in the unproblematic relinquishing of withheld information. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, for example, the Medical Officer’s attempts to extract information from his enigmatic patient are perennially frustrated—a frustration most powerfully articulated when the Medical Officer imagines chasing K into the wilderness, casting his own interpretations of him *towards* him like a lasso that
never finds its mark (MK 161-7). In *Disgrace*, David Lurie experiences a different brand of torture: he is set alight and locked into a bathroom by intruders who proceed to rape his daughter. But his efforts to explain the situation to himself—in French, in Italian—are in vain. ‘[T]he horror … exceeds measure in any language,’ says Carrol Clarkson; the ‘ability to articulate these events with a strong conviction that the truth is being told, is rendered questionable’ (168). In short, there is a plethora of textual evidence in Coetzee’s fiction to suggest that ‘reticent Nature’ does not in fact ‘speak more freely’ when it is subjected to the ‘vexations of art’—at least not in intelligible linguistic terms. In fact, if torture elicits ‘speech’ at all, it is of a rather different quality.

Evidence to this effect can be found in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, arguably Coetzee’s most sustained interrogation of the limits of human language when the body is placed under extreme duress. In this novel, the attempts of Empire to extract information from the so-called ‘barbarians’ (or their suspected sympathisers) devolve into physical torture as a matter of course. This is presented most viscerally when the Magistrate is subjected to a mock hanging. Perched atop a ladder, his head covered, the Magistrate feels the rope tightening around his neck: ‘I try to call out something, a word of blind fear, a shriek, but the rope is now so tight that I am strangled, speechless’ (WftB 131). He begins to dangle; he hears the ‘drumbeat’ of his heart thudding in his ears (WftB 131). When he is lowered back onto the ladder, the ordeal appears to be over—but his respite is short-lived. The Magistrate is hoisted once again, this time by his wrists. Though he now *can* use his voice, he still finds himself curiously speechless: ‘I feel a terrible tearing in my shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way. From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow, like the pouring of gravel. […] I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright’ (WftB 132-3).

Several features of this quotation require attention. Firstly, the sounds that emanate from the Magistrate are extra-linguistic: the ‘bellow’ does not comprise words, but is simply ‘noise’. Secondly, that ‘bellow’ is described by a surfeit of adjectives—‘first mournful dry’—which, taken collectively (as they must be, given the lack of punctuation), imply a desperate, fruitless attempt to make sense of it. (This idea is only reinforced by the bellow’s comparison with ‘the pouring of gravel’, a simile whose
reference is of the material environment. Thirdly, the yell is described as coming ‘out of a body’—that is, out of an entity from which the Magistrate is dissociated—that boasts its own, non-verbal type of knowledge. The Magistrate’s voice is thus disembodied: its verbal language refers to a physical language that it can perceive, but cannot translate. In other words, the pain is literally indescribable, ‘real’ in ways that defy representation by linguistic means. In Clarkson’s words, ‘[t]he damaged body, without premeditation, roars its truth in a way that cannot be recapitulated with integrity in the organizing patterns and structures of language’ (174). Or, as Arthur W. Frank has it, ‘that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail’ (qtd. in Tegla 64).

The deeper implications of these conclusions are clear: art’s failure to force truth from ‘reticent Nature’ is not just a feature of Coetzee’s fiction on a textual level, but speaks directly to the question of whether that fiction can itself render the ‘real’ via textual means. As such, we are again confronted with a central tenet of Coetzee’s aesthetic already identified earlier in this paper. The metafictional interpolation of fiction’s representational inaccuracy into the representation proffered by that fiction is, of course, one of the defining hallmarks of Coetzee’s writing, and is testament to his intense preoccupation with the problematics of realism—problematics which, in the context of the present paper, must be addressed. We are of course interested not in ‘reticent Nature’, with its quasi-intentional adjective and its capitalised proper noun, but in a means by which to approach ecological objects stripped of precisely the kind of assumptions signified by agential descriptors and casual personification. In other words, we are interested in bodies: absent vocal chords, perhaps insentient, but bodies that are nonetheless real. If Coetzee insists upon the impossibility of accessing reality through language, where are these bodies to be found?

Consulting critical interventions that address Coetzee’s treatment of the body in pain might help us to answer this question. Consider the following observations from Barbara Eckstein:

> Early in his acquaintance with the magistrate, Joll explains to him how torture leads to truth: ‘first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth.’ The magistrate paraphrases to himself this lesson: ‘Pain is truth; all else is

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24 In this same vein, we might note that, in another peculiar simile, the Magistrate’s body is likened to that of a moth—a silent animal lacking any form of higher cognitive function.
subject to doubt.’ Joll is right as the magistrate interprets him, even though the magistrate does not yet know the cost of this truth. He later pays the price and repeats the lesson. Torture produces truth, for it produces pain, and pain is certain presence. (192)

Joll is indeed right ‘as the magistrate interprets him’—but not as Joll wishes to be understood. The Magistrate’s paraphrase subtly undermines Joll’s meaning, recasting the words ‘truth’ and ‘in’ in important ways. While Joll refers to a truth in language (where ‘in’ means, roughly, ‘within’, or ‘with reference to’), the Magistrate experiences a truth in pain (where ‘in’ means ‘inherent to’ or ‘embodied by’). Since Joll’s torturous methods seldom elicit information that is factually accurate, his ‘truth’ is, in practical terms, regularly false. But his truth may also be considered false in a more profound sense. Irrespective of its accuracy as information, it always takes the form of information: being rendered verbally, it is always already a representation, and is thus liable to be misinterpreted (as the Magistrate’s own paraphrase so deftly demonstrates). The same cannot be said of the truth inherent to the Magistrate’s physical pain, which is verified by the fact of its own incommunicability. In Lamb’s words, ‘by closely attending to the circumstances of its pain’, Coetzee ‘assert[s] the importance of bare facts in respect of the irrefragable authority of the sensate body’ (178). This body is ‘a stranger to figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, personification and especially irony’ (Lamb 178)—that is, the very type of language to which the Magistrate desperately, hopelessly appeals.

On this basis, we can argue with some confidence that the ‘reality’ of bodily pain is a ‘certain presence’ in Coetzee’s fiction. Pain, however, is more experiential than physical; in philosophical terms, therefore, we are in phenomenological, rather than ontological, territory. In order to justify the identification of ecological existents in Coetzee’s work, we surely require evidence of the reality of the body itself, rather than evidence of the reality of what the body feels. Coetzee seemingly proffers this evidence in an interview with Attwell. ‘If I look back over my own fiction,’ he says, ‘I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it is is the pain it feels. The body in its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can’t in philosophy, I’m sure.)’ (DtP 248; emphasis in original). The reality of pain is here invoked as evidence of the reality of the body: the presence of the felt experience is the means by which the presence of the tangible
object can be identified. But Coetzee is right to admit his own lack of philosophical rigour, since what he sketches is a dynamic whereby ontological presence is ‘proven’ by epistemological means. This is problematic. We might note with some concern, for example, that Coetzee’s ‘proof’ for the presence of the body is a pain that many ecological existents do not necessarily experience. More troublingly still, Coetzee is acutely aware of the profound gulf between epistemology and ontology; indeed, it is precisely this gulf that he exploits when ‘staging’ attempts at interpretation—as in the example above from Barbarians—in order to interrogate the referential authority of language. Coetzee knows that perception is in no way a clean, thoroughgoing representation of ‘reality’. Pain may gesture towards the ‘certain presence’ of the body, but it cannot describe it with certainty of its own.

If Coetzee openly interrogates the fidelity of language to the ‘reality’ it attempts to represent—that is, if he addresses the question of ‘realism’ in all its complexities—then is the attempt to identify ontological stability in his works not inherently misguided? Indeed, does it not miss the point of Coetzee’s fiction almost entirely? And, for our purposes, does this not suggest that ecological objects are always bound to remain held in ‘symbolic servitude’ (Festa 444), overlaid (as they must be) with the creativity of the perceiving subject’s perspective? On the understanding that we are not about to ‘solve’ the problem of realism, we may have to resign ourselves to answering in the affirmative. Resignation, however, may not be the only attitude available as we consider this inconvenient truth. Just because a veil of subjectivity interposes between an object and its perception (or representation) does not mean that we must follow the ramifications of poststructuralism to their logical conclusions. As Eckstein herself writes: ‘When a critic practicing a deconstructive method leaps to conclusions of irresponsibility and despair, it is not because those conclusions are inherent in the method’ (177). Instead, we might utilise the problematic slippage between signifier and signified more productively.

Put simply, we are faced with a choice. Either we attempt to make sense of objects (including ecological variants thereof) via a process of ‘naturalisation’—‘textualising’ them into digestible concepts by draping them in the aforementioned ‘discursive garb’—or we reconcile ourselves to the inevitability of the fundamental 25 Attribution discusses this mode of ‘staging’ in a chapter entitled ‘Against Allegory’ (32-64). I will return to this chapter in the following section.
otherness that renders them ungraspable. The former means increasing the density of the mediation of one's experience of the world (and, therefore, of the objects that comprise it). The latter, by contrast, entails accepting the fact of mediation, and remaining attentive to its density. By adopting this second mode of thinking, the obfuscation that is liable to follow from an increased density of mediation can be offset, and we can do justice to the object as best we can from a position we know to be compromised.26 In other words: rather than treating Coetzee’s neomodernism as if it insisted upon the impossibility of interpretation, we could instead choose to hear its longing for access to ‘the thing itself’27 as an injunction to redouble our efforts to locate it—and, moreover, to do so on the terms of deconstruction itself. In short, we might find the object in the very sign of its own absence.

Just as pain is verified by the fact of its own incommunicability, so objects (or physical matter more generally) may be identified by the mark of their own resistance to representation. It follows that the only logical place to look for ecological existents in Coetzee’s work is outside the text. Dominic Head performs this manoeuvre in his reading of Life & Times of Michael K, as Anthony Vital explains:

For Head Michael K is ‘one of those postmodernist novels which requires us to revisit the effects of textuality’ by delivering, within an overall self-reflexivity, narrative elements … that gesture towards a materiality, elusive but important, and it thereby serves to warn of the ‘dangers of over-textualization’ […] By attending to these intimations of the material, the literal, that the dominant code elaborating ideas of ‘textuality' cannot absorb, Head can then read the novel as being about ecology, necessarily extratextual. (89-90)28

26 Timothy Morton begins his book Realist Magic with a discussion of a song that he describes as ‘a reading, an interpretation, of a Spandau Ballet song (“True”), which itself seems to be trying to copy or evoke something, to do justice to something’ (15-16; emphasis added). Six pages later, he asks the question: ‘What is a just interpretation? What is justice, when it comes to a work of art?’ (22). As should already be clear, I understand a ‘just interpretation’ in the present context to be aware of the impossibility of apprehension per se, and thus to boast a metacritical awareness of its own limitations.

27 This dynamic clearly echoes Kant’s concept of the Ding an Sich, and his distinction between the ‘noumenon’ and the ‘phenomenon’. Although this paper neither engages explicitly with Kant’s work nor employs Kantian terminology, I note these resonances here in order to emphasise that the present paper, despite drawing heavily on the theoretical insights of a school of thought (OOO) that remains very much in its infancy, is nevertheless situated in a long and storied philosophical tradition.

28 Head’s argument takes a further turn after this point: ‘by essay’s end, Head returns to admitting the limitations of this attention to “double-coding.” Nature, for Head, has necessarily to be nature-signified, a discursive construct, and nature-as-literal is not exempt from this rule’ (Vital 90).
By Head’s rationale, even if ecological matter cannot be directly represented by the text, it can at least be tacitly referenced according to the text’s admission of its own limitations. Poststructuralism’s almost morbid fascination with the ineffable thus gives rise to a secondary mode of accessing precisely the entity that elides its grasp. Like all unspeaking objects, ecological existents may be signified by the scorched space on the page where the very battle for their signification has been lost, or in the object-shaped hole through which that object has inevitably escaped. If we cannot apprehend them per se, we can at least grasp their fundamental ungraspability.

This notion of the ‘escaping object’ is an interesting one, resonating as it does with the tenets of object-oriented ontology (or OOO). While OOO may seem a counter-intuitive theoretical means by which to approach Coetzee’s fiction, it in fact articulates many of the same dynamics I have identified above: the longing for unmediated access to the ecological ‘other’; the inevitability that this longing will not be fully satisfied; and the potential productivity of reconciling oneself to that very inevitability. The following section will develop each of these arguments, thus laying the foundations for an object-oriented re-reading of Coetzee. More broadly, it will also gesture towards the potential for a materialist brand of ecocriticism that does not return to the resistance to textuality that characterised ecocriticism’s first wave, but rather understands textuality as a mediating force whose acknowledgement is in fact a prerequisite for responsible environmental thinking.

1.3. Undermining ‘Overmining’: Virtues of an Object-Oriented Approach

In view of the conclusions drawn in the previous two sections, we might take Coetzee’s works to invite a theoretical approach that identifies the ontological ‘reality’ of the ecological object precisely by accepting and understanding its tendency to overspill the limits of textualisation. Object-oriented ontology (OOO) represents such a framework.

29 Lawrence Buell provides a useful outline of ecocriticism’s first decade. ‘First wave’ ecocriticism, he argues, was characterised by a conscious break from humanistic tradition, seeking to refocus critical attentions on the environment as environment. Interestingly, however, the general trajectory of ecocritical theorising has not led further away from humanism, so much as it has returned towards it after this initial departure: ‘second wave’ ecocriticism has increasingly acknowledged the manifold intersections at which environmental and humanist concerns meet, problematising the boundaries that purport to delineate them (Buell 21-22). While this is a welcome development, the present paper attempts to demonstrate that the material ecological object should retain a central position in ecocritical discourse—and, importantly, that it can do so without questions of textuality being dismissed.
In *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Graham Harman elaborates the central tenets of an object-oriented philosophy that allows objects (or ‘tool-beings’) to ‘be defined only by their autonomous reality’ (Harman, *Quadruple Object* 19). Harman distinguishes between the means by which humans attempt to conceptualise objects, and what he calls the object’s ‘hidden surplus’ of being (Harman, *Tool-Being* 2); boasting this ‘hidden surplus’, the object ‘withdraws’ from the same ‘linguistic [networks] or culturally-coded [systems] of “social practices”’ with which it is often falsely equated (*Tool-Being* 5; emphasis in original). Timothy Morton clarifies this key notion of ‘withdrawal’, emphasising that it is neither ‘a violent sealing off’ nor ‘some void or vague darkness. Withdrawal just is the unspeakable unicity’ of the object (*Realist Magic* 16).30 ‘That tool-beings retreat into a silent background,’ Harman argues, ‘means not only that they are invisible to humans, but that they exceed any of their interactions with other tool-beings’ (*Tool-Being* 5). As such, ontological weight is restored to ‘the transcendent world of things in themselves’ (Harman, *Tool-Being* 5).

In *The Quadruple Object*, Harman discusses two broad means by which the autonomy of the object may be problematised: ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’ (7-19). Harman argues that ‘“undermining” philosophies … say that objects are too shallow to be real’; they locate reality instead in ‘the tiny elements or the quasi-unified lump deeper than all individual things’—that is, the components or materials of which the object is comprised—without allowing for ‘the emergent power of larger entities’ (qtd. in Kimbell 106-7). ‘Overminers’, meanwhile, say that objects ‘are too deep to be real’: ‘useless fictions, or at least forever unverifiable. All that is real are the contents of consciousness, the constructions made by society, the workings of language—or relations, effects, and events more generally’ (qtd. in Kimbell 107; emphasis in original). If objects ‘exist mid-way between their tiny components and their palpable external effects’ (Harman, qtd. in Kimbell 111), ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’ mistakenly attempt to locate them at the respective poles of this spectrum: the former ‘reduces’ the object to its constituent parts, while the latter ‘expands’ the object by

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30 Among the most radical features of Harman’s thesis is that this ‘same structure of withdrawal occurs even on the inanimate level’: it is ‘not a specific feature of human temporality, but belongs to any relation whatsoever’ (*Tool-Being* 5; emphasis in original). Also notable is that Harman’s definition of objects is capacious enough to include both the tangible and the non-tangible. ‘Objects need not be natural, simple, or indestructible,’ he writes. ‘Instead, objects will be defined only by their autonomous reality’ (*Quadruple Object* 19). This has proven one of the more contentious among OOO’s claims—and while it cannot be resolved here, it is important to note that the present paper concerns itself only with objects that are tangible: physical matter identifiable by empirical means. As such, the problematics of non-tangible objecthood in fact fall beyond the remit of my argument.
treated as a metonymy of a ‘deeper’ reality that is constructed, and therefore illusory.
While Harman takes exception to overmining on philosophical grounds, \(^{31}\) we might note that overmining also appears to describe the same obstacle repeatedly identified earlier in this chapter: the obstacle erected somewhere between *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, and bemoaned in ‘Nietverloren’; the obstacle to which Coetzee so self-consciously draws attention when the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is hoisted into the air. \(^{32}\) From circles of earth to human bodies, objects in Coetzee’s fiction are repeatedly subjected to—and repeatedly *defy*—attempts to reduce them to conceptual categories, social constructions, and linguistic representations. The longing noted earlier might thus be re-read as a resistance to the practice of overmining—or, better, an imploration that material (and, specifically, *ecological*) objects’ own resistance to overmining be acknowledged.

According to the dynamic that Harman associates with overmining, whereby being-as-such is mediated, its ‘hidden surplus’ denied, and its apprehension-as-such forestalled, the ‘real’ is obscured behind layers of imposed meaning which, taken collectively, amount to a certain density of mediation, the likes of which I discussed earlier. If realism refers to a mediation of reality that is inevitable but minimal, overmining intensifies that mediation, thus widening the ‘omnipresent fissure between the sparkling perceptibility of the object and its hidden seismic reality’ (Harman, *Tool-Being* 236). It would be easy, of course, to question whether we should care about the density of this mediation. If the object is bound to elude us, why should the *margin* by which it eludes us matter? But we should be wary of equating all lost battles, especially if the number of casualties differs from case to case. As I suggested in the Introduction—and as I will argue further in the Conclusion—the casualties of ecological misapprehension are already numerous, and stand to increase exponentially if misapprehension is not itself apprehended.

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\(^{31}\) Harman’s objection is that overmining theories ‘fail to explain why anything would ever change. If you or I are … fully determined by our current sociolinguistic context and our current sum total of relations with all other beings, then there is no reason why either of us would ever change or develop in any way. And the same goes for inanimate objects’ (Harman, qtd. in Kimbell 107).

\(^{32}\) Harman and Morton have between them ventured an intimidating array of names by which this obstacle might be known. Harman refers to an ‘unbridgeable gap between being in general and this being in general as experienced’ (*Tool-Being* 239; emphasis in original), while Morton discusses ‘the *interobjective* space, the sensual space that consists of relations between objects’ and ‘the Rift … between a thing and its appearance’, further describing this as ‘*a chorismos*’, and (echoing Harman) ‘an irreducible gap’ (*Realist Magic* 26, 26, 27, 27; emphasis in original).
The protagonist of Coetzee’s ‘academic novel’, *Elizabeth Costello*, ventures an eloquent explanation of the dangers of overmining in an ecological context:

‘In the ecological vision, the salmon and the river weeds and the water insects interact in a great, complex dance with the earth and the weather. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In the dance, each organism has a role: it is these multiple roles, rather than the particular beings who play them, that participate in the dance. As for actual role players, as long as they are self-renewing, as long as they keep coming forward, we need pay them no heed.

‘I called this Platonic and I do so again. Our eye is on the creature itself, but our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthly, material embodiment.

‘The irony is a terrible one. An ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures justifies itself by appealing to an idea, an idea of a higher order than any living creature. An idea, finally—and this is the crushing twist to the irony—which no creature except man is capable of comprehending.’ (EC 98-9)

As Morton says of Blake’s famous grain of sand, ‘this is a very ooo insight’ (*Realist Magic* 30): Harman himself has argued that ‘Plato was the first overminer’ (qtd. in Kimbell 107), while Costello’s distinction between ‘role players’ and their given roles is redolent of much ooo writing. By highlighting the problematic tendency to equate ecological existents with the ‘relations, effects, and events’ in which they participate, Costello emphasises the presence and significance of those objects themselves. Importantly, however, Costello’s refocusing on the role players does not diminish those players’ ecological embeddedness or interconnectivity—and, according to ooo, the same is true of objects. Individual objects may claim a measure of autonomy on account of the ‘hidden surplus’ that each object boasts, but this need not entail their mutual exclusivity from one another. Just because an object is not reducible to its components or its relations does not mean that it does not boast those components—each of which is equally an object in its own right—or enjoy those relations. Indeed, inter-object relations and questions of causality represent significant preoccupations for many proponents of ooo, as is especially evident when their critical work addresses matters of ecological and geological import.34

33 I will return to Costello’s idea of ‘embeddedness’ in my discussion of *Disgrace* in Chapter Two.
34 The extent of the common ground shared by ecocriticism and ooo is exemplified by the number of scholars bringing the latter to bear within the context of the former. Timothy Morton is arguably the most prominent, with his book *The Ecological Thought* situated very clearly at this particular nexus. This junction is not populated solely by literary scholars, however. Andrew Pickering, for example, has
In this connection, it is important to note that human beings are not only participants in the ‘great, complex dance’ of Costello’s ‘ecological vision’ (and, as the developing Anthropocene narrative attests, highly influential ones at that); they also qualify as objects according to OOO. Indeed, OOO thinkers typically dispute the privileging of the human that is implicit in the idea of subjecthood. (Not for nothing is the Introduction to Levi R. Bryant’s *The Democracy of Objects* titled ‘Toward a Finally Subjectless Object’. Since I have used the term on several occasions already, it might seem that my own misgivings regarding the retention of the concept of ‘the human subject’ are rather less profound than Bryant’s. But while this may appear to mark a major schism between my own philosophy and that of OOO, this perceived incongruence is actually something of a misnomer. In fact, I retain the term ‘subject’ for the same reasons that OOO rejects it. The very idea of ecological misapprehension, of course, relies upon the notion of a human subject who assumes a self-endowed authority over the realm of nonhuman objects; to discuss the dynamics of misapprehension thus entails an admission of subjecthood, albeit as a problematic imaginative construct. As such, I use the term here not in order to reinforce the authority of the human subject, but in order to highlight that misapprehension is all but endemic to human acts of conscious perception and linguistic representation. As I have already established, however, OOO asserts that objects resist this interpretative manoeuvre. Just as Coetzee insists that ‘the body is not “that which is not”’, Morton insists that ‘[a]ll the things by which we specify the object are not the object’ (*Realist Magic* 27; emphasis in original). An object ‘isn’t something else’: it is not ‘a void or … a moment in my reflective process’, but ‘is irreducible to anything else at all’ (Morton, *Realist Magic* 30; emphasis in original). It follows that ‘[e]very seeing, every measurement, is also an adjustment, a parody, a translation, an interpretation’ (Morton, *Realist Magic* 33)—or, as Derek Attridge might put it, an allegory.

According to Dominic Head, ‘all language—and all literature—is allegorical in that it constitutes a network of deferred meaning. In this account, the literary work comprises allusions to (and substitutions for) a referent that is unattainable’ (*Cambridge Introduction* 29). Echoing Head’s concerns, Attridge posits ‘that all engagements with...
literary works—insofar as they are engagements with literary works—benefit from …
a literal reading: a reading that defers the many interpretive moves that we are accustomed to making in our dealings with literature, whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political’ (60; emphasis in original). This is easier said than done, however. While Coetzee’s works articulate a longing, both formally and thematically, towards the possibility of a poetics of the literal, we have seen that this longing is itself an implicit expression of its own hopelessness.  

37 Attwell places this hopelessness in a socio-historical context—and, moreover, implies that context’s responsibility for this hopelessness—when he observes that ‘[i]n a frenzied culture such as South Africa’s … every sign, no matter how innocent, becomes a signifier at another level, pointing to the larger conflict. Within such a context there is no such thing as an irreducible element’ (Politics 100).  

38 We have also noted, however, that OOO insists upon the ungraspability of that ‘irreducible element’, locating it outside the realm of discourse. As such, OOO actually promises to provide a fresh means of identifying the ‘reality’ of ecological existents in Coetzee’s works and, by extension, the relation between those existents and the ‘readers’ who encounter them—a relation marked by the tension that inheres in the liminal space between readers’ discursive entanglement and objects’ extra-discursive presence.

I refer not only to readers of those works, but readers within them, as well. Just as the majority of critical analyses of Coetzee’s fiction are prone to treat his texts as ‘allegorical’—thus overmining ecological existents in the process of ‘pointing to’ South Africa’s ‘larger conflict’—the characters in Coetzee’s novels often demonstrate a comparable interpretative inclination. As Attridge reminds us, ‘[a]llegory may … be staged in literature, along with so many other aspects of the way we make sense of the world’ (61; emphasis in original). Coetzee, a proponent of ‘postmodern allegory’ (Head, Cambridge Introduction 29), is apt to perform this manoeuvre. As such, quite

37 On the basis that this longing cannot be satisfied, a ‘poetics of the literal’ might be understood as an example of what Coetzee elsewhere calls a ‘poetics of failure’ (DiP 86). In an essay on ‘Achterberg’s “Ballade van de gasfitter”’ (DiP 69-90), Coetzee characterises such a poetics in terms of ‘the maneuver in which a poem ends by swallowing its own tail—denying, denouncing, or erasing itself’ (DiP 86). ‘The poem that incorporates a denunciation of itself,’ he continues, ‘paradoxically acquires the ontological self-sufficiency, and therefore extends the ontological challenge, of the self-consuming artifact: Can language reach outside itself?’ (DiP 86).

38 We are already familiar with this dynamic courtesy of Coetzee’s pointed critique of his country’s hereditary masters’ and their overmining of the South African landscape.

39 Traditionally understood, allegory substitutes one plane of significance for another […] Coetzee is quite clear, however, that such a flat use of allegory has become anachronistic […] In postmodernist expression … allegory becomes highly self-conscious, a mode which advances a radical investigation
aside from the question of whether literature necessarily overmines ecological existents by simple virtue of daring to represent them—as Harman implies in his brief, veiled critique of literary theory—\[40\]—we might question the degree to which Coetzee’s characters overmine environmental objects on the ‘extensional’ level of storyworld.\[41\] How do Coetzee’s characters misapprehend the ecological existents with which they engage—and with what consequences?

Chapter Two: Traversing the Terrain

2.1. ‘Stop calling it the farm’: Disgrace’s Microcosm of Misapprehension

Just as Coetzee criticism has tended to inadvertently subjugate the thematics of ecology to a more mainstream interest in the social, the political, the linguistic, or the intertextual, so characters in Coetzee’s works are liable to misapprehend the ecological objects that constitute and/or populate their respective storyworlds. By way of introducing one pertinent example, I will turn briefly to an early ecocritical re-reading presented by Ralph W. Black at a meeting of the WLA in October 1994. ‘Not long ago,’ Black says, ‘I saw King Lear again. Olivier’s Lear’ (qtd. in Barry 248). Black notes that on this occasion he was particularly ‘struck … by the beginning’, in which ‘[a] map of the kingdom is unrolled’ and ‘[t]he old Sovereign uses his sword to symbolically divide up his domain’ (qtd. in Barry 248). ‘Even before the daughters have spoken, or refused to speak, the trajectory of their love, there is this transgression: the commodified landscape is sliced up and parcelled out to the highest rhetorical bidder. For a moment I wonder about my understanding of the tragedy, about what hubristic act instigates Lear’s fall’ (qtd. in Barry 248).

\[40\] To repeat: ‘overminers’ have it that ‘[a]ll that is real are the contents of consciousness, the constructions made by society, the workings of language—or relations, effects, and events more generally’ (Harman, qtd. in Kimbell 107; emphasis added).

\[41\] See Doležel 201–2. A key figure in the emergence of Possible Worlds theory, Doležel understands the ‘extensional’ plain of storyworld in opposition to the ‘intensional’ level of textuality. Although this paper uses OOO as its prime theoretical framework and critical vocabulary, the distinction between ‘intensional’ and ‘extensional’ remains a useful one in the present context.
Although the protagonist of *Disgrace*, David Lurie, cannot literally lay claim to such sweeping powers, he nevertheless retains a conception of the South African landscape as ‘sliced up and parcelled out’—an ideological hand-me-down that his own daughter, Lucy, refuses to inherit. Lucy does indeed oversee a patch of land, but it is not one that her father—or, rather, anybody—has given to her. Indeed, she does not conceive of the land in terms of ‘ownership’ at all. As Clarkson points out, Lucy ‘seems to embody a response’ to the land that is ‘divested of cultural baggage. She recognizes … the difference between Western notions of land ownership, and her very physical interaction with the soil: “Stop calling it the farm, David,” she says, “This is not a farm, it’s just a piece of land where I grow things”’ (121-2). While her father harbours concerns regarding the prospect of Lucy ‘handing over the title deeds’ of ‘her’ land to Petrus—a black farmer, and owner of an adjacent lot—Lucy considers this gesture ‘just another exercise in ‘abstraction’ … it will not change what she does with water, earth, and living things’ (Clarkson 122).

For Lurie, however, heeding Lucy’s imperative proves easier said than done. Unlike his daughter, Lurie remains wedded to a version of the South African pastoral of which ownership is a central tenet. When he finds this brittle, outdated conception of the land challenged by the forces of historical change, his default impulse is to locate a means of conceptualising the new status quo. In fact, if we read *Disgrace*’s structure in terms of a series of visits by Lurie to his estranged daughter’s home out in the *veld*, we might note a cyclical process of resigned departure from, and fascinated return to, a rural, earthbound life that he struggles to comprehend. As if repeatedly visiting the same gallery in an attempt to make sense of a particularly enigmatic painting, Lurie regards Lucy’s life from one angle, then from another, then from another again. This behaviour is characteristic of Lurie: earlier, while giving a lecture on Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, he ‘tries, rather awkwardly, to transfer the Romantic sublime to an African landscape’ (Barnard 216). But, as Barnard brilliantly observes, ‘the students remain uninspired. As a cultural translation, Lurie’s commentary moves in the wrong direction. […] The students’ incomprehension suggests that it is only Lurie, author of *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*, who still needs to apprehend the African landscape in this fashion’ (216).

For Barnard, this instance of overmining represents a particular (and rather pathetic) mode of ‘apprehension’; for our purposes, however, it functions rather as an example of *misapprehension*. Both the ‘South African pastoral’ and *The Prelude*...
represent discursive lenses that interpose between Lurie and the physical ecological matter with which his daughter works, and upon which she leaves ‘clear prints’ (D 62). Even by the end of the novel, these conceptual veils have not been fully lifted: Lurie cannot help but note that the rural ‘scene before him seems picturesque in a distinctly European style’ (Barnard 218), ‘ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard’ (D 218). If there is a kernel of promise in Lurie’s tacit admission of the precedence of ‘world’ over ‘word’—the scene now awaits the painters—it is no more than that. Just as he ‘seeks a rationale for’ and ‘constructs theories about’ the ‘day of horror on the farm’ (Clarkson 169), ‘reading’ the incident as if through the lenses of critical theory, Lurie has not managed to divest himself of what Coetzee has called the pastoral’s ‘retrospective gaze’ (WW 4). Rather, he has simply changed his lens. Like the protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’ with his ‘circle of earth’,42 Lurie evinces a tenacious impulse to undermine ecology—quite unlike his daughter, who he recognises earlier as ‘a solid woman, embedded in her new life’ (D 62).

By describing Lucy as ‘solid’ and ‘embedded’, Lurie echoes Elizabeth Costello’s description of Red Peter, the speechifying ape of Kafka’s ‘Report to an Academy’, as ‘embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important,’ Costello emphasises, ‘not the life itself. His [Kafka’s] ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the better, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page’ (EC 32). Lurie sees Lucy, like Red Peter, as ‘realistic’—as if made so by the grunt work of the ecological existents among which she is ‘embedded’. In Lurie’s reading of his daughter-text, then, ecology is relegated to the role of ‘zoo-keeper’ (EC 33).43 But, once again, Lurie’s interpretative radar is askew. Lucy is not so much realistic as she is a realist. While her father exercises a self-endowed interpretative authority in order to attempt to make sense of her, viewing her through the (rose-tinted? sepia-tinged?) spectacles of his outmoded pastoral ideal, Lucy appears to have long since kept the exercise of her own interpretative faculties to a minimum. Rather than looking towards ‘a Sargent or a

42 Lurie might almost have authored the following from ‘Nietverloren’: ‘What did it mean for the land as a whole, and the conception the land had of itself, that huge tracts of it should be sliding back into pre-history? […] Could one not imagine a different history and a different social order in which the Karoo was reclaimed, its scattered sons and daughters reassembled, the earth tilled again?’ (35).

43 When John disputes her position on realism, Costello retorts: ‘What would you prefer? A zoo without keepers, where the animals fall into a trance when you stop looking at them? A zoo of ideas? […] Do you know how many kilograms of solid waste an elephant drops in twenty-four hours? If you want a real elephant cage with real elephants then you need a zoo-keeper to clean up after them’ (EC 32-3).
Bonnard’—or a Wordsworth, or a Byron—for a frame of reference by which to make sense of the world around her, Lucy understands ecological existents as ‘others’ that exist literally, beyond perception, and declines to overmine them in the way her father overmines her (and, in the process, the ecology to which she attends).

Needless to say, Lucy cannot access ecology absent the medium of empirical perception any more than literature can render its own objects absent the medium of language. The fundamental problematics of realism have not been resolved, merely deferred. But there is a marked qualitative difference between the quality—or, better, the density—of the mediation of Lucy’s experience and that of the mediation of her father’s experience. In broad terms, that difference is the same one which, to paraphrase Costello, distinguishes the ‘word-mirror of the text’ of a pre-modernist yesteryear from that same mirror after its having been ‘broken, irreparably’ (EC 19). Is it naïve for Lucy to behave as if this breakage never occurred? Perhaps. But if, as Barnard suggests, ‘Disgrace’ s penultimate scene [invites] us to imagine the farm’ as ‘a place where the difficulties of cultural translation may be overcome, wordlessly, by bodily experiences: pregnancy, field labor, the materiality of dwelling on the land’ (219-20; emphasis added), then we might be so bold as to venture that this naivety may be a prerequisite for productive human living after the textual turn.

That said, we should be alert to the fact that Barnard’s hopeful assessment is heavily qualified. Its conditions are numerous: we are invited to imagine a place where overmining may be overcome. Like the ‘red rust’ of industrialisation that looms on the horizon of the pastoral idyll in the final chapter of E. M. Forster’s Howards End (289), a sense of provisionality pervades Disgrace’s South African ‘counter-pastoral’ (Huggan and Tiffin 113). It is as if the image of the past that Lurie has retained as a reference point for understanding—‘Field-labour; peasant tasks, immemorial’ (D 217)—is being stretched to accommodate the new terms that have entered into it. One wonders whether it will hold, or whether Lurie’s apparent ascription of timelessness is, rather, wishful thinking. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin seem to suggest the latter. ‘Pastoral’s ideologically reassuring patterns of call and response are no longer valid in this volatile context,’ they argue, ‘although the momentary aesthetic gratifications of pastoral idyll, however delusional their apprehension of timelessness, are never quite cancelled out’ (Huggan and Tiffin 113). By using the word ‘although’, Huggan and Tiffin imply that ‘aesthetic gratification’ offsets the ultimate futility of employing pastoral as a frame of reference. I disagree. This ‘aesthetic gratification’ seems to me
perfectly *symptomatic* of a mode of reading whereby ecology is shoehorned into an inherited interpretative schema that does not so much as countenance the possibility of its apprehension *as such*. If this gratification is ‘never quite cancelled out’, it does not function as a remedy to that schema; rather, it functions as its trace. That the gratification is *Lurie’s*, meanwhile, only reinforces the sense of him as a living, misreading anachronism.

Perhaps, then, we can only read *Disgrace’s* penultimate scene with the ‘naïve’ realism of Lucy if Lurie, the character through whom the novel is focalised, has proven himself to be capable of this mode of reading as well. But by persisting in the refraction of that ‘scene’ through the prism of inherited imagery and ideology, Lurie has yet to do so. Where Lucy recognises the otherness of ecological existents *as such*, Lurie—and, by extension, the readers of his story—are bound to misapprehend them instead. *Disgrace* thus functions as a self-reflexive meditation on misapprehension, tempting us to ‘read with’ Lurie even as the text highlights the limitations of such an approach. By staging the dynamic of overmining in the context of a fiction—itself a form of overmining, almost by definition—Coetzee is able to interrogate dynamics of misapprehension and to explore their consequences. Along with Lucy, the victims of these (mis)reading practices count ecological objects among their number.

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Lucy is by no means the only victim of misapprehension by a fellow character in Coetzee’s body of work. Another prominent example is the protagonist of *Life & Times of Michael K*, with whom Coetzee scholars deem Lucy to be comparable in a number of respects. Attwell, for example, posits that both Lucy and Michael K are ‘gardeners’ who evince a ‘fondness for a version of pastoralism that privileges self-sufficiency over commerce’ (*Life of Writing* 135), a parallel he elsewhere places in the context of what he calls ‘Coetzee’s ethical turn’: a ‘turn’ characterised by an ‘emphasis on ontology or being … shorn of system, and therefore inimical to philosophy—a consciousness of what it means to be alive, sharing the precariousness of creation’s biological energy’ (*Race in Disgrace* 340). Where Lucy ‘comes close to representing’ this ‘condition’, Attwell suggests that it is ‘most memorably [embodied]’ by Michael K (*Race in Disgrace* 340). Ingenious though Attwell’s argument may be, I will in the next two sections elaborate an alternative reading of *Life & Times* according to which K is not so much an ontological object ‘shorn of system’ as an active subject who *himself* employs systems of discourse in order to make meaning of ecology. Finding these discursive systems unequal to the task of apprehending ecological existents,
however, K makes an audacious attempt to ‘become’ the kind of ontological object with which Attwell equates him, evincing an unlikely, radical form of ecological misapprehension in the process.44

2.2. ‘I thought Prince Albert was dead’: Michael K’s ‘Nets of Meaning’

In my Introduction, I noted that critical discussions which address the ecology of *Life & Times of Michael K* tend to do so only insofar as it is relevant to Coetzee’s critique of a political machinery which exercises its power on and through the landscape. We see this machinery at work in the South Africa of *Life & Times*—a space at once geographically realist and temporally speculative—inasmuch as it is represented as ‘a system of camps and prisons, defining, regulating, and confining its citizens, both geographically and discursively’ (Barnard 204). As the plight of Michael K attests, escape from these defined (and *defining*) spaces of discursive internment, though possible, repeatedly proves unsustainable. K’s departure from Cape Town with his ailing mother in search of her childhood home is only the first in a series of such escapes. The Visagie farm, Jakkalsdrif, Kenilworth: K’s internment in each of these places is only temporary. And yet so is his freedom. K escapes the physical environs in which he is kept, and the definitions imposed on him therein, only to be interned again elsewhere. Interestingly, the descriptions of his (re)capture seldom reflect the event’s significance. When K is imprisoned at Jakkalsdrif, for example, we find no heightened language, nor even a paragraph break that might formally reflect the crossing of the threshold between a tentative freedom and a forced incarceration (*MK* 70). K’s capture always just *happens*—as if it were expected, even inevitable. It is little wonder, then, that one of K’s final reflections should have become an indispensable reference point for critics of the novel: ‘Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of all the camps,

44 The possibility of identifying examples of ecological misapprehension in both *Disgrace* and *Life & Times*—works published some sixteen years apart—suggest that it may also be possible to trace an overarching shift in the modes of misapprehension represented throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre. Tempting though it may be to undertake this project, it remains an awkward one. We might perhaps mark the early 1990s—and the formal end of apartheid—as a pivot upon which the forces that underpin misapprehension turn from colonial (as in the case of *Life & Times*) to neo-colonial (in the form of the neoliberalism at play in *Disgrace* and ‘Nietverloren’, for example); but this rather ‘neat’ reading ignores works such as the short story ‘A House in Spain’, whose tone of pragmatic optimism regarding relations between a human subject and nonhuman objects renders it somewhat anomalous.
out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the

The significance of this line, and the import of the various critical arguments
that develop from it, is indisputable. K clearly and repeatedly demonstrates a desire to
escape the various ‘camps’ in which he is kept, and thus to transgress the boundaries,
at once literal and metaphorical, imposed upon him therein. At first glance, then, it
would appear that K’s characterisation by the Medical Officer as a ‘great escape artist’
(MK 166) may be warranted. Moreover, K has a clear motive. Attempting to negotiate
his release with one of the guards at Jakkalsdrif, K says, simply: ‘I don’t want to be in
a camp, that’s all’ (MK 85). But we should be wary of taking K’s plaintive appeal at
face value. The impulse to be ‘out of all the camps’ may be obvious, but this negative
definition of location need not preclude a concomitant impulse to positively be
somewhere else. Indeed, the text itself quietly encourages us to re-read K’s ‘freedom
from’ the state’s physical and ideological reach as ‘freedom to(wards)’ a locus whose
value is not limited to the fact of its ‘elsewhereness’. Consider again the passage quoted
above. To be ‘out of all the camps’ may ‘perhaps’ be ‘enough … for the time being’: it
is not definitely enough; it is certainly no more than enough; and, in any event, it may
not be enough in future. K’s apparent satisfaction is conditional, provisional, perhaps
even hypothetical. The implication is that this satisfaction might be stripped of its
contingency if K could only locate a specific ‘elsewhere’ in which to be. Stefan
Helgesson appears to corroborate this point, observing that ‘K knows that he ought to
be somewhere, the underlying rationale being that if you are nowhere you are no one.
The condition of possibility of the subject is closely associated with the rhetoric of
physical presence—being there’ (208; emphasis in original). K thus seems to embody
an impulse towards an alternative situation that is, somewhat paradoxically,
hypothetically concrete.

What might it mean for something to be ‘hypothetically concrete’? Put simply,
the designation marks an ontological certainty that is compromised not in principle, but
in practice. It is the place that exists, but might not be found; it is the state that exists,

The title of Laura Wright’s Writing ‘Out of All the Camps’: J. M. Coetzee’s Narratives of
Displacement is testament to the profound influence of this passage within Coetzee studies.

As we will see, the Medical Officer’s assessments of K always require more than a single ‘glance’.

Helgesson proffers a further observation whose relevance to my own argument will become evident
later in this section: ‘This resonates … with a Levinasian critique of intellectualist ontology (in the
sense that the intentional subject appropriates every place on behalf of its self-presence)’ (208).
but might not be attainable. ‘Hypothetical concreteness’ thus describes not only a prospective destination for Coetzee’s protagonist, but the ontological ‘thereness’ of ecological existents as they are understood in the context of this thesis. Although one may be justified in reading Life & Times’s ecology as an elsewhere—a kind of anti-place, the elusive ‘out’ to the state’s appropriative ‘in’—there is nothing to prevent us from attending to it as a material entity in its own right. Even if the concreteness of that entity cannot be accessed in itself, understanding the novel’s ecology as inhabiting a necessarily extra-discursive reality allows us to read for the mode and density of the hypothetical quality behind which it is destined to remain veiled.

As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, Michael K’s journey—and specifically the ‘first leg’ of that journey, from Cape Town into the Swartberg mountains—evinces a dramatic fluidity in the relation between K and ecology (as he conceives of it), with the concreteness of perceived ecological objects becoming more or less hypothetical throughout. That relation first shifts as the discursive frameworks in which the ecological object is incarcerated, and through which it is misapprehended, gradually give way to an acknowledgement of the ecological object as a full, irreducible ‘other’ from which K is necessarily distanced, and with which he can therefore institute an ethical relation. As his journey continues, however, K’s movement towards an ecological ‘elsewhere’ fosters a peculiar, disturbing dynamic: an environmental ‘mimicry’ whose thrust towards ecological assimilation is itself a form of misapprehension—one that forecloses the aforementioned ethical potential of the relation between human subject and ecological object. In the parlance of OOO, K’s attempts to move away from one form of overmining inadvertently lead him to another variant of the same dynamic.

My argument here owes a particular debt to two critical contributions: Marais’s ‘Literature and the Labour of Negation’ and Vital’s ‘Toward an African Ecocriticism’. The former traces an illuminating parallel between the way in which Michael K is ‘negated’ as an object by various perceiving subjects and K’s own negation of objects other than himself;48 building upon Marais’s observations, I will show that K in fact attempts to negate both others and himself as ecological objects (in both cases without

48 Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’ 107. Marais also addresses the former dynamic in ‘Languages of Power’, in which he argues that K ‘dispossesses the state functionaries of their power without himself assuming a position of dominance’ (36) even as ‘state interrogators respond to K’s otherness … by coercing the deviant object into a mode of discourse which culture assumes natural, … obliterating and domesticating the strangeness which defies and resists understanding’ (39).
success). The latter, meanwhile, posits that Life & Times demonstrates an imperative to understand that one’s perception of ecology must necessarily be from within the strictures of those discursive frameworks by which we make meaning.\textsuperscript{49} While I agree with Vital’s premise, I dispute his attendant assumption that the ecological object itself only ever exists within discursive systems; rather, I suggest that our perception of ecology necessarily takes place across the divide that follows from the object’s fundamental ungraspability, its otherness that transgresses discursive boundaries by definition. Indeed, it is precisely the tension between human subjects’ inevitable reliance upon explicatory discursive frameworks (on the one hand) and ecological objects’ inevitable transgression of the boundaries of those frameworks (on the other) that defines ecological misapprehension. By engaging with the perspectives of Marais and Vital in these ways, I argue for a reading of Life & Times that acknowledges this divide between human subject and ecological object, weighs its implications for ecological misapprehension, and emphasises the practical (and practicable) ethical potential that may follow from it.

When K leaves Cape Town, it is with a clear destination in mind: his mother’s childhood home in Prince Albert. But when Anna K dies en route, K’s sense of direction dissolves. Without his mother—his guiding principle\textsuperscript{50}—his sense of time is problematised: ‘It appeared that he had to stay in Stellenbosch for a certain length of time. There was no way of shortening the time’ (MK 34). The schemata of everyday existence become arbitrary, irrelevant; increasingly, K responds to the brute facts of the physical environment instead of the discursive arrangements overlaid upon them in accordance with social norms. Indeed, K only brings himself to leave Stellenbosch after noticing that the hospital where his mother died, so recently invested with her presence, has been reduced to its basic objecthood: ‘It was smaller than it had once seemed, merely a long low building with a red tiled roof’ (MK 34). His onward trajectory

\textsuperscript{49} Vital advocates ‘an interpretive strategy that does indeed … rest on the assumption that all understanding of the world (what we call “nature,” “history,” etc.) is always delivered through language, but one that qualifies this assumption with the recognition that different languages (and discourses within a language) permit varieties of understanding. In this approach it would be recognized that language cannot deliver the material world (“nature”) free of linguistic, cultural, or social mediation’ (90).

\textsuperscript{50} Anna K is her son’s ‘guiding principle’ in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Not only is she physically able to direct K; she is identified as Michael’s own raison d’être: ‘The problem that had exercised him years ago … namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother’ (MK 7). Thus, when his mother dies, K is left ‘without a raison d’être in a literal sense: the loss of his mother means that he can no longer constitute his own being by directing it towards his mother’ (Helgesson 202).
becomes relative: walking alongside a passing cart, K notices ‘that there was after all nothing any more to keep him’ (MK 35), and clambers aboard. Having lost the figurative meaning with which it was previously imbued, K’s direction is now dictated by the physical environment.

Two features of K’s journey thus far are especially noteworthy: firstly, the correlation between his mother’s passing and his own loss of meaning (and therefore direction); and, secondly, his refocusing upon the materiality of his environs. These two developments are not unrelated. In fact, as the narrative proceeds, they become increasingly entangled: as K’s ‘direction’ is renewed, it is *towards* that materiality—specifically, the ecological existents among which he lives, and upon which he subsists. As K makes his way towards the Visagie farm, the baggage of social and cultural association with which the land is freighted, and which have conditioned his reading of the environment, are gradually relinquished. By (con)test ing and dismissing the materials of overmining via which the landscape is misapprehended, K works towards a comparatively unmediated appreciation of ecological existents as ‘others’ that exceed attempts at discursive appropriation. Among several examples of this dynamic, two are particularly illustrative. One involves K’s forced conception of the land as an obstacle; the other concerns his misapprehension of it as property.

Shortly after departing from Stellenbosch, K meets a police roadblock; upon attempting to cross it, he is forcibly conscripted into a gang of labourers and loaded onto a train. He asks one of his fellow conscripts where the train is taking them. “‘Why does it matter where they are taking us?’ he said. “There are only two places, up the line and down the line. That is the nature of trains’” (MK 41). As several commentators have noted, the old man’s evocative phrase signals the way in which technology inscribes that landscape with binary oppositions: if the train only goes ‘up the line’ and ‘down the line’, it follows that it also divides the landscape into two ‘sides’. Before long, however, the journey is halted by a landslide that has damaged the tracks, and the conscripts are forced to clear it (MK 42). By performing this work, K, like Lucy Lurie, is physically engaging with ecological matter; but, by being *forced* to do so, he is made complicit in a project overseen by a state that has disinherited him, and which conceives of the behaviour of the local ecology as an obstacle to ‘progress’ (in both an immediate, literal sense and a broader, metaphorical one). K’s internment thus directly entails participation in the figurative incarceration of ecological existents according to a discursive agenda with little interest in those existents *as such*. The parallel is as clear
as its irony is cruel: in the course of being misapprehended himself, K is ordered to misapprehend his environment in turn.

His abrupt, almost arbitrary release from the gang not only enables K to continue his journey towards Prince Albert, but generates an impetus for a figurative release from the ‘nets of meaning’\textsuperscript{51} imposed upon him during his temporary internment. Not incidentally, ecological existents here enjoy a concurrent liberation from their own ‘encampment’. When he is ‘woken roughly’ and ‘warned … off the land’ by an ‘old countryman’ (\textit{MK} 46), K ruefully returns to walking alongside the highway, tacitly accepting the principle that the land belongs to somebody else. It is not long, however, before he determines to ‘[recross] the fence’ that separates him from the \textit{veld} (\textit{MK} 46). Here, in open country, ‘[t]he anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him’ (\textit{MK} 46). The literal boundaries of nearby properties are traded in his imagination for a metaphorical alternative: ‘He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence’ (\textit{MK} 47). His inherited conception of land-as-property gives way to the prospect of its opposite: ‘he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see’ (\textit{MK} 47). While this clearly demonstrates a formative version of K’s desire to be ‘out of all the camps’, his nascent subjecthood has important implications for ecological objecthood, too. Not only does K weigh the possibility of ecology unappropriated by humans; he also imagines identifying that ecology from an omniscient perspective: a point of view (almost literally) liberated from its implication in worldly concerns. In order to ‘see’ ecology \textit{as} ecology, K requires a distance over which to perceive it.

