WAR, SILENCE AND SHALOM: A TRANSCENDENCE POINTING TOWARD INEