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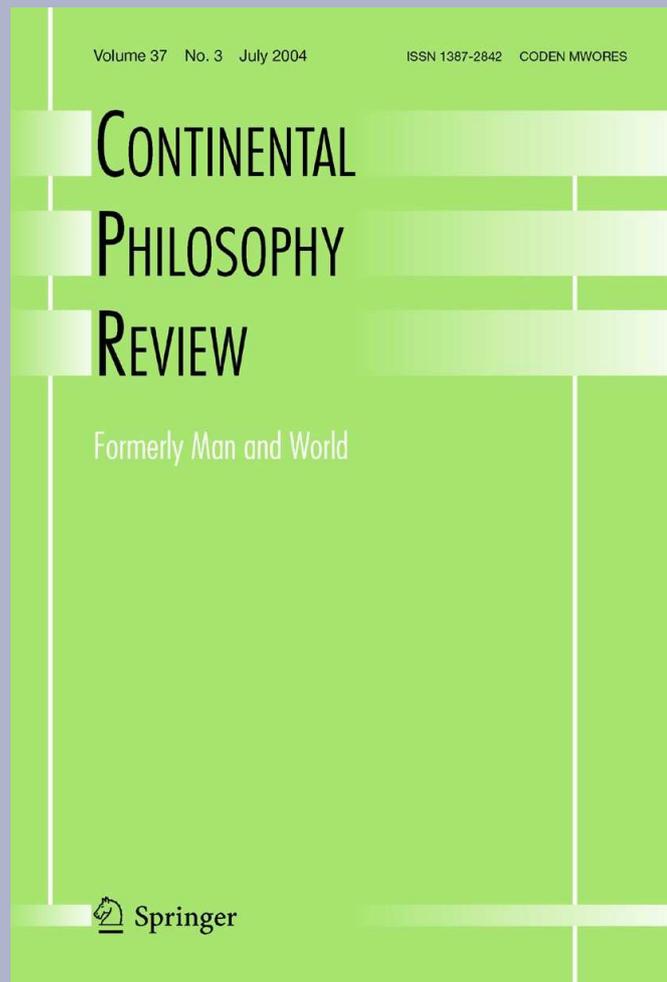
Cynthia Willett

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Ground zero for a post-moral ethics in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Julia Kristeva's melancholic

Cynthia Willett

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Abstract Perhaps no other novel has received as much attention from moral philosophers as South African writer J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The novel is ethically compelling and yet no moral theory explains its force. Despite clear Kantian moments, neither rationalism nor self-respect can account for the strange ethical task that the protagonist sets for himself. Calling himself the dog man, like the ancient Cynics, this shamelessly cynical protagonist takes his cues for ethics not from humans but from animals. He does not however claim much in the way of empathy or understanding of animals, and his own odd motives remain a puzzle throughout the stages of his ethical transformation. Many scholars approach Coetzee's text through an ethics of alterity, and even argue that *Disgrace* is exemplary in this regard. Kristeva's rendition of alterity ethics brings us close to the novel's vision, and yet the novel points towards a more primordial basis for ethics in the search for meaning through the human encounter with other animal species.

Keywords Post-moral ethics · Coetzee · *Disgrace* · Kristeva · Animal ethics · South Africa · Postcolonial theory · Biological racism · Cultural racism

“Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing...Yes, like a dog.”—Lucy

“Well, now he has become a dog-man.”—Lucy's Father (reflecting on his own strange behavior)

C. Willett (✉)
Philosophy Department, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA
e-mail: cynthia.willett@emory.edu

1 Beyond alterity: Ethics in South Africa

Gayatri Spivak praises South African writer J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as an exemplary postcolonial text because of its refusal to impose a voice on the subaltern.¹ This praise by one of the leading postcolonial theorists may be surprising given that the African National Congress has condemned this novel for its seemingly blatant racist depiction of black men as the rapists of white women.² The Other that Spivak has in mind, however, does not refer to the black Africans who are depicted as dogs, nor, for that matter, to any of the dogs that populate the novel, but to Lucy, the white daughter of the protagonist. After a terribly brutal rape, the pregnant daughter not only decides to keep the child, but consents to become the third wife in the black family of one of the rapists. The daughter's response to the rape leaves the protagonist, and most likely the reader, utterly bewildered. The protagonist believes he can understand the motives of the men who did this to her. He is able to visualize how these men must have looked as they approached his daughter after having killed her guard dogs; how they "drank up her fear...[and]...heighten her terror....*Call your dogs! They said to her.... No Dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*" He suspects that the drives of these men—black men he often sees as like dogs—are not different in kind from aspects of himself. Indeed, he views himself as a predator in the sexual liberties that he regularly takes with young women. "He can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men.... The question....," Coetzee writes, is does this male protagonist, a protagonist who can imagine in himself the pleasure of the savage male rapist, "have it in him to be the woman?"³

For myself, however, perhaps in part as a female reader of this novel, the question is somewhat different. The ethical force of the novel is sufficiently enigmatic that it is not merely difficult to grasp the decision of the daughter, a decision that she believes to be that of "a good mother and a good person"; it is even more difficult to understand the nature and basis for the ethical transformation of the protagonist himself, which is what the novel is all about. In fact, if by subaltern one refers to a character who cannot be understood through dominant moral frameworks, then the protagonist certainly qualifies.

And yet the protagonist is clearly not a subaltern in any kind of political sense. On the contrary, as a white professor of English literature who makes casual sexual use of the young colored women of the novel, and who shows little concern for his students or his teaching except as an occasion for his own gain or pleasure, he represents aspects of what we could call the "colonial mindset." In the context of this novel, the mindset links together a range of transgressions from the sexual use of dark-skinned woman and the racial exploitation of the colonial past to the cruel treatment of animals. But instead of prompting the reader to make a moral judgment against this mindset, the narrative represents through this character a very strange and yet perhaps strangely compelling ethical transformation.

¹ Spivak (2002, pp. 17–31).

² For a discussion of this issue, see Attwell (2002) and McDonald (2002).

³ Coetzee (1999a, p. 160).

The treatment of animals poses for the novel the most radical instance of the ease with which human beings exploit others for their own use. Coetzee is known for insisting upon similarities between factory farming and the genocide of the Holocaust in his speeches and in other literary contexts.⁴ *Disgrace* likewise makes use of this comparison in order to challenge the colonial mindset down deep by troubling the relationships between human and non-human animal species. Consider the trajectory of the narrative: The novel opens with a man who expresses little ethical regard for others, human or animal, and who, while not a vicious man, represents his own desires through animal imagery, typically of predator and prey. Amoral predation seems to be posited as the norm in much human and animal behavior. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist gradually changes who he is as he finds himself forming bonds with random animals. By the middle of the novel, for example, we learn that a peculiar “bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians [the ethnic name designates the breed of sheep about to be slaughtered for a feast].... The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (*D*, 126). By the end of the novel, this former university professor is volunteering to assist a veterinarian (who is a female friend of his daughter’s) with euthanizing abandoned animals left at her clinic. The only stated motive for the odd behavior of this formerly quite self-centered man is to become “a good person.”

The novel is ethically compelling, and yet no moral theory that I know of explains its force. At this juncture in the novel, where the protagonist states that his only aim is to be a good person, the stance of this former sensualist seems to take a turn toward what Nietzsche might describe as a Kantian-style asceticism.⁵ Kant famously argues that humans should treat animals well, not for their sake, nor for the sake of anyone’s happiness, but for the sake of being a good person. The moral agent thereby distinguishes himself from the animal through a sublime form of reason that is the source of moral law. According to this view, only human beings are worthy of respect for their own sake. However, despite clear Kantian moments in the narrative’s ethics, neither self-respect nor rationality can capture the ethical force of the final and most bizarre task that this peculiar character chooses for himself: He insists on escorting euthanized dogs from the clinic to the incinerator in order to ensure that the corpses are not mishandled as they are placed on a conveyor belt. This care for the animal corpses teeters somewhere between the sublime and, well, the absurd.

Whatever the novel’s strange but compelling ethical force, perhaps no other contemporary literary author has received as much attention from U.S. philosophers in recent years as Coetzee, and much of this attention has been on the problem of how human beings ought to treat other animals. Yet for many of the novel’s readers, it is not clear if the strangely skewed ethical stance of the novel opens new ethical vistas or simply disturbs our ordinary ones. As I read the novel, the African National

⁴ De Waal (2006, pp. 75–80).

⁵ See Nietzsche (1956, pp. 231–299).

Congress may have been right to flag the images of black Africans as of some concern; however, these images occur in the context of a narrative that exposes the subtle ways in which the colonial mindset may continue in South Africa and elsewhere, and to locate some basis for transforming this mindset where it is quite pervasive and most easily dismissed, namely, in the relation of human beings to other animals. Certainly the novel disturbs any known paradigm of ethics. The question is whether the author gives us any clues for some other ground of ethics.

2 Historical background to the novel

Some background on the history of colonialism in South Africa provides insight into the power relations in the novel, and so too into the puzzling nature of the novel's ethical force. Historian Clifton Crais traces colonialism through two main stages, both involving the imposition of a coercive labor system by white Europeans upon two groups of black people in southern Africa, the Khoikhoi and the less easily dominated Xhosa in the Eastern Cape.⁶ The transfer of colonial power from the mercantilist Dutch East India Company to the industrializing and expansive British in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century altered the economy as well as the system of thought of both the colonizer and the colonized. The British abolished the institution of slavery as practiced by the Dutch-speaking Afrikaners, and replaced a pre-modern spectacle of excess and servitude with racial capitalism, which rested on more "rational" and less visible styles of coercion. As Crais explains, "the colonial discourse of the black as Other...gradually informed...the important changes which were taking place in the composition and conduct of the colonial state. Less interested in the infliction of punishments, the state became preoccupied with institutions aimed at transforming the very inner character of the individual. Part of a much larger change in the way power was exercised, punishment became progressively 'interiorized'. Disorderly prisons were replaced by more 'efficient' and systematically constructed buildings geared to reform and control... (126-7)." Crais's Foucauldian-inspired analysis juxtaposes two systems of power: the utilitarian and distinctly modern exercise of control through bureaucratic rationalization in the service of capitalist growth brought by the British and the pre-capitalist forms of servitude and slavery instigated by their continental predecessors. Two distinct colonial systems of thought, or mindsets, have developed from these two periods of colonization, the one that perceives itself to be Anglo and modern, the other, which perceives itself as continental European in origin and as hostile to the emerging bourgeois and bureaucratic elements of the more modern social system. The modern system of oppression introduced biological racism to South Africa well after it had appeared elsewhere, while the earlier Dutch social system maintained an older and more prevailing system of racism, cultural racism, in South Africa well into the nineteenth century. Both older and newer systems continue to

⁶ For an understanding of the history of race and frontier in white supremacist South Africa, see Crais (1992). And for an expansion of the trajectory of racism beyond cultural and biological racism to a neoliberal racialization of space via Merleau-Ponty, see Willett (2004).

weave contrasting strands of racism and power in the culture of contemporary South Africa and, I think, in the novel.

3 Beyond good and evil

While teaching at a hyper-modernized Anglo university in post-apartheid Cape Town, the protagonist of *Disgrace* romanticizes an older style of privilege associated, we can now say, with the first wave of colonizers. This romantic, anti-modern stance estranges the protagonist from his university, and modern rationalized and bureaucratic forms of power that if introduced by the British, no doubt have been intensified as neoliberal globalization replaces earlier forms of capitalist expansion. Early in the novel, the protagonist characterizes his sexual relations with young women through the image of a snake in a garden. Both the image of the snake and the garden play an important role in understanding the way in which power is understood in the novel. The metaphor of the garden recalls the image of pre-colonial South Africa that attracted Europeans and the image invokes the sexual innocence and lack of agency in the women that the protagonist seduces. The image of the snake belongs to a cluster of images associated with Lucifer, the figure that is celebrated in a poem by Lord Byron that fascinates the protagonist. This Lucifer, Coetzee writes, could “resign his own for others’ good but not in pity and not because he ought”; his “perversity of thought” and “pride” could lead just as readily to “crime.”⁷ This figure beyond good and evil reflects an aspect of that more retro pre-modern colonial mentality, the Uberman so-to-speak who presumes that the Other, whether that Other is Africa or beautiful women, is without its own agency and there for him. In this “noble” cast of mind, such a figure may nonetheless, should he choose, for whatever reason, exercise his power or privilege with generosity, but not because of any moral obligation. Such a postmoral figure may aim, in short, to be a good man, but this aim has nothing to do with the ordinary obligations of morality. The protagonist betrays a sense of prerogative most provocatively when he asserts of his student’s seductive beauty: “It is part of the bounty that she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16).

The protagonist thinks of his unbridled erotic desires as natural, even at one point comparing his own irrepressible sexual urges with those of a dog in heat. The same Foucauldian framework that proves useful for an analysis of colonial systems of thought should serve as well to remind us that the unbound will of the sensualist/predator that this protagonist romanticizes in his erotic and aesthetic pursuits is no more natural and free than the social Darwinism of capitalism. The colonial mindset as a system of thought is trained by a system of power. Any particular case of this mindset is one more formation of power, more than it is the authentic desire of natural man. Even the figure of Lucifer is not a natural creature. But then the novel still leaves open the question as to why key scenes in the novel do not merely play with animal imagery. This novel is to a significant degree about animals.

⁷ Coetzee (1999a, p. 33).

As we have said, animals, and not human victims, seem to represent the ultimate targets of human arrogance in much of Coetzee's writing. His 1997–1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University (published as the *Lives of Animals* and reprinted in *Elizabeth Costello*) explicitly set up the parallel between the treatment of animals in factory farms and the Holocaust.⁸ *Disgrace*, (published in 1999) refers to the incinerating of unwanted animals as a “Loesung” (the German word used for the Final Solution).⁹ Yet the basis for our ethical concern with animals is never through any of his writing made clear. Rationality certainly accounts for very little, but what about some form of empathy or emotive response? In *Disgrace*, the protagonist undergoes an ordeal of suffering that provokes some element of sympathy for the wounded and the vulnerable, including the random animals he bonds with. But the protagonist also makes a point of mocking the moral sentiments of good-natured animal-welfare advocates early in the novel in such a way that it would be difficult to assume any simple relevance of these sentiments at the end of the novel. As Coetzee writes, these people are a “bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat.”¹⁰ And later on in the novel: “He is not, he hopes, a sentimentalist,” he thinks to himself as he “takes charge of disposing of their [the animal corpses] remains.”¹¹ In short, the novel may well aim to expand our moral sentiment and, as it does so, call upon a nearly sublime duty to ourselves in regard to animals, but no standard moral element (neither moral sympathy nor Kantian reason) accounts for the full ethical force of the novel.¹² It is too strange for that.

No doubt it is because this novel challenges our sensibilities with an ethical position that is virtually, in fact just may be, unreadable, that it has emerged as such an important literary text for the ethics of alterity, a tradition of ethics that of course traces back to a Jewish thinker, Emmanuel Levinas. In part, this appeal to a Jewish thinker could be fitting given that the brutal techniques of the Holocaust did in fact develop out of factory farms and industrial agriculture, and that these modern techniques in the treatment of nonhuman as well as human animal species are

⁸ Coetzee (1999b) and Coetzee (2003).

⁹ Coetzee (1999a, 142).

¹⁰ Coetzee (1999a, 73).

¹¹ Coetzee (1999a, 143–144).

¹² Cf. Kuzniar (2006) for a reading of the novel that emphasizes the importance of sympathy and empathy. In my current essay, I am interested in the limits of empathy or any other social bond for characterizing the ethical concern that Coetzee's protagonist develops for the abject and unsympathetic. Elsewhere, I discuss how our cultural or subjective associations as well as our resentments, identifications, and other sources of motives and images inform empathy. There I argue that if there is not an unmediated ethical approach to others, ethics requires tropes as well as a social and political infrastructure not usually thought of as essential to its practice. My example from *Disgrace*: The protagonist associates the abandoned pit bull, Katy, with the veterinarian, Bev, and with Lord Byron's abandoned lover, Teresa. This association composes the basis for an empathy that will later include the maimed dog in the final chapter. Empathy is not direct from one person to another, and so is never free from associations; moreover, it is challenged by creatures that are abject. Among other sources, I examine Butler (2004, p. 150). In this context, I am critical of the assumption that the subaltern or Other could speak, if only their cry weren't blocked through our failure to represent them, or allow them to be represented, adequately.

central to Coetzee's larger ethical concerns. I think that this specific post-modern tradition of ethics sheds some light on aspects of this narrative's ethical force, but here too there are limits to what this tradition can explain. In much of the remainder of this essay, I examine aspects of an ethics of alterity in the novel, and then turn to a more expansive basis for ethics in terms of what it means to live a life of meaning in the face of brute suffering.

Before proceeding, we should mention the acknowledged limits to drawing upon any moral tradition rooted in Jewish memories of the Holocaust for an ethics that is centered not on people, but on animals. The Levinasian tradition emerged as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust, and in particular the need to re-think moral theory given the ease with which standard moral sentiments and principles (both empathy and reason) can lend themselves to horrifying causes. The appeal to a post-Holocaust ethics to interpret a novel that compares the treatment of animals to that of Jews in concentrations camps or even to that of black Africans in colonial society risks moral outrage unless we are very careful to respect the differences.¹³

And yet, as mentioned earlier, many scholars interpret the enigmatic force of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* along with much of the rest of his corpus in terms of an ethics of alterity that is post-Holocaust as well as, as Spivak insists, postcolonial. Spivak anchors her insights explicitly in the development of this tradition in the work of Derrida as well as Levinas; other scholars draw more from Deleuze, Lyotard, Agamben, and Adorno in the continental tradition or from Stanley Cavell in the American tradition.¹⁴ All of these interpreters locate in Coetzee's narrative style something of what Cora Diamond characterizes, with nuanced Old Testament overtones, as a psyche that is wounded through its exposure to the other, the sense of responsibility to the other that comes from this wounding, and a "moral inadequacy" that results.¹⁵ Wherever else the novel might take us, I think it is fair to say that this wounded opening of the self—of a self that is vulnerable, weak, and dependent—to the other, who is similarly vulnerable, lies on the threshold of an older, more primordial religious perspective without crossing over into it, and in this respect contrasts subtly with any modern moral perspectives based on reason or sentiment. The ethical force of Coetzee's novel begins from the fact of suffering, and not, as does the modern moralist, from the any simple obligation to avoid suffering. Modern moral theories provide guides or principles for avoiding harm to others, but give us little in the way of dealing with the pervasive suffering that persists, which is where this novel begins. But if we are working with an anti-

¹³ Cf. Heidegger's infamous parallel between the Holocaust and the mechanized food industry; cited in Rockmore (1995, p. 150). On a related note, the film *Downfall* (2005) portrays Hitler as concerned about his secretary and his dog and as a vegetarian in contrast with his lack of concern for the fate of his fellow German citizens at the end of the second world war. For a discussion of this contrast, see Lara (2007, p. 8).

¹⁴ See also Taylor (2008); Taylor draws beautifully upon Coetzee's novel to extend Bulter's Levinasian ethics of non-violence to animals.

¹⁵ See Diamond (2008, pp. 71–72) along with other essays in Cavell, Stanley, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking and Cary Wolfe (2008). For an extensive reading of Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello novels from this tradition, see Mulhall (2009).

colonial perspective that is not modern, the trick for readers of this Afrikaans writer is to avoid slipping into just a more retro uebermanly colonial one.

So an ethics of response to the alterity of the other provides a good beginning for understanding the solitary protagonist of this novel. Recall that, say in contrast with major characters found in the communitarian novels of Toni Morrison (one of the favorite writers of the seduced student in the *Disgrace*), Coetzee portrays the protagonist as a loner and an aesthete who aims to remain proudly aloof from others, who certainly does not think of himself as dependent upon them, and who resolutely determines never to be subject to their views of him. Yet this existential stranger, this uncommunal man, this serpent in the garden, undergoes a wounding that transforms him from serpent to outcaste, while rendering him open and exposed to others in ways that he had never aimed to be. His ethical response to others develops out of a sense, not of rational or practical agency of the kind that is emphasized in modern moral theory, and not even of the strength and other resources that might be found in communal bonds as do the characters in other contemporary novels, but of woundedness, or incapacity.¹⁶ Moreover, as we would also find in an ethics of alterity, the ethical concern for others that emerges in the novel, a concern that this time centrally includes nonhuman animals, does not rest on much understanding of those others, let alone on any presumption that those others are substantially like ourselves.¹⁷

Thus we can see, even though I will argue that the ethical force of the novel, in the last analysis, carries us beyond the ethics of alterity, there are very good reasons for approaching this novel from this post-Holocaust tradition. I will draw upon the tradition as far as possible in order to make sense of the ethical force of the novel before finally suggesting some ways in which we could view the novel as contributing towards an ethics oriented not towards otherness per se, but towards what we might call a meaningful life.

But in contrast with most other scholars who examine Coetzee through this tradition of alterity, I will turn, somewhat perversely, to a theorist of alterity who happens to be, not a man, but a woman—Julia Kristeva. This is because, unlike Levinas and other philosophers writing after the Holocaust, Kristeva locates the primary challenge of alterity first and foremost—not in the alterity of the other person—but in the need to come to terms with unclaimable elements within one's own self. This focus in Kristeva on the alterity of the self fits well with the strangeness that characterizes Coetzee's odd protagonist. Kristeva develops an ethics of alterity in *Strangers to Ourselves* based on her earlier work emphasizing strangeness not in others but first of all in one's self.¹⁸ Critics (including myself, and in part based on my reading of Morrison) have argued that Kristeva's initial focus

¹⁶ See Lawlor (2007) and see Willett (2001) for communal ethics of eros and hubris in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and other literature.

¹⁷ See Perpich (2008) and Katz (2003). See also Oliver (2009) for a rich exploration of the role of animals in the assertion of the human for Derrida, Freud, Kristeva, and other major figures for continental ethics.

¹⁸ Kristeva (1991). See Beardsworth (2004) for a compelling reading of Kristeva's work through her response to modern nihilism and the loss of meaning. And see McAfee (2004) for a rich interpretation of the relevance of Kristeva for political ethics.

on alterity in the self rather than on relationships falls short of weighing in the significance of relationships with others for both ethics and for the development the psyche. These critics claim that the alterity of the self is simply projected onto others rather than encountered, and that Kristeva's theory of the psyche is finally of a narcissistic one.¹⁹ Be this as it may, Kristeva's theory of the psyche sheds a great deal of light on the narcissistic protagonist of Coetzee's novel. Modern moral theory begins too late, from the assumption that harm can in most circumstances be avoided. Coetzee like Kristeva assumes that the situation in which we find ourselves is one first of all of some kind of woundedness or disgrace.

Yet despite a kinship between the ethical insights in Kristeva and Coetzee, and despite a special delight I take in insisting that a male protagonist who never claims to understand women can himself best be approached, at least initially, through the conceptual net of a female psychoanalyst, we will see that he does finally allude full capture at least in her terms. Perhaps the main indication that the ethical force in Coetzee's narrative will allude Kristeva's human-oriented perspective is that the man who once viewed the dogs in the novel with indifference chooses to become, as he says near the end of the novel, a "guardian of animal souls." In the ethical idiom of the novel, he will take upon himself the role of the "dog-man." The insights in Coetzee's novel introduce a unique dimension into the ethics of alterity, a dimension that is post-Oedipal and post-humanist in a way that takes us somewhere other and more enigmatic yet than Kristeva, and as well other theorists of alterity. For a secular age ever on the verge of nihilism, this novel brings us to the threshold of a near religious response to the life we share with animals.

4 Kristeva's relevance

As we have remarked, literary scholars have interpreted *Disgrace* (and for that matter, much of the rest of Coetzee's literary work) through just about every major philosopher or theorist of alterity except for Kristeva.²⁰ Even though I will argue that the novel does not fully accommodate Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach, her contributions to an ethics of alterity give us rich insights into the main character in this novel.

Psychoanalytic theory examines drives at the core of our identities that are erotic and destructive, even incestuous, through a cluster of tragic myths tracing back to the Sophoclean story of Oedipus. These drives render the core of the self opaque, and manifest themselves in unwanted tendencies or fantasies, like raping, pillaging, or even, I'd think, kicking cats, drives that are not nice, and that we cannot easily alter or control, but that these analysts dare us to fully deny. However pervasive

¹⁹ Kearney (2003). And for my earlier concerns with representation of mother in Kristeva, see Willett (1995, pp. 19–23); and for an extensive discussion of the origins of ethics in music and dance, see the discussion that follows especially with regard to Daniel Stern, Nietzsche, and Frederick Douglass.

²⁰ For an interpretation of earlier novels through Kristeva's theory of the semiotic, see Parry (1996, pp. 37–65). Parry discusses Coetzee's use of female narrators in various novels and the notion of the body as progenitor of woman's language as a language of the heart. She argues that these narratives remain sealed from the heterology of other voices, and in this respect is critical of Spivak (2002).

these drives are, a psychoanalytic approach offers a promising place to start given that Coetzee's narrative suggestively sets up the protagonist in terms that invoke transgressions—"the rights of desire," as he says—with an explicitly oedipal cast.

The protagonist describes himself as "a servant of Eros," seduces the student Melanie, who is young enough to be his daughter, and just in case we miss the significance of this act, the narrator tells us that the seduction occurs on his daughter's bed. This rather desiccated and deluded middle-aged man, teacher of the romantic poets, is far from the Byronic character that he would like to be. A "great self-deceiver," as his ex-wife describes him, he lacks the panache of the great poet, and regardless, the era of the Byronic man and all that he stands for is or should be long gone. A committee of peers at the university, characterized in terms that remind the reader of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation committees, attempts to understand and then finally condemns him, while the student press ridicules him, for a harmful pattern of seductions that may fall just short of rape and that he stupidly and arrogantly defends. His refusal to admit any moral error leads to his dismissal from the university and to his self-imposed exile to live with his daughter on the frontier, as in Oedipus and Antigone.

Kristeva's theory of the psyche (even if not as generalizable to all individuals and cultures as she might assume) provides a striking framework for understanding Coetzee's melancholic protagonist. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva diagnoses human subjectivity as melancholic by its nature.²¹ Her claim is that the process of individuation differentiates humans from other animals through a process that begins with a traumatic separation from the body of the mother. This ontological gap or separation from others registers in our psyche as an ill-defined but persistent sense of loss and incompleteness. We counter this melancholy through the compensation in meaning that we find in art. In maturation, the ontologically wounded subject finds meaning by developing—not solely what modern moral theorists term agency, a term which seems to presuppose a higher degree of self-consciousness and self-control than possible for the melancholic or otherwise moody human psyche—but what literary scholars term a voice, or otherwise a sense of one's own style. The conceptless meaning embodied in singularity, i.e., the meaning expressed through the images, rhythms, and habits that sustain subjectivity, can (under certain conditions) ward off the threat of nihilism that is brought by the solitude of individuation and by our awareness of our mortality. A basic quest for meaning is, I think, central as well to the ground zero ethics of Coetzee's novel.

For Kristeva, cultivating a sense of meaning for our life is an act of faith that requires the support of a loving father. A loving father guides the emerging subject from a self-absorbed depressive state through images of forgiveness and reconciliation. "The 'primary identification' with the 'father in individual prehistory' would be the means, or the link that might enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing," Kristeva explains, using the term 'Thing' to designate the maternal element. (Coetzee's protagonist associates this animal-like Thing at his core, his inner Lucifer self, with rogue dogs in heat and, indirectly, with the black rapists rather than with a maternal element. However, for both, this Thing at the core of the

²¹ Kristeva (1989).

self elicits “violent pleasures.”) Kristeva insists, “Primary identification initiates a compensation for the Thing and at the same time secures the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adherence, reminding one of the bond of faith.”²² Images of the loving father in Christian art help one to sublimate erratic drives while offering some glimpse into the possibility of reconciliation and truth, and of some meaning that survives death. While music provides a sense of connection with the primordial maternal ground of our being (a kind of the pre-oedipal Dionysian), visual images (Apollonian) can generate a bond of faith, not through the experience of reconciliation, but through the promise of reconciling with the irreconcilable. For Kristeva, this promise whenever it occurs re-invokes our identification with the loving father from our childhood.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, she moves beyond *Black Sun* to describe her project in terms of a distinctly cosmopolitan “ethics of the irreconcilable.” While this project has a Kantian dimension, namely, the respect for the stranger outside of normal community or social bonds, the most sublime form of ethical response does not come from identification with a judgmental and rule-bound father associated with Kantian rationalism, but with a loving and forgiving one. This identification allows one to respond to the singularity of the other—of an other moreover who is not necessarily either rational or sympathetic, and who may even be abject—through a highly sublimated and very sublime mode of eros that she calls love.

Kristeva’s vision of ethics provides a guide for understanding the ethical development of Coetzee’s melancholic protagonist. For he likewise attempts to deal with a prevailing sense of disconnection and loss by searching for meaning in music, originally a chamber opera that he is composing called “Lord Byron in Italy.” His central interest in his musical composition eventually turns from Byron to Byron’s aging, abandoned and unbeautiful lover, Teresa, and finally even to Byron’s abandoned child. At the end of the novel, he develops an ethical attentiveness to abandoned or otherwise abject others that is almost fatherly or, as he says, grandfatherly in its virtuousness, that is not at all judgmental, and that, as he says, one should call “by its proper name: love.”²³ The novel leaves the reader with an image of the protagonist carrying a dog lovingly to the operating table. As one would expect from a Kristevan perspective on the novel, the protagonist embraces the maternal element (the aging and ever more abject Teresa) through music and identifies with the image of the loving father, or grandfather, as he says, and does so only after suffering through an ordeal that brings him face-to-face with his own abject nature. He emerges from a journey of self-knowledge, or rather a knowledge of his own woundedness and inability to know, transformed by a need to tend lovingly to abject others.

It is sublime, or at least kind of so. For Coetzee’s fascination with the boundaries between the human and animal does not fit smoothly into either a humanistic or a Judaic-Christian theory of alterity. The images and music that represent what the protagonist learns from his ordeal seem finally focused much more on dogs (not gods) than on the family romance that Kristeva, like other psychoanalytic theorists,

²² Kristeva (1989, pp. 13–14).

²³ Coetzee (1999a, p. 219).

draws from classical Greek tragedy. And however ethically compelling, the images of the protagonist at the operating table in the clinic and at the incinerator are nearly ridiculous.

I will quote fairly extensively from the passage in the novel where Coetzee's protagonist ponders his unfathomable ethical compulsion to accompany the abject corpses of animals to the incinerator because this passage is so very difficult to interpret: "Why has he taken on this job? [the protagonist muses]....For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead....For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing... The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted....That is where he enters their lives....He may not be their savior, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves...A dog-man, Petrus [the daughter's former hired hand and soon-to-be husband] once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker, a dog psychopomp, a harijan..."²⁴

No ordinary moral concern, no rational sense of moral duty, no utilitarian calculus of happiness, not even ordinary sympathy accounts for the ethical stance of this character. He continues his musings: "Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. One could for instance work longer hours at the clinic. One could try to persuade the children at the dump not to fill their bodies with poisons. Even sitting down more purposefully with the Byron libretto might, at a pinch, be construed as a service to mankind."²⁵ Do we even have here in the Coetzee narrative what we could call an ethics of alterity? Perhaps, but if the novel exemplifies the ethics of alterity, as so many scholars claim, the ethical focus on the anonymous carcasses of dogs—dogs that he has put down—remains peculiar. For surely any ethics of alterity would give prominence to the singularity of others; but the ethical bond that this protagonist feels toward animals, for example the two Persian sheep earlier in the novel, has nothing to do with either their particularity or their singularity. He cannot tell one sheep from another. At this point one could understand a temptation to argue, in quasi-Deleuzian fashion, that this strange protagonist has blurred boundaries and become animal.²⁶

And, in some respects, the Deleuzian interpretation does shed light on a protagonist who calls himself a dog-man and who in scene after scene sees himself as akin to the dog or snake or other animal. However, more is happening yet in this strange novel than we easily would discern in a Deleuzian notion of becoming-animal. For, while the narrative crosses the boundaries between the human and the animal, especially through representations of the protagonist as like other predators, it does not blur them; on the contrary, the narrative maintains a sharp sense of necessary boundaries between the protagonist and the dogs he tends right through to the end. And these boundaries are significant. The protagonist does not feel any

²⁴ Coetzee (1999a, p. 146).

²⁵ Coetzee (1999a, p. 146).

²⁶ Patton (2004, pp. 101–112).

ethical compulsion to stop the “Loesung,” the decision to euthanize and incinerate the abandoned animals at the clinic, which surely he would do in the case of humans. Moreover, the narrative ends at the clinic with the protagonist reflecting upon the limited awareness that dogs have of their own mortality in contrast with humans: “What the dog will not be able to work out..., what his nose will not tell him, is how one can enter what seems to be an ordinary room and never come out again.”²⁷ Humans differ from other animals and this novel does not fully challenge that fact nor the principle that we should continue to treat other species as morally distinct from our own.

So we are still left with the puzzle: Can we account for the ethical force that lies behind this protagonist’s concern to honor the corpses of animals, especially given that he fails to concern himself with other more urgent and genuinely moral problems, such as the children who live off the toxic garbage at the incinerator. His determination to focus his care on the corpses will undoubtedly strike many readers as bizarre, less ethical than pathological. In fact, one could easily argue that the protagonist’s care for animal corpses is not ethical at all, that it avoids our more important moral and ethical concerns, and that this narrative does not so much challenge our ordinary sensibilities as deviate from them. Then this novel would offer less an ethical vision for melancholic modern man than pathological symptoms of modern disconnection from any salutary sense of ethical community or moral social bond. Unless, that is, the stubborn determination to mourn creatures so abject as to have been abandoned entirely by any community represents ground zero for a post-moral ethics.

5 Deviance and Antigone

The Sophoclean themes in the tale proliferate. As we have said, the opening scene introduces these tragic themes fairly straightforwardly. We meet a man who is a modern-day agent of hubris (in the terms of classical tragedy, he is a *hybristae*). He is not a king, but he fancies himself among the aesthetic elite, a creature of eros, indulging as he does in the pleasures of sex with younger women (“technically he is old enough to be [their] father”) as well as in the pleasures of high culture. “Is he happy?” the narrative inquires, “By most measurements, yes, he believes he is. However, he has not forgotten the last chorus of *Oedipus*: Call no man happy until he is dead.”²⁸ Elements of the Oedipal saga continue after his affair with his student. If the protagonist takes on the role of the exiled transgressor, his alternately stubborn and yielding daughter and her unattractive veterinarian friend take on some of the features of Oedipus’s two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. Together, like Oedipus’s daughters, they serve as guides for the outcaste on the frontier. Or at least in part.

For, while the narrative positions the protagonist as the classical scapegoat, the sacrificed king-figure, the agent of hubris in the style of Sophoclean tragedy, it also

²⁷ Coetzee (1999a, p. 219).

²⁸ Coetzee (1999a, p. 2).

reminds us that we no longer live in classical times. To the daughter's direct assertion that her father has been "exiled" like a "scapegoat" in "the wilderness," this cynical father, this father *qua* cynic, responds: "I don't think scapegoating is the best description....Scapegoating worked...while we still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out and the city was cleansed. Then the gods died.... The censor was born, in the Roman sense. Watchfulness became the watchword."²⁹ The gods are dead, and the methods of surveillance and normalizing codes of the bureaucratic state (that is, the work not of choruses, but of committees in the university and, perhaps, aspects of Truth and Reconciliation committees) have replaced the sacred rituals that once gave meaning to pathos through cathartic violence. Of course, our current judicial processes aim not to scapegoat randomly but to respect moral and legal standards for determining responsibility and to punish accordingly, and rightly so. However, these modern means do not function on the South African frontier, or at any liminal place where rationality is not the norm.

If the ethical force that this novel seeks to relay through this modern day hybrid is neither classical nor modern, neither religious nor utilitarian, then it is not going to be easy to determine what this force is. The protagonist may exhibit aspects of an Oedipus on the eastern frontier in modern South Africa, but if so, it is not at all clear what role the partial disrupting of the boundaries between the human and nonhuman play, and yet this troubling of boundaries is central. Just after his exile to the frontier where he learns that his daughter's friend runs the clinic for abandoned animals, and he expresses his disdain for animal lovers, his daughter responds that "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals."³⁰ At this still early point in the narrative the father reacts the way any of us might, "As far as animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity."³¹ Perhaps we could have found the protagonist repeating these same words at the end of the novel, where, reduced to an abject state of mind, he assists at the clinic and at the incinerator. But if these words do anticipate his perspective at the end of the novel, these words would have to change their latent meaning. As a result of his experience on the frontier, the arrogance vanishes. And while the daughter, perhaps like Antigone, may very well provide some guidance for her father in exile, her words fall short of the disturbing force conveyed by the final image of the father carrying a maimed dog to the operating table. Something more bizarre is happening in this farcical scene than family romance doggie style (so-to-speak).

Let's go back to the middle of the novel in order to understand how the ethical import of the final scene diverges from what we ordinarily call morality. After the exchange between the father and daughter regarding their shared life with animals, the protagonist undergoes a terrifying ordeal that transforms both him and his

²⁹ Coetzee (1999a, p. 91).

³⁰ Coetzee (1999a, p. 74).

³¹ Coetzee (1999a, p. 74).

daughter in ways that are difficult to understand, although in very different ways. Two black men and one black boy (referred to by the protagonist as “the jackal boy”) rape the daughter after shooting her dogs, and dousing her father with alcohol and setting him on fire. The instigators, the three black intruders, enter on stage as the classical nemesis, the agents of revenge for the father’s thoughtless seduction of another man’s daughter at the university, and the larger violation of colonization and apartheid that white privilege represents.

The symbolic justice that we find in classic tragic models of justice explains the perspective of the daughter. Recall that in classical tragedy the protagonist, as the agent of hubris, whether by accident or not, violates human bonds that are sacred to community. The community heals as the exile of the protagonist brings about cleansing and atonement. The daughter’s earlier suggestion that her father is the sacrificial scapegoat points to a classical sense of justice, and provides some insight into her acceptance of a marriage alliance with the uncle of the jackal boy, the man who as her former worker once referred to himself her dog-man. The father suggests that she has decided to lay down like a nun and accept violation as her share of the burden of the injustice of colonial Africa. “‘How humiliating,’ [he] says, and she agrees.... ‘But perhaps it is a good point to start from again [she adds]. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing’...’Like a dog.’ ‘Yes, like a dog.’”³²

Lewis Gordon, in his essay “Tragic Revolutionary Violence,” clarifies the role of cathartic violence in the context of decolonization from the perspective of the colonized. He writes of those who “rise up against the privileged and the powerful and bring these people down to the level of the scapegoat;” and he suggests that “if [the powerless] cannot make a colonized or colored life as good as a white one, he can at least make a white one no more valuable than a colonized or a colored one; he can, that is, bring the white god down to humanity.”³³ Similarly, in the novel, rape may appear to the daughter as an act of cleansing and atonement—cathartic justice—in post-Apartheid South Africa.

However, this is not the view of the protagonist and it cannot be the ethical center of the novel. The protagonist insists that the gods are dead in modern South Africa, and that his daughter’s sacrifice contributes nothing to justice. To the extent that the idea of such a sacrifice strikes the reader as a pathological mix of white guilt and female masochism, as I think to some degree that it should, her perspective cannot be what makes the novel ethically compelling. At best we can say, to draw once again on Spivak, that the novel solicits the generous reader to counter-focalize, to struggle to grasp an ethical perspective in this daughter that remains out of reach and unavailable in a narrative told from the point of view of the father. At worst, the rape of the female character serves as a vehicle for the ethical advance of a male perspective. Not only does the male protagonist in the novel gain his enlightenment on the backs of women who are resigned to suffering and subordination. Cynical ANC representatives continue even today to excuse crimes of rape, which are out of

³² Coetzee (1999a, p. 205).

³³ Gordon (1995, p. 76); but see note 32; my concern here is the reduction of the crime of rape to the politics of race.

control in post-apartheid South Africa, as payback for colonization.³⁴ I would agree fully with South African historian Helen Moffett, who argues that rape is a crime that goes well beyond race, and that no ethical democracy could fail to respect women's most basic rights.³⁵

Still, however, something of the daughter's self-abjection resonates with the final image of the father, and with the central ethical force of the novel. The novel is in part a father-daughter story, as Spivak suggests, even if the final chapter, Chapter 24, renders the daughter only a part of a larger ethical concern. This last chapter contains three scenes and three key elements for ethics that we need to examine if we are to understand the ethics of the novel.

Let's run quickly through the major parts of this last chapter. In the first scene, the father returns to composing his opera to Lord Byron, but he alters the opera's focus from Byron to Byron's abandoned and aging mistress, Teresa, as well as to their abandoned child. In the middle scene, he visits his daughter, whom he finds out in the field near her home in the countryside. As he glimpses her pregnant amidst the flowers he envisions a "picture" of "*das ewig Weibliche* [...] scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard..."³⁶ He knows that his daughter is determined to love her child. This scene leads up to the last scene, which is staged as a pieta. The protagonist who declares that he intends to become a "loving father and grandfather," is posed, however, not with his daughter or any human, but with a somewhat random dog, the 24th abandoned animal to be euthanized that day. What is the ethical meaning of these last three scenes of the novel?

The protagonist has known this 24th and last dog for the past some weeks, and has come to feel a fondness for it. The dog, who is maimed, hangs around his feet after work, but, as the narrative emphasizes, this dog "is not 'his' in any sense"; and that "he has been careful not to give it a name (though [the veterinarian] refers to it as Driepoot)"; "nevertheless he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows."³⁷ If the protagonist's attempt to adopt the virtues of the "loving father and grandfather" prepares him to respond ethically to others, he has learned the virtues in part from his daughter, who is determined to love the child of her rape, and the friend, Bev, who tends abandoned or sick animals at the clinic.

³⁴ In the context of discussing the current high crime rate, and especially the crime of rape, as a legacy of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa, Helen Moffett explains the "tacit social understanding that certain kinds of white-on-black violence were 'necessary' as a kind of oil that kept apartheid hierarchies running smoothly" Moffett (2006, p. 140). At the same time, she points out the possible political damage of Coetzee's representation of black as the rapists of white women, and thus as "barbarians" Moffett (2006, p. 135). The novel accounts for that political legacy in such a way as to contribute to a posthumanist ethics. It does not claim to tell its story from the positions of white women or black Africans, and it in fact fails to do so. Again Moffett: "South African women are sick of hearing that apartheid is to blame for the brutality that men mete out to them" Moffett (2006, p. 143). The protagonist has difficulty finding a role for himself other than predator or protector of women. He does though identify with women through his relation with dogs (see footnote 12). Hence, the radical and progressive element of the novel is the relation with dogs, not women, which remains problematic.

³⁵ Moffett (2006, p. 137).

³⁶ Coetzee (1999a, p. 218).

³⁷ Coetzee (1999a, p. 215).

He finds the virtue again and completely in this limp dog who loves him “arbitrarily” and “unconditionally”. He learns from animals.

But why does this final scene insist upon a relation to this random dog, a dog that he will help to put down? Who is this Driepoot?

The Afrikaans word Driepoot signifies tripod, or three-footed. In a narrative thick with Sophoclean themes, a dog with a maimed foot brings to mind the club-footed king, Oedipus. Oedipus acquires his identity as king by puzzling out the answer to the riddle of the sphinx regarding the identity of a creature who walks on four legs, then two and finally three in old age. The answer is man, and this man, Oedipus, exemplifies that quest for self-knowledge that seems to separate the human from the other animals, just as the crimes that Oedipus commits seem to exemplify the actions that would transgress against that same distinction. The classic tragedy exemplifies the tragic lot of the fallen man, the self-deceived transgressor, whose arrogance blinds him to what he does. The Coetzee tale alters the tragic scenario when it places in the position of the king, perhaps even the fallen god, a maimed dog.

But then if the dog, not the protagonist, takes the place of Oedipus, sacrificed for the functioning of the community, we might think again about the role of the protagonist. Let's turn once again to the protagonist's claims with regard to his ethical concern for the animal corpses: “There must be other more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world....But there are other people to do these things—the animal welfare thing, the social rehabilitation thing, even the Byron thing. He saves the honor of the corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it.”³⁸ In the modern world, defined through moral systems of universal rules, the harm of another respectful or rational being is a scandal. There is no moral law (at least none that I think many of us would accept) that would condemn the euthanizing of the pitiless creatures at the animal clinic. The novel does not challenge those moral laws. It does aim to locate some ethical stance that would supersede them. In this respect, the protagonist has become a modern day Antigone—an Antigone in an age without any of the usual transcendent sources of religion.

For modern humanists and moral theorists, in principle every human life should be respected, even if political systems through their compromises fail to honor this principle. Kristeva's appeal to the gap between the human and the animal carries forward this same humanist moral focus. What modern humanism cannot claim is that residual ethical force that disturbs our ordinary moral sensibilities in even the most humane use of animal lives for the sake of our own. The protagonist does not try to stop the euthanizing of any of the dogs, he does not depict their death as the same as murder, and he even assists with the process; yet the narrative does solicit a residual ethical lack of ease sufficient to acknowledge the deaths of animals as the sacrifice that underlies the modern utilitarian or otherwise rational state—the sacrifice of animals for the sake of the human community. There may be no way out of this kind of disgrace, but there is need for an ethics to deal with it.

³⁸ Coetzee (1999a, p. 146).

Kristeva draws our attention to images that endeavor to reconcile—to attend with care—to the irreconcilable suffering of those who are abject. The opaque images that she finds in painting and in novels establish the only basis that we have for our faith in meaning. The final chapter of *Disgrace* likewise offers an image that might be seen as bringing together what is irreconcilable, the human and the abject. A scene of pieta, the figure of the protagonist carrying the dog like a lamb, offers a compelling image of mourning for a creature without value. In the Sophoclean drama, Antigone sanctions her final show of respect for a brother who stood outside of communal bonds through an appeal to the gods. The Christian portrayal of Mary holding her crucified son offers a similar appeal. The appeal to the gods, however, is not likely to work in a secular if not cynical age—in an age when “all things are permitted.”³⁹ The mourning of unwanted animals supersedes our ordinary religious as well as moral sensibilities. But if this strange scene of pieta of a man with a maimed animal suggests an inadequacy in our moral language, it also gestures toward a ground zero for a post-moral ethics, one that lies at the threshold of religion but does not cross into the sphere of religion proper. Most odd of all, our cynical protagonist who flaunts conventions, including any conventional or standard form of religion, will take his ethical cue as did the ancient Cynics, those original so-called “dog men,” from animals.⁴⁰

6 An ethics of meaning based on music and image

The Coetzee narrative reasserts a morally significant difference between humans and other animals. It doesn't have any real arguments against the inevitable uses that animals will continue to serve for human beings. It doesn't insist upon bringing animals into a community of equals with humans. However, the final image would lack the poignancy that gives this story its ethical force, if it were not for the ethical crossing over of the boundaries between humans and other animals that occurs here as throughout the novel. In this last chapter, the protagonist turns away from the original project for his chamber opera, *Byron in Italy*, and toward a more “temperate” musical piece that is fitting for a man stripped bare of pretensions. He plucks on his daughter's banjo, a simple instrument from her childhood, and a native instrument of Africa. He is searching on the banjo for what he describes as a “halting cantilena [he imagines might be] hurled by Teresa,” the aging and abandoned lover, “into the empty air.” In this polyphonic sound he is not seeking a complex layering of music, but just some one “authentic note of immortal longing.”⁴¹ Then, with nothing left of his life but a banjo and a vision of his daughter in the field—what he portrays as a calming image of the eternal feminine—he “hums Teresa's line.” He does not hum this line entirely alone, for the maimed dog by his side “smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too,

³⁹ Coetzee (1999a, p. 215).

⁴⁰ On the importance of the seriocomic, the Cynic as dog men, of shameless disregard of conventions, and of the learning ethics from animals, see Branham and Goulet-Gazé (1996, pp. 1–27).

⁴¹ Coetzee (1999a, p. 214).

or howling. Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa.”⁴²

This appeal to music for some ground element of meaning appears just as centrally in Kristeva's theory of the psyche. Kristeva's melancholic, like Coetzee's protagonist searches for meaning, not happiness or rationality, and this search for meaning accounts for why ethical force might stem more originally from art rather than from theories of happiness or rationality.⁴³ Kristeva, however, finds this self-transcending element of music not from any simple instrument or musical line but, on the contrary, as she explains in *Strangers to Ourselves*, in the European baroque. The polyvocal quality of Bach's Tocatta and Fugue in D minor, best recognized perhaps by many of her contemporary readers less as church music than as the vampire's theme in twentieth-century films, exemplifies the half-animal/half human underside of our psyche, the underside that renders us unknown knowers, strangers to ourselves. According to Kristeva, this abject elemental, ground of the psyche, threatens to consume the subject if we do not subdue its savage force and sublimate its energy into the mathematically constrained, multiple voices that we find in baroque. Bach's baroque piece expresses through beauty what is strange and mysterious. The humming to the banjo, on the other hand, is nearly pathetic; when the dog seems to want to join in, we have a scene that is somewhere between the sublime and the ridiculous.

Both Kristeva and Coetzee appeal to music in grounding a search for meaning in an experience of the elemental. For Kristeva, the sublimated emotions that we find in Bach's tocatta evoke a heightened degree of religious passion that is unambiguously sublime. In Coetzee's novel, the simple plucking of the banjo in a bare, desublimated form expresses a simple cry of longing, a cry perhaps not to be abandoned. This cry of the maimed and abandoned, rather than that of “violent pleasures” blind to suffering, offers for the otherwise shameless protagonist a self-transcending seriocomic (for the Cynics, the term was *spoudogelois*) ground for an existential ethics.

Much is at stake in different conceptions of the elemental for ethics as well as art. In her own experimental prose, Kristeva multiplies the voices within the psyche and fractures narrative unity to express what she believes to be the traumatic separation from the maternal Thing that lies at the core of the human self. Coetzee's protagonist inhabits in solitude a single-voiced narrative. By the end of his journey, he listens for that one note that could possibly resonate not just down into the depths of the human psyche, or even from psyche to psyche, but through linguistic barriers of Afrikaans, English, or Xhosa, and, finally, across animal species in mother Africa. Recall that “Lucy” names the fossil remains of an Australopithecus in Africa, a creature who links the human and nonhuman, as well of the daughter.

⁴² Coetzee (1999a, p. 215).

⁴³ For a discussion of the role of race in the selective punishment of rape in South Africa, see Scully (1995). Scully explains how race figures in the view that male sexuality is a result of uncontrollable passions and female seduction in South Africa.

From that single note on his daughter's banjo, the protagonist searches for a "song...to fill ...the overlarge and rather empty human soul."⁴⁴

Kristeva and Coetzee belong together because they both pose the search for ethical meaning in the context of a deep and abiding solitude, one that leaves the subject a stranger in the world. Dostoyevsky's melancholic search for an ethic of faith in the void of modernity, not say, Toni Morrison's equally compelling communal ethic, lurks in the background for them both. For both an ethics that would counter the melancholic condition of modern nihilism, a faith in meaning could be found, if at all, not from our embedded bonds and historical memories, but on the contrary, only after paring down these ordinary bonds. Ethics begins with the existential journey of the stranger, and that first stranger is not first of all the other, it is the self. Neither author denies ordinary morality of its value. However, for both Kristeva and Coetzee an image of loving reconciliation enhanced by a mournful musical tone provides a glimpse into some odd left-over remainder of our usual moral sensibilities. The remainder reminds us of that abject creature whose state of disgrace prohibits normal forms of moral consideration. What Cora Diamond calls our "moral inadequacy" points for these authors toward a ground zero of ethics, and the relevance of the outcaste, an Antigone, in the time of the cynics, in an age when the gods are dead.⁴⁵

Coetzee goes deeper than Kristeva with regard to the concern for other animal species. Kristeva attends to music and image, not concepts and principles, as the basis for ethics, but not in order to ever suggest a means to reconcile the human with the non-human animal; in that direction lies, for Kristeva, the risk of psychosis. Unlike Coetzee's protagonist, she poses the origin of meaning in high art's sublimation of eros; and she frames the process of meaning-making through the elements of a family romance that, for all its Sophoclean strangeness, remain fully human.⁴⁶ The cultivation of the individual severs the human psyche from animality and its subhuman archaic past even as that past continues to fracture subjectivity and narrative meaning.

Coetzee's ethical narrative reverberates around the thought that "we are of a different order of creation from the animals...not higher, necessarily, just different." As predatory animals we likely will continue to "colonize" other animals for the sake of our own species. Certainly, our moral codes permit the use of animals, even the killing of them, for no other reason than that they are different from us. How they are different is of secondary concern. Every one has his or her theory about what this difference is. But when the protagonist of Coetzee's narrative recognizes some distant and deeper possibility of himself in the maimed dog, and specifically, in the dog's ability to love arbitrarily and unconditionally, the narrative gives us a glimpse of an ethical force beyond normal moral codes that is, in part, learned from animals. This ethical force hovers near the sublime and yet, in the scenes with the

⁴⁴ Coetzee (1999a, p. 4).

⁴⁵ Derek Attridge reads the novel as the search for grace, understood as a receiving of external beneficence; see Attridge (2004, pp. 162–191).

⁴⁶ Kristeva stays close to Freud, who argues that the Oedipal complex lies at the beginning of religion, morality, culture, and society, even as she modifies his claim to include the pre-oedipal phase. See Freud (1913, p. 156).

banjo and at the incinerator, borders as well on the ridiculous. As a professor of literature, the protagonist who once sought the sublime through his erotic and aesthetic endeavors, was then blind to the collusion of his sublime ideals with the privileges that, in the context of the novel, configure a colonial mindset. The novel does not present us with an alternative route to this same sublime, if now without the colonial mindset. On the contrary, this novel is the story of the leveling of the colonial mindset through another origin for ethics from the pathos of the absurd.

As the last dog at the clinic signals some sign that he would sing along with the strumming of the banjo, we stumble with the protagonist onto this other origin for ethics. This origin is, as Kristeva suggests, found in music and image, but this time music and image are not simply of the loving father or of the violent maternal. This time, the abandoned dog guides the ethical response. This animal does not speak and the novel does not give us in words what the dog's love might mean. Instead the dog leaves us with a bare assertion of faith: that in this world there must be meaning and that this bare assertion holds for even those creatures who are abject or strange or otherwise beyond moral concern. And that their deaths tear holes in this world of ours, holes that are also wounds, and that these deaths, this suffering, should not be left unobserved or unattended.⁴⁷ Philosophy without the music and image of these abandoned creatures loses not just a part of ethics, but its maternal if not primordial ground.

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⁴⁷ For a discussion of Husserl's ethics as an idea of a world, with numerous origins and distinct subjects, see Derrida (1982, pp. 125–126). See Perpich (2008, pp. 71–72) for an elaboration of Derrida's critique of Levinas and the latter's response with regard to the difference between having meaning in the world and having a world; she also discusses the tensions in Levinas due to the need to represent oneself in this world rather than appearing out of the blue unmediated by any mode of representation.

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