This shift in perspective is encapsulated by a brief episode when, finally approaching the town of Prince Albert, K hears what he thinks is a voice: ‘Is this the voice of Prince Albert? he wondered. I thought Prince Albert was dead. He tried to make out words, but though the voice pervaded the air like a mist or an aroma, the words, if there were words, … were too faint or smooth to hear. Then the voice ceased, giving way to a tiny faraway brass band’ (\textit{MK} 48). The town, readily personified by virtue of its name, appears to speak with its own voice; but that voice speaks in sounds

\textsuperscript{51} Attwell, \textit{Politics} 92. This term echoes a turn of phrase used by the Magistrate in \textit{Barbarians} as he ponders his interpretative dealings with the so-called ‘barbarian girl’: ‘So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her’ (89).
that are extra-linguistic, comparable only to the physical particles and molecules of ‘a mist or an aroma’. Ultimately, it is into material existence that the voice is resolved: the ‘brass band’ signifies a movement back into physical reality. In other words, Prince Albert is dead, albeit not for the reasons K supposes: it dies as a metaphorical construct at the moment the ‘voice’ dissolves and its implied personhood is rejected. Like the hospital in Stellenbosch, it has been divested of the human presence with which it had been imbued, and thus of the ‘deeper meaning’ the likes of which Harman’s overminers are desperate to discern.\footnote{In another example of the same dynamic, K later ‘[stares] at the corrugations in the roof-iron’ and ‘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’ (\textit{MK} 115). In an observation that resonates strongly with my own, Marais argues that this passage ‘implies an anti-intentional mode of consciousness in which the self forgoes control over the world of things’ (‘Labour of Negation’ 110).}

Despite the absence of overt ecological references in the passage quoted above, this brief episode can be taken to function as a microcosm of the trajectory of the relation between K and ecological objects at large. K listens—perhaps literally, certainly figuratively—for words that will give him direction, only to find that those words are not forthcoming; what he perceives instead is the physical language of the material environment. As in the case of the Magistrate’s extra-linguistic ‘bellow’ of pain, this environment is untranslatable, irreducible to any metaphoric function it might be ascribed. Like Timothy Morton’s ‘strange stranger’,\footnote{Morton uses the designation ‘strange stranger’ to describe ecological existents as ‘others’ with whom we (that is, humans) are confronted. While he seems to suggest that ‘strange stranger’ is a synonym for ‘animal’, closer inspection of Morton’s description reveals that his understanding of the word is rather larger in scope than is traditional: ‘Instead of “animal,” I use \textit{strange stranger}. She, or he, or it—can we tell? how?—is strangely strange. Their strangeness itself is strange. We can never absolutely figure them out. If we could, then all we would have is a ready-made box to put them in, and we would just be looking at the box, not at the strange strangers’ (\textit{Ecological Thought} 41; emphasis in original).} or Graham Harman’s object with its ‘hidden seismic reality’ (\textit{Tool-Being} 236), the ecological objects of \textit{Life & Times}’ storyworld overspill attempts at their appropriation by and into the discursive systems imposed on them as part of K’s quest for direction and meaning.

K finally desists in his overmining of the land at the Visagie farm. Given the significance of this watershed moment, I will quote from the text at length:

The time came to return his mother to the earth. He tried to dig a hole on the crest of the hill west of the dam, but an inch from the surface the spade met solid rock. So he moved to the edge of what had been cultivated land below the dam and dug a hole as deep as his elbow. He laid the packet of ash in the hole and dropped the first spadeful of earth on top of it. Then he had misgivings. He closed his eyes and
concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what
he was doing was right—his mother’s voice, if she still had a voice, or a
voice belonging to no one in particular, or even his own voice as it
sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came. So he
extracted the packet from the hole, taking the responsibility on himself,
and set about clearing a patch a few metres square in the middle of the
field. There, bending low so that they would not get carried away by the
wind, he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth, afterwards
turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful.

This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator. (MK 58-9)

Addressing this pivotal scene, Helgesson discusses K’s desire for the box containing
his mother’s ashes to disclose its meaning, arguing that it is only ‘when he relinquishes
this desire that he is able to complete the burial and affirm the meaning of cultivating
the ground’ (209). This identification of an inverse correlation between a longing for a
meaning superimposed from an indeterminate ‘without’ and an affirmation of the
meaning of cultivation is, for our purposes, highly significant. Having recently
discerned a ‘voice’ that slowly resolved itself into physical matter, K now hears no
voice at all; the meaning for which he listens is no longer merely elusive, but absent.
Lacking a ‘representative or representation’ to ‘[validate] his own actions or ideas’
(Helgesson 206), K is left with little option but to ‘[take] the responsibility on
himself’—that is to say, to assume an interpretative authority he has hitherto deferred.
Helgesson reads this moment as marking K’s ‘emergence’ as ‘a human subject’ (207)—
but the ramifications of this shift on the ecological object are no less profound. Rather
than exercising that authority in order to subjugate the land according to an inherited
preconception of it, K eschews this authority in much the same way that Lucy does in
Disgrace, as if to exercise it would be to do an injustice to the ecological object as
object, and to foreclose the possibility of the symbiotic relation that is a prerequisite for
cultivation.

Crucially in this regard, K removes the ashes from the packet. Aside from
occasioning direct physical contact between ashes and earth, this act has a deeper
significance. A material, and, indeed, ecological object—his mother’s remains—is
freed from its encasement not just literally, but also figuratively: in a single moment,
the object is removed from both its physical packaging and from the confines of the
prescribed meaning—indeed, any prescribed meaning—to which K has until now
presumed it to be attached. K becomes a cultivator at this moment, when the ‘nets of
meaning’ fruitlessly cast on the ecological object are set aside and the material business
of gardening can begin. Phrased differently, cultivation is made possible only when a parallel between K’s plight and that of ecological existents emerges. Epistemic violence is done to both K and ecology when they are contained in the ‘camps’ of definition and conceptualisation; by releasing the ashes from the packet, ecology is allowed, so to speak, ‘out of all the camps’. Just as K overspills discursive boundaries, rendering him ultimately beyond definition—as the futility of the Medical Officer’s attempts to define him will later show—ecological existents overspill their prescribed meaning too. The ‘hidden surplus’ of the ecological object is freed from the ‘labour of negation’ and the fullness of its being is reasserted.

K’s relation with ecological existents is at this juncture one of difference: a difference that is acknowledged, accepted, even embraced. Where K’s relation to the land was formerly framed in terms inherited from discourse, that relation is now premised on a recognition of ecology’s fundamental otherness. This recognition is foreshadowed by the omniscient, ‘bird’s-eye’ perspective with which K imagines himself endowed, and is latent in the oft-referenced descriptions of K’s ‘waking life’ being ‘bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate’ (MK 59), and, most famously, the ‘cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam’ where pumpkins are being grown (MK 66). These descriptions affirm distance by virtue of their very inference of closeness: a ‘cord’ connects entities which are necessarily separate; to be ‘bound tightly’ to something is to be next to it, and therefore somehow apart from it. By declaring this moment the ‘beginning of [K’s] life as a cultivator’, Coetzee implies that this distance is a prerequisite of any meaningful attempt to (at)tend to ecology.

Moreover, we might characterise this distance as a prerequisite for an ethics on the terms of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy both resonates with the tenets of OOO—Harman cites Levinas ‘for his dramatic sense of the strife between the visible and withdrawn faces of … things themselves’ (Tool-Being 11)—and has become a key

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54 Marais makes a related point in a discussion of what he calls ‘Coetzee’s Post-colonial Meta-Fiction’ (‘Hermeneutics of Empire’ 66): ‘In much the same way as Michael K, the landscapes in these novels reassert their separate identities after being named and dominated. Like him, they remain inscrutable to language and refractory to programs of containment’ (79). He proceeds to quote Coetzee himself: ‘the real Africa will always slip through the net woven by European categories’ (WW 165). Of course, one might justifiably argue that ‘the real Africa’ is itself a problematic discursive construct—and yet it is sufficiently unspecific as to gesture towards ‘the real’ without attempting to actually describe it. As such, we can read this quotation as yet another example of Coetzee simultaneously insisting upon the existence of ‘the real’ and tacitly admitting the impossibility of representing it via linguistic means.
touchstone within Coetzee studies.\textsuperscript{55} Marais, for example, argues that \textit{Life & Times} ‘seems to suggest that responsibility may be the outcome of the self’s encounter with the ungraspability of the other’, and on this basis relates ‘Coetzee’s views . . . to those of Levinas, who argues exactly this point’ (‘Labour of Negation’ 118). Marais proceeds to outline Levinas’s position, according to which ‘the I is challenged when it is pre-reflectively addressed by the other person in a way that obliges it to be responsible, and this happens in the event of the “face to face”,’ that is, an encounter between self and other in which the “exteriority of the other with respect to the same” is maintained. The face is “[t]he way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me”’ (Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity} 50, qtd. in Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’ 118; emphasis in original). ‘Being unable to establish a relation of correlation with the other,’ says Marais, ‘the I cannot foreclose on its otherness and, owing to its irreducibility, the other surprises the self, who finds itself in relation to something which is nothing definable’ (‘Labour of Negation’ 118).

Marais here enlists Levinasian ethics on the understanding that K—that is, a human character—plays the role of the ‘other’ in this equation. It could hardly be otherwise: as Harman notes in \textit{Tool-Being}, Levinas shows ‘little concern for the strife between inanimate objects. His theory of the Other is a theory of the infinite challenge posed by the human Other’ (243; emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{56} But Harman argues further that ‘[w]hile there is no denying the special ethical status of human reality, it hardly exhausts the field of ontological alterity’ (\textit{Tool-Being} 243; emphasis in original). Thus, while acknowledging that we are taking liberties with the intended scope of Levinas’s theory, we might revisit Marais’s acute observation armed with Harman’s theoretical

\textsuperscript{55} The scholars who put Coetzee’s fiction in conversation with Levinas’s philosophy are too numerous to cite here. One such scholar, Carrol Clarkson, describes the relevance of Levinasian ethics to Coetzee studies as follows: ‘[T]here are numerous scenes in Coetzee’s novels which have been read as staging a Levinasian relation to alterity—an encounter in which I cede the otherness of the other, without reducing the other to my conceptual frame of reference (in Levinas’ terms, the ’same’). […] Characters such as Michael K, Friday in \textit{Foe}, the unnamed barbarian girl in \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}, and even Lucy in \textit{Disgrace}, have been read as figures of alterity in that they make an ethical injunction to those who find themselves bound to respond to them. The medical officer, Susan Barton, the magistrate and David Lurie thus find themselves in an impossible ethical bind of having to respond with justice to that which eludes their cultural—and even their cognitive—grasp’ (69; emphasis in original). Clarkson argues that ‘to read these scenes as a themed staging of Levinas’ ethical philosophy is to be up against the wall of what seems to be Levinas’ aesthetics’ (69; emphasis in original), thus problematising the kind of ‘literal reading’ advocated by Attridge. While an investigation of this issue falls beyond the scope of this thesis, the notion that even a ‘literal reading’ is answerable to aesthetic concerns certainly speaks to our question of how literary objects can evade the extensive reach of textualisation.

\textsuperscript{56} This conclusion is corroborated by Levinas’s awkward attempts to clarify precisely \textit{which} nonhuman beings can be said to boast the all-important ‘face’ (see Levinas, ‘Name of a Dog’ 47-50).
boldness and identify an ethical dimension in the relation established between K and the local ecology—a relation which proves not only productive, but caring. To revisit a familiar phrase, K directs his love towards what is least likely to respond to love: pumpkins and melons, grass and soil and water.

Clearly it would be absurd to suggest that K’s inadvertent enactment of a colonialist conceptualisation of the landscape implies any serious parallel between K and South Africa’s ‘hereditary masters’. This is not to say that no such parallels could be drawn: in theory, we might argue that K’s attempts to evade the human conflict ravaging his country in order ‘to keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening’ (MK 109) represents a dereliction of some human(ist) duty, and that he is guilty of the same ‘failure of love’ of which Coetzee spoke in 1987. (A version of this same contention has of course been levelled at Coetzee himself, in Nadine Gordimer’s famous review of Life & Times, ‘The Idea of Gardening’.57) But to argue this point in the present context would be to wilfully misconstrue the value of K’s directing his love towards ecology.58 Whereas the love of the land by the ‘hereditary masters’ is understood by Coetzee to be directed away from other humans—functioning as some manner of political decoy—K’s love of the land, while apparently predicated on an impulse to evade, is revealed to be towards that land: towards ecology in and of itself, deserving of that love in spite of (or even because of) its inability to reciprocate. The concreteness of the ecological object may remain inaccessible as such; significantly, however, it is no longer hypothetical.

2.3. ‘Perhaps I am the stony ground’: Michael K’s Mountaintop Mimicry

Five paragraphs: that is how long this idyllic ecological scenario endures before it is disrupted. The disruption comes courtesy of the Visagie grandson, who arrives carrying with him the same ideological baggage of which both K and the farm have only recently, finally, been divested. No sooner has K started to ‘[live] by the rising and the setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time’ with ‘Cape Town and the war and his

57 ‘A revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions rises with the insistence of the song of cicadas to the climax of this novel. I don’t think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion’ (Gordimer). She concludes, quizzically: ‘It’s better to live on your knees, planting something…?’
58 To pursue this argument would also be to once again subsume ecocritical concerns within a broader humanist critical project, thus facilitating ecological misapprehension on the level of ecocriticism itself.
passage to the farm [slipping] further and further into forgetfulness’ (*MK* 60) than the grandson galvanises the same discursive paradigms whose governance over K’s ‘life and times’ has fleetingly been resisted. K’s identity is instantly reappropriated, shoehorned into the limited (and limiting) discursive schema that bounds the grandson’s thinking. By mere virtue of standing silently before his interlocutor, K is enslaved: automatically, and with a breathtaking casualness. Importantly, the farm seems to undergo an equivalent change: once ownership is asserted over it, it becomes ‘a farm’ once again. Its meaning has been reified by the returning Afrikaner, and K laments the inevitable cutting of the ‘cord of tenderness’ that symbolised his responsible, respectful, reciprocal relation with his ecological environs. To be clear: it is not that the grandson takes from K what K has made his own, but rather that the concept of ownership has been reasserted, intruding upon a fragile experiment that had dared to do away with the notion entirely. One wonders if K might empathise with the protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’ in his vituperative response to the appropriation of the land he ‘used to love’; in both cases, a veil has been drawn between human subject and ecological object. This colonialist intervention thus has a strong environmental dimension: ecological existents are the ‘bycatch’\(^59\) entangled in the ‘nets of meaning’ unthinkingly cast over K by the Visagie grandson.

In response to the ‘hermeneutic capture’ of both himself and his ecological others, K slips away from the farm. Several hours later, he is atop a mountain, overlooking ‘the vast plain of the Karoo’ (*MK* 66). For the purposes of my reading, the significance of the following episode is substantial. The development in K’s relation with ecology during his stay in the mountains is without precedent in the other works discussed in this paper, and gives rise to a form of ecological misapprehension that is as troubling as it is counter-intuitive. It should be noted, however, that a precedent for what follows can in fact be found earlier in the narrative, when, before his arrival in Prince Albert, K is invited by a friendly stranger to spend a night at his family’s house. As they have dinner together, the man professes his belief—a rather quaint one, amidst a state of civil war—that ‘[p]eople must help each other’ (*MK* 48). K ponders this assertion and finds himself to be lacking ‘a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought’ (*MK* 48). Initially, K’s mental response reads as a simple

\(^{59}\) A term used in the fishing industry that refers to the inadvertent capture of non-target species.
metaphor—albeit with Biblical overtones— for an indifference he perceives in himself. Upon reflection, however, the metaphor is quite striking. K’s identification of himself as the ‘stony ground’ does not foreground its own insufficiency as a mode of self-conception (in the manner witnessed, for example, when the tortured Magistrate fruitlessly appeals to metaphor in order to articulate himself). Rather, it reads as if it is meant literally. It is hypothetically concrete: uncertain on the basis of circumstance, not plausibility.

This tacit admission that K’s identification with the ecological object may not be merely figurative foreshadows his stay in the mountains, where, having ‘come as far as a man can come’ (MK 66) in his attempts to evade encampment, and finally able to ‘think of [himself] as lost’ (MK 66), the distance between K and ecology—the same distance formerly implied by the ‘cord of tenderness’—begins to collapse. It is here, at the extremity of isolation, that K threatens to literally become the ‘stony ground’. With ‘everything else behind him’, he now ‘[faces] only the single huge block of the day, one day at a time’ (MK 66); the only cues to which he responds are the light and darkness of day and night. He ignores his feelings of hunger, repressing the ‘crying of his body’ and choosing instead ‘to listen to the great silence about him’ (MK 66). (That this silence is described as being ‘about’ K, rather than ‘around’ him, is subtly indicative that silence somehow describes K, instead of merely surrounding him.) When he falls asleep, he does so ‘easily’ (MK 66). Finally, having ‘nothing to do but live’, K sits ‘so still’—indeed, so stone-like—‘that it would not have startled him if birds had flown down and perched on his shoulders’ (MK 66).

The suggestion that K ‘would not have been surprised’ is a peculiar formulation, since it implies a non-reaction to a hypothetical event. The ‘narrator’s ironic knowingness’ (Vital 102) casts an image of K of which K himself is not obviously cognisant: the sentence only makes sense if K would not react to birds landing on his

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60 This Biblical reference is not isolated. Earlier in his journey, upon discarding his mother’s suitcase, K performs a peculiar act of generosity, ‘leaving the lid open so that the rain could fall and the sun scorch and the insects gnaw, if they wanted to, without hindrance’ (MK 38). Shortly afterwards, K happens upon some vegetables in an orchard; pondering whether to take them, he thinks to himself that ‘[i]t is God’s earth,… I am not a thief’ (MK 39). In these small acts we may detect a nascent symbiosis between K and the local ecology, a reciprocal relation apparently premised on the vestiges of some vaguely remembered theological dicta. The spiritual dynamic here is unmistakeable: K giveth and K taketh away. With this in mind, Biblical discourse might be deemed both a pervasive feature of the novel’s discursive environment, and another framework through which ecology is misapprehended.

61 The stone motif is revisited in Youth: he ‘will be on his way to becoming a proper Londoner, hard as stone. Turning to stone was not one of his aims, but it may be what he will have to settle for’ (113).
shoulders (that is, if he were somehow oblivious to the event); if K were to react, the sentence would be false. Thus, not only does the sentence explicitly suggest a passive, stone-like quality developing in K, but implies this same quality on the level of form—at a distance from K, where the sentence can be articulated and be true. If K would not be surprised by birds perching on his frame, and if Coetzee’s sentence construction tells us that, for K’s purposes, the prospect is an irrelevance, his stone-like passivity is reiterated and emphasised. The shift in focalisation here thus increases the distantiation between K and the narrator in a manner that formally reflects K’s movement away from the realm of textuality—that is, from the forces of discursive internment—and towards a state of being that defies those forces.

K’s mental life has not yet been effaced, however. In one of the novel’s most remarked-upon passages, the narrator offers us glimpses into K’s thinking as he casts his mind back towards Cape Town. His thoughts here, I suggest, provide evidence of a motivation towards the state of passive ecological being K appears to be attaining:

Presumably the grass had not stopped growing in Wynberg Park because there was a war, and the leaves had not stopped falling. There would always be a need for people to mow the grass and sweep up the leaves. But he was no longer sure that he would choose green lawns and oak-trees to live among. 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; one could dig to the centre of the earth from Wynberg Park, and all the way to the centre it would be cool and dark and damp and soft. I have lost my love for that kind of earth, he thought, I no longer care to feel that kind of earth between my fingers. It is no longer the green and the 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. (MK 67)

The first line of this passage implies the imperviousness of ecological processes to human(ist) concerns, only for this fact to be enlisted in a justification of the necessity of K’s vocation: gardening. But this reference to work which has formerly given K so much satisfaction, and which boasts a clear ethical dimension, gives way to a conscious reassessment of the ‘kind of earth’ K prefers. Wynberg Park, symbolic locus of ecological care, no longer holds any interest for K. It is ‘vegetal’; it can be penetrated infinitely. It is represented as boasting precisely the kind of ‘depths’ out of which, according to a particular ‘romantic aesthetic’ (from which Coetzee distances himself),
a quasi-mythical ““true” speech’ emerges (Begam and Coetzee 426-7). K’s image of Wynberg Park is one devoid of environmental resistance—one, indeed, in which ecological material figures as layers of meaning through which one must dig in order to reach a ‘centre’. Now, however, K identifies instead with ‘the dry’, ‘the light’, ‘the hard’: ecological matter that resists both physical penetration (like the rock struck when K first attempts to bury the ashes) and the interpretative penetration by which it might be thoroughly explored and fully known (a notion relinquished when K removes the ashes from the confinement of the packet). Whereas the episode with the ashes marked the consecration of an ethical relation predicated on difference—on K’s latent, object-oriented acknowledgement of ecological existents’ otherness—the episode in the mountains veers towards an identification of sameness. The parallels between the respective resistances of K and ecology to ideological incorporation become grounds for an unlikely kind of fusion. ‘If I were to die here,’ K thinks, ‘I would be dried out by the wind in a day. I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand’ (MK 67-8). The body preserved; the mind effaced: K sees himself transformed into a ‘hard’, irreducible ecological other.62

Among the numerous critics who have marked this peculiar paradigm shift63 is Marais, who notes this dynamic in passing while discussing K’s ‘close affinity with the earth’ (‘Languages of Power’ 43). Pace Teresa Dovey, Marais argues that similes likening K to various ‘underground creatures … suggest the fusion of Michael K as subject with the earth as object, a fusion further evident in the medical officer’s description of him as “a genuine little man of earth”’ (‘Languages of Power’ 43). We might note, however, that Marais elsewhere preaches caution regarding the Medical Officer’s interpretative capabilities.64 If Marais takes the Medical Officer’s attempts to make meaning of K to represent an instance of the ‘labour of negation’—labour which,

62 Margot expresses a comparable sentiment in *Summertime*: ‘This landscape, this kontrei—it has taken over her heart. When she dies and is buried, she will dissolve into this earth so naturally it will be as if she never had a human life’ (129).
63 Attwell, for example, notes that ‘[t]he geology of the Karoo in *Michael K* is not just scene-setting: it is part of K’s conception of himself. Some of K’s most distinctive qualities as a figure of elemental freedom—elusiveness, self-sufficiency, resilience—are figured in the description of the Swartberg mountains’ (Life of Writing 77). Vital, meanwhile, highlights ‘those moments when K through identification with the earth seems barely human’ (97); Derek Wright posits that K ‘feels himself assuming the character of the bare mineral scrubland’ (‘Black Earth’ 436); and a scathing review in the *African Communist* famously describes K as ‘an amoeba, from whose life we can draw neither example nor warning … unnatural, almost inhuman’ (qtd. in Attwell, *Politics* 92).
64 A number of *Life & Times*’s critics are happy to cite the Medical Officer’s interpretations of K when critic and Officer are in agreement, even as those same critics elsewhere discuss the hopelessness of those interpretations. See also Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’ 77, and Wright, ‘Black Earth’ 437.
according to Marais, K evades—then Marais’s reliance upon the Medical Officer’s reading of K here seems somewhat expedient. In fact, the Medical Officer’s description of K does reward the critical scrutiny that Marais applies only selectively. K does not become a genuine ‘little man of earth’, because the ‘anarchic collapse of the subject-object division’ (Marais, ‘Languages of Power’ 43) that Marais identifies never actually occurs. Unlike a novel such as Han Kang’s The Vegetarian, which tends towards magical realism in its portrayal of a character’s apparently literal transformation into a tree, Life & Times never loses sight of its protagonist’s persistent, perhaps inconvenient humanity. K does not begin to ‘dry out’; rather, in all-too-human fashion, he falls ill. At this juncture, the sentiment attributed to K again seems to denote an identification of self with the physical matter of which he is ostensibly comprised: ‘It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing’ (MK 69). But ‘it’ is decidedly not ‘the same thing’. After all, if the totality of K’s being really amounted only to the kind of passive body exemplified by ecological objects—that is, if K’s identification with those existents were complete, irrevocable—why would the very next sentence see K ‘[creeping] down the mountainside’ (MK 69)?

Attridge observes that ‘[w]e are never made privy to K’s decision-making’ (57), and the moment that K resolves to leave the mountains is no exception. It is barely marked by the text; in fact, it is marked only by the lacuna of a paragraph break. But while we are not privy to the logic that governs this decision, the previous paragraph, in which K acknowledges death’s approach, may allow us to surmise that it is based on a desire, conscious or otherwise, not to die. Attridge may be accurate in suggesting that ‘it is almost as if he acts without going through the process of deciding what to do next’ (57)—and K’s delirium here may render the prospect of a calculated decision implausible—but K is nevertheless compelled from the mountain-top without having been coerced by human agents. Amidst the novel’s established pattern of forced incarceration and active escape, this episode is the sole anomaly. Here, at limits both environmental and corporeal, K moves back towards the realm of geographical and discursive encampment seemingly of his own volition. Vital asserts that ‘all the joy K

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65 See Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’.
66 The shared concerns of Life & Times and The Vegetarian are such that a comparative analysis of the two works would represent an interesting and valuable addition to the growing corpus of environmental criticism. Indeed, I suspect that The Vegetarian—first published in English in 2015—will in time come to attract a great deal of critical attention, especially as ecocriticism is further unmoored from its western origins and adapted to the contextual specificities of different regions and cultures.
finds in his life in nature … has to be balanced with the suffering and the suggestion that the drift into reverie is linked to a death wish’ (99). But this death wish is ultimately relinquished. To Elizabeth Costello’s questions—‘Are there other modes of being besides what we call the human into which we can enter; and if there are not, what does that say about us and our limitations?’ (EC 188)—K’s experience represents a direct answer. One may enter ‘other modes of being’, but only if one is prepared to perish. In other words, death is the only apparent means by which K’s transformation from human being into ecological object might be effected. It is a price K is evidently unwilling to pay.67

While we could plausibly claim that K’s ‘decision’ is predicated on nothing more (or, indeed, less) than the will to live, we should be aware that his motivation may boast a political dimension rooted in alarming parallels between the descent into objecthood and acquiescence in a colonialist vision of ethnic cleansing. As Derek Wright observes, ‘[t]he unspoken wish of the white authorities in the novel is for the blacks to vanish from the face of the earth and, preferably, into it, and K’s frightening image of blacks being forced to dig their own mass-graves … anticipates the doctor’s later fantasy of K as earth-man pulling down the lid after him’ (‘Black Earth’ 437).

The prospect of ecological objecthood-as-death is thus bound discursively to nothing less than a hypothetical genocide whose victims are made complicit in their own burial. This ‘frightening image’ is one that K actively considers—he ‘[watches] the thought begin to unfold itself in his head, like a plant growing’ (MK 94)—thus suggesting an explicit awareness on K’s part that he cannot ‘go to ground’ without inadvertently engaging this disturbing dimension of his ‘life and times’. Of course, we cannot take this as definitive proof that K’s decision to return from the mountains is politically motivated. Nevertheless, in the context of a novel which pits its protagonist against an

67 The well-documented parallels between Michael K and the protagonist of Kafka’s ‘A Hunger Artist’ are also relevant to my own reading of the novel. When the hunger artist sees the impresario displaying pictures of his emaciated frame on the final day of his fasting, his frustration at being misunderstood is clear: ‘What was a consequence of the premature ending of his fast was here presented as the cause of it!’ (Kafka 250). Like the hunger artist, K feels himself assailed by his eventual ‘rescue’ by the authorities; their failure to grasp the nature of his unorthodoxy is lamentable. Quite unlike the hunger artist, however, K confronts the possibility of death and actively turns away.

68 Wright’s readiness to discuss race as a matter of ‘black and white’ is, I think, much too quick. The novel’s only reference to K’s ethnicity is in the acronym ‘CM’ (MK 70), usually cited as standing for ‘Coloured Male’. Coetzee has been emphatic in his response to critics who assume an explicit racial dimension in his works, telling Begam that ‘[t]here is nothing about blackness and whiteness in Waiting for the Barbarians’ (424). Still, Wright’s point stands: the South Africa of Life & Times evinces clear social stratification, and the authorities’ antipathy towards K (and others) is indisputable.
appropriative hegemonic system of encampment, K’s return does reinforce a sense in which the attainment of ecological objecthood is rejected as an alternative to the human ‘world of obligation’ (Attridge 56), even as the human realm threatens to once again corral K into a state of physical and discursive incarceration.

Significantly, K repeats his attempts at ecological assimilation when he later returns to the Visagie farm, where he builds a burrow in which to live. As before, he becomes unwell; but as he again nears the brink of death, he is discovered by the authorities and dragged to Kenilworth to be subjected to the Medical Officer’s desperate diagnoses. Though this intervention certainly lends further credence to readings of K as an object subjected to the ‘labour of negation’, it also forecloses K’s opportunity to complete the transformation into ecological objecthood first attempted in the Swartberg mountains. Would K now take this opportunity if the authorities did not intervene? One can only speculate. What is clear is that, while K may in certain respects represent ‘chthonic man’ (see Wright, ‘Chthonic Man’ 1991), his earlier return from the mountains suggests the likelihood of an enduring reluctance to cross the threshold into objecthood that entails a death at once literally unpalatable and associatively unacceptable.

If K is unprepared to die, and if death is the only means by which the state of pure ‘being’ that ecological objecthood represents can be attained, it follows that K’s attempts to achieve that state are bound to fail. Despite his awareness of the necessity to ‘lay low’ in order to avoid capture—‘Would it not be better … to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs?’ (MK 106)—disappearing into the ground proves untenable as long as he resolves to survive. The land of Life & Times is the ‘dry’ and ‘hard’ Karoo; it rejects the intimacy of K’s approach.69 To his prospects of assimilation it challenges K to perish, to dissolve, to scatter and intermingle—a challenge that K silently defers when he wriggles through the hole of Coetzee’s paragraph break.70 He sacrifices the prospect of full ecological objecthood because he will not sacrifice his life. The ‘subject-object division’ therefore remains, and K’s identification with ecological objects is recast as a form of mimicry.

69 This rejection finds expression in a fever dream—itsel a symptom of bodily illness, and therefore a reminder of death—in which K digs his fingers into the ground as he attempts ‘to cross an arid landscape that tilted and threatened to tip him over its edge’ (MK 57).
70 Coetzee’s fictionalised alter-ego performs the same manoeuvre in Youth. At the end of Chapter 4, John witnesses a protest on the streets of South Africa; at the beginning of Chapter 5, he has already moved to London (Y 40-41), as if having made the journey through the vacancy of the interim.
K’s ecological mimicry is redolent of both the biological definition of the term and Homi Bhabha’s reworking of the concept in a postcolonial context. The former describes the ‘superficial resemblance of two or more organisms that are not closely related taxonomically’ (Wickler). In this understanding, K is the ‘mimic’ who attempts to render himself indistinguishable from the ‘model’ of inert ecological objecthood. The quality of the advantage K enjoys as a result of this performance—as is ordinarily the case in instances of mimicry in the animal kingdom, for example—is debatable (verification of his having escaped ‘out of all the camps’ is one possibility). But it is clear that, consciously or otherwise, K senses that he will benefit from his act of mimicry in one respect or another. If he does so, however, it is only fleetingly: as I have shown, the performance proves physiologically unsustainable. In Bhabha’s reading, meanwhile, the motivation behind the impulse towards mimicry is reversed: it is attributed not to the mimic, but to the model. Bhabha defines mimicry as the ‘desire’ evinced within colonial discourse ‘for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (126; emphasis in original). Mimicry thus ‘emerges’ as ‘the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power’ (Bhabha 126). It should go without saying that Life & Times’ ecological existents cannot ‘appropriate’ K by actively casting him as ‘mimic man’ (Bhabha 128). But although in K’s case the impetus towards assimilation derives from the mimic—he apes his environment, blends in with his surroundings, imagines himself subsumed—Bhabha’s explanation of the ramifications of the act of colonial mimicry remains instructive in our present ecological context.

If ‘mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically’, then K might be said to function as a ‘metonymy of presence’: he is ‘almost the same’ as his environment, ‘but not quite’ (Bhabha 131, 130, 127; emphasis in original). As in the case of the biological mimic, the urge towards mimicry derives from the other; as in the case of the colonial mimic, however, the strategy of mimicry is ultimately ineffective. K is the ‘other’ who ardently wishes to be assimilated into the ecological ‘same’, but who is destined in practice to fall foul of the same ‘excess’ and ‘slippage’ that is fundamental to the metonymic character of Bhabha’s mimicry. By
opting against death, the inevitability of this ‘slippage’—and thus the ‘irreducible gap’ between K and the ecological object—is reaffirmed. Moreover, if, for Bhabha, this ‘slippage’ is both a mode of colonial authority and a prospective origin of resistance to this authority,71 in *Life & Times* it may be taken to represent the authority of the ecological object *qua* object (that is, as it is understood within OOO) and the inherent resistance of K *qua* human to that authority—a resistance that, despite K’s best efforts, cannot be repressed.

As I have argued, it is in the gap opened by this slippage between K and ecology—that is, the irreconcilable *difference* between human subject and ecological object—that an ethical relation between the two can be founded. After initially overmining ecological existents in order to identify in them meanings ‘deeper’ than themselves, misapprehending them in a manner redolent of both David Lurie and the protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’, K finally desists in these efforts at the Visagie farm. Here, he fleetingly enjoys the relation with ecological existents elsewhere enacted (and articulated) by Lucy Lurie, whereby the otherness of the ecological object is accepted and an ethical relation to the land is allowed to flourish. Ecological misapprehension thus gives way to a comparatively unmediated understanding of ecology: if not ecological apprehension *per se* (which is technically impossible) then something akin to apprehension, whereby the ungraspability of the ecological object is, itself, grasped. But when the forces of textualisation close in on the periphery of this ethico-ecological vision, K’s environmental sympathy devolves into a profound, and profoundly odd, empathy: a misapprehension predicated not on the ‘naturalisation’ of ecological existents, but on the radical defamiliarisation of the self in order to be conjoined with an ecological ‘other’ that proves, finally, unknowable.

The notion of ‘slippage’ between the perceiving subject and the ecological object brings us full circle to the problematics of poststructuralism with which this thesis began. To characterise K as ‘metonymic’ is to understand him as a signifier that ‘stands for’ the ecological object without successfully embodying it. K may envisage himself ‘not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of the earth’ (*MK* 97), but this self-conception is implausible; like

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71 ‘Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge in the defiles of an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations’ (Bhabha 131; emphasis in original).
Lucy, K leaves ‘clear prints’ on the earth—markings that at once attest to the reciprocal relation he has attempted to institute with the local ecology and ultimately betray the underground life that he builds for himself. (His concerns that the pumpkin leaves are like ‘flags’ (*MK* 112) that will attract unwanted attention ultimately prove well founded.) To live ecologically is thus to *inscribe* ecology—either deliberately or inadvertently—and, by extension, to admit the inevitable discursive appropriation of that ecology by the perceiving subject. K’s near-object experience is thus not only a misbegotten act of sabotage designed to occasion the collapse of Marais’s ‘subject-object division’ (leaving K buried in the rubble), but an attempt at self-negation that is, figuratively speaking, also an attempt to *negate the act of signification itself* in order to access a state of transcendent, ahistorical matter. The sign, however, cannot be negated. As a result, the inevitability of ecological misapprehension is confirmed.

What remains is the imperfect question of how one can ‘do justice’ to the ecological object in spite of this inevitability. After his five paragraphs at the Visagie farm, K ought to know the answer to this question. In a typically Coetzean paradox—and in keeping with my reading—the final paragraphs of the novel simultaneously imply this knowledge and problematise the possibility of its translation into a viable reality. Back in Cape Town, K thinks of the farm once again—and, specifically, its individual ecological constituents*——and imagines his journey beginning afresh with a ‘little old man’ (*MK* 183) taking his mother’s place. K envisages reaching the farm, tying a teaspoon to a length of string, and lowering it ‘deep into the earth’: ‘when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live’ (*MK* 184). In this scenario, the ethical relation between human subject and ecological object would be reinstituted. This scenario, however, is not merely speculative, but impossible. Even if the imagined situation were to materialise, the teaspoon, lowered vertically, would not hold water—and so neither, finally, does K’s vision. It is not so much hypothetically concrete as hypothetically *hypothetical*. In another world, perhaps, one might be able to live this way. In the storyworld of *Life & Times*, however, one certainly cannot.

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*K* name-checks ecological objects one by one—‘the grey thornbushes, the rocky soil, the ring of hills, the mountains purple and pink in the distance, the great still blue empty sky, the earth grey and brown beneath the sun’ (*MK* 183)—in a manner that recalls the individual stones, bushes, and blades of grass upon which young John’s love is lavished in *Boyhood*, as discussed in Chapter One.
Conclusion: Reading the World

On March 8, 2016, *The Guardian* published an article entitled ‘South Africa says shale gas exploration to begin in next 12 months’ (AFP). The proposed hydraulic fracturing (or ‘fracking’) project will centre on a region ‘believed to hold 485 trillion cubic feet of shale gas’; is cited by the government as a ‘real opportunity for South Africa’; and is ‘opposed by environmentalist [sic] who argue’ that it could ‘poison’ the region’s ‘underground water supply’ (AFP). The region in question is the Karoo.

Fracking is a highly specific form of mining designed in order to secure supplies of a ‘natural’ gas regularly (and erroneously) cited as an environmentally friendly alternative to fossil fuels such as coal or oil, the detrimental effects of whose extraction have now been proven far beyond reasonable doubt. As such, like the mining of these other substances, fracking is undertaken in pursuit of a so-called ‘natural resource’. It should go without saying that this is a highly problematic term—and one that is all the more problematic for the currency it enjoys. Quite apart from the fact that it seems to derive its legitimacy by contrasting itself against an unimaginable other—if all material ultimately derives from the earth, what exactly would an unnatural resource look like?—the very premise of the term is that ecological existents are ‘resources’, always already at our disposal. According to South Africa’s government, then, shale gas (and, by extension, the Karoo more generally) is not deemed an ecological object in itself so much as something, or some things, ‘deeper’ than itself: economic prosperity, the power and opportunity that follow from such prosperity, and so on. The proposed mining project is thus predicated on a process of overmining—the same dynamic with which this paper has been concerned. It is on the basis of both a refusal to revise its understanding of the land in terms of ‘ownership’ demonstrated by David Lurie, and a conception of that land as ‘profitable’ that so angers the protagonist of ‘Nietverloren’, that the South African government risks occasioning irreversible environmental degradation.

Already we can see that the link between mining and overmining is much more significant than a felicitous terminological congruence. Practices that occasion such

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73 The dangers of fracking are well documented. Robert W. Howarth recently published a major paper confirming the findings of an earlier study that ‘the climate impact of shale gas may be worse than that of other fossil fuels such as coal and oil because of methane emissions’ (1). While this point remains somewhat contentious, other effects of fracking are less easily disputed—namely, its potential to poison aquifers (Klein 328) and to increase the frequency of seismic activity (Klein 329).
environmental damage regularly appear to be predicated on a dynamic of ecological misapprehension, either wilful or otherwise. Consider, for example, Sarah Palin’s calls to exploit ‘the resources that God created right underfoot on American soil’ in the name of ‘economic growth and energy independence’ (Palin). If God granted mankind dominion over the environmental world by bestowing upon Adam the right to name all of the creatures of the earth—the myth that Derrida expertly enlists in his famous essay, ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am’—so Palin appears to reassert that dominion by corralling ecological existents under a popular umbrella term. Though hardly renowned for her verbal acumen, Palin deftly interweaves ‘resource discourse’ with religious dogma (as well as a strong hint of American exceptionalism) in order to make a case for increased mining activity.

Not all instances of overmining—and the misapprehension that follows from them—are quite so transparent. Sometimes they occur under the auspices of a call for greater environmental responsibility, as in the case of Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*’. For all the praise that was lavished on the progressive pontiff for his determination to address the issue of anthropogenic climate change—thereby rebuking attempts such as Palin’s to justify environmental harm on the basis of a God-given authority—the encyclical’s own overmining tendency should not be overlooked. Rather than reducing ecology to an expression of the boundless generosity of the Lord, Pope Francis instead reduces it to an expression of the exhaustible generosity of a Mother Nature figure that has been abused and taken for granted. The mystical connection between women and ‘nature’ may have its advocates, not least within the discipline of ecofeminism, but I would venture that it remains problematic. Anthropomorphising ecology in this way, though potentially useful as part of a strategy to mobilise environmental activism, is an emotive tactic prone to inspire unintended, unhelpful connotations, and/or to gloss over the specificities of anthropogenic climate change and the practical requirements that must be met if it is to be combated with any measure of success. While certain allowances must be made for the encyclical’s rhetorical

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75 This imagery is employed as early as the encyclical’s second sentence: ‘Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”’. Francis continues: ‘This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted upon her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will’ (Pope Francis).
76 This connection also has its critics within ecofeminism; Janet Biehl is among the most prominent.
situation—the practical, contextual factors from which it cannot be extricated—the rhetorical situation itself may be said to represent another example of the kind of conceptual ‘lens’ through which misapprehension occurs. The very idea that the encyclical cannot be decontextualised may thus be said to represent further evidence of the depth and complexity of the ecological object’s entanglement within extant discursive schema.

On the understanding that those who wilfully misapprehend ecology often have a vested interest in neglecting to amend their ‘ways of seeing’ (as in Palin’s case), a greater understanding of the pervasiveness of ecological misapprehension may be most beneficial to a seemingly unlikely constituency. As the case of Pope Francis suggests, misapprehension does not merely afflict those determined to perpetuate behaviour that risks occasioning environmental crisis, but is also demonstrated by those dedicated to the environmental movement. The various forms of ecological misapprehension sketched in this paper might thus function as cautionary tales: not to those who consciously obstruct changes to environmental attitudes and policy, but to activists themselves. My re-reading of Life & Times is a case in point. K may or may not be ‘a hero for the white ecological Eighties’ (Wright, ‘Black Earth’ 440), but he can hardly be considered a poster-boy for ecological thinking in the present day. Indeed, his futile attempts to ‘become’ ecological matter recall problematic schools of environmental thought which emphasise the holistic character of ecology, in which humans are encouraged to think of themselves as ‘at one’ with nonhuman ecological existents. ‘Gaia theory’ is one example.

Pioneered in the 1970s, Gaia theory follows that ‘all life and all the material parts of the Earth’s surface’ comprise a ‘self-regulating entity’ (Lovelock ix): ‘a single system, a kind of mega-organism, and a living planet’ (Lovelock x). Drawing on this theory, Derek Wright argues that K is ‘less a man than a spirit of ecological endurance, a Gaian ideograph’ (‘Black Earth’ 439). For reasons discussed in Chapter Two, I disagree with this reading; I take K’s avoidance of death to render him much more ‘man’ than ‘spirit’. Yet, in one sense, Wright is correct: for as long as he persists in his attempts to attain ecological objecthood, K does function as a ‘Gaian ideograph’—that is, as the embodiment or representative of Gaia theory as a mode of environmental
understanding. To the criticisms that Gaia theory has attracted, we might thus add one of our own. As my analysis of *Life & Times* implies, the prospect of Gaian ‘at-oneness’ is problematised by the inalienability of the distance between (human) self and (ecological) other that K attempts to collapse: the ‘recognition of and respect for difference which is the very condition of [Levinasian] ethics’ (Marais, ‘Labour of Negation’ 118)—or, more accurately, the expanded, object-inclusive definition of Levinasian ethics that I established in Chapter Two. As such, Gaia theory, a long-established touchstone of environmental thinking, may be understood as a form of ecological misapprehension.

Just as Gaia theory’s emphasis is on the wellbeing of the planet, Wright further argues that K ‘plants to keep the earth, not himself, alive’ (‘Black Earth’ 439). Again, I disagree: K may play the role of environmental martyr during his stay in the mountains—and again later upon his return to the Visagie farm—but, as we have seen, imminent death makes it impossible for him to ‘stay in character’. This impossibility thus doubles as an articulation of Gaia theory’s own shortcomings in the context of the present era, which demands environmental action precisely in order prevent the death of a large proportion of the world’s human population. By effecting environmental degradation, we do not necessarily threaten the future of the planet; rather, we threaten to render the planet uninhabitable for a vast array of its constituents, *including ourselves*. As such, imaginatively conjoining ourselves with the planet only serves to vacate the space from which valuable environmental activism and policy-making might derive.

The identification of this imaginative conjunction seems to underpin Wright’s assessment that ‘Coetzee seems concerned in this novel to found a new myth of the

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77 Although certain tenets of Gaia theory have attained respectability and currency within the scientific community, it has been heavily criticised on numerous counts: from a supposed lack of theoretical and methodological rigour, to its overarching metaphoric quality, to its liberal use of personification (see Lovelock vii-xix). Lovelock himself cites comments made by ‘French Nobel laureate Jacques Monod’ who ‘castigated holistic thinkers like me as “very stupid people”’ (Lovelock xii).

78 Given his argument in ‘Literature and the Labour of Negation’ that K does in fact collapse the ‘subject-object division’, it is unsurprising that Marais should elsewhere read K’s residence in the burrow as evidence that he ‘has become one with the earth’ (‘Hermeneutics of Empire’ 77).

79 Indeed, this conjunction might even be argued to constitute a mode of self-absolution, whereby identification with the land recasts one as a victim of anthropogenic environmental irresponsibility. Though technically correct—insofar as humans *will* be among the victims of this irresponsibility if it is left unchecked—this still manages to miss the point. In this case, one can be both a victim and a perpetrator; to identify with the former but not the latter would appear to be myopic at best. When K attempts to attain ecological objecthood, we might argue that he evinces this myopia. But, as I have shown, K never achieves environmental martyrdom. When death (and, with it, objecthood) approaches, he recoils. He is not the ‘stony ground’, but a human being.
land: the myth of earth minus man, or at least of Western Technological Man (white) as distinct from Vegetarian, Macrobiotic Man (here, black), who eats only what nature supplies and is not damaged by (‘Black Earth’ 439). A rebuttal to this theory provides the epigraph to this paper. Here, at an event hosted by the animal rights organisation, Voiceless, Coetzee ‘highlights the paradox of distance and proximity to other creatures by stressing the humanity of animal rights groups … and the necessity of a philosophical approach and a cultural practice that is true to the exercising of that humanity with regard to other species’ (Clarkson 125; emphasis in original). For ‘animal rights groups’ we might easily read ‘environmental activists’ more broadly: Coetzee’s point regarding the indifference of animals to Voiceless’s work—and the fundamental humanism of that work—can be applied equally to ecological existents in all their forms. In fact, in this expanded formulation, Coetzee’s argument that ‘this remains a human enterprise from beginning to end’ (‘Voiceless’ 2) is doubly true. Not only is it humanist in intention, but also in consequence: without human intervention regarding the welfare of ecological objects of all varieties, humans themselves risk eventually joining the burgeoning ranks of endangered species.

In this connection, it is important to reiterate that OOO’s determination to strip the human object of its ‘subject’ status should not be equated with a desire to efface humankind altogether. In the terminology of Elizabeth Costello’s elegant analogy, the role and its player must once again be distinguished from one another. Timothy Morton articulates this point with characteristic verve in The Ecological Thought, in which he takes issue with posthumanism on the basis that it ‘too glibly combines (1) a deconstruction of humanness—and animal-ness, and life form-ness—into sets of machine-like, algorithmic processes; and (2) decidedly nonreductionist, holistic, quasi-mystical systems theory’ (113). It is notable that these two propensities describe ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’, respectively—and, moreover, that Morton’s ‘quasi-mystical systems theory’ bears an uncanny resemblance to Gaia theory. Morton emphasises the object’s resistance to these propensities and reiterates the necessity of the human ‘same’ that follows from the object’s otherness. Just as Costello tries to direct her audience’s attention towards ‘poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with

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80 In a similar vein, Attwell argues that ‘the idea of gardening as cultivation does accumulate a certain ethical significance. […] Protectiveness, nurturing, cultivation: this thread involves an attempt, I suggest, to project a posthumanist, reconstructed ethics’ (Politics 97; emphasis in original).
him’ (EC 96; emphasis added), so Morton asks: ‘What if being human is the encounter with the strange stranger—in other words, at a certain limit, an encounter with the inhuman?’ (Ecological Thought 113; emphasis added). He continues: ‘Isn’t this the very “posthumanism” for which some are yearning?’ (Ecological Thought 113). Morton’s implication is that, if this is not the “posthumanism” for which some are yearning, perhaps it ought to be. Indeed, maybe the posthumanism for which some are actually yearning is the type that raises Morton’s hackles: the type that ‘seems suspiciously keen to delete the paradigm of humanness like a bad draft’ (Morton, Ecological Thought 113); the same type, indeed, after which K yearns in his attempt to conjoin himself with the ecological other. The posthumanism after which Morton seems to yearn, by contrast, finds its expression in the very impossibility of this conjunction—or, in other words, in the very distance that characterises his ‘encounter’ or Costello’s ‘record of an engagement’.

While the stylistic flair (and occasional vagueness) of much OOO writing may lend it a somewhat enigmatic quality,81 OOO in fact has little time for Gaia-style mysticism: to repeat, ‘an object isn’t something else’ (Morton, Realist Magic 30; emphasis in original). Nor should its orientation towards objects be misconstrued as campaigning for any kind of posthumanist ‘myth of earth minus man’. Indeed, to my mind, the most radical quality of OOO—and the characteristic that renders it such a promising theoretical development for ecological thinking today—is its pragmatism. As we have seen, OOO neither purports nor seeks to bridge the ‘irreducible gap’ between perception and objecthood; rather, it asks us to acknowledge the existence of that gap. Heeding this request means accepting the ‘hidden surplus’ of ecological objects (or, more specifically, the hiddenness of this surplus); desisting from interminable efforts to identify an impossible unmediated ‘truth’; and focusing instead on the quality and density of the discursive veils through which we inevitably attempt to make meaning of those objects. In other words, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that the ecological object will always evade our nets of meaning and, refusing to be

81 Harman directly addresses the question of style in academic writing in his interview with Lucy Kimbell, arguing that mainstream academic philosophers ‘think they are good writers, when actually they’re not. That’s because they think good writing is about clarity, as if the only problems with bad writing were vagueness and imprecision. But what we need is not clear writing, but lucid writing that really brings things to life before us. And since things are never entirely clear, lucid writing means using vagueness, allusion, and insinuation at times, just as the great Renaissance painters had to master the art of shadow to depict things accurately. Academic philosophy today has no sense of chiaroscuro, and thus no sense of style’ (qtd. in Kimbell 114; emphasis in original).
disheartened, rededicate ourselves to the ethical relation that is only possible under these circumstances. Just as all but the most nihilistic poststructuralists have accepted the implications of the textual turn without despairing for the future of literary criticism, so we must accept the ungraspability of the ecological object and on that very basis attend to our own overmining impulse, knowing that the potential for productive, sustainable relations with the countless ecological existents among whom we are entangled relies upon the responsible policing of this impulse. Here, a conclusion drawn by Leon de Kock in a postcolonial context remains apt for our ecocritical purposes: ‘Once the representational basis of the ongoing crises of identity in South Africa is acknowledged,’ he argues, ‘we may be able to shift from disputing what it is our fellows say we are to how it is that they say such things in the first place. In that case we may qualify the perception of ontological crisis (identity fixation) with the memory that identity has always been contingent upon representation and is likely to remain so’ (287-8; emphasis in original).

The basis of environmental crisis, I suggest, may be likewise representational in character. Thinking about the environment is well and good in principle, but in practice it is necessary to consider how we think about the environment before such thinking can productively commence. Qualifying ‘the perception of ontological crisis’ with the memory that our dealings with ecology are contingent upon representation would appear to be a promising place to start. This is not to say that attentiveness to ecological misapprehension will in itself be sufficient to remedy the manifold environmental crises with which we are currently confronted. By the same token, however, it may be no great exaggeration to suggest that such attentiveness may be a prerequisite for efforts to address those crises. If ecological misapprehension is as pervasive as I have suggested—not simply because of the basic problematics of empiricism, but because of the near-inescapability of overmining tendencies—then the lessons we might extrapolate from the study of misapprehension would appear to be of real importance. To this end, literary criticism—and a nuanced understanding of postmodernist representational strategies, in particular—can be an influential tool. Coetzee argues that ‘it is a good idea for students to be exposed to the spectacle of someone else reading intently and intensively’ (qtd. in Begam and Coetzee 429). By self-reflexively dramatising modes of reading, Coetzee’s novels expose his readers to exactly this spectacle. From an ecocritical standpoint, as this thesis has shown, it is a spectacle from which much can (and should) be learned.
Works Cited


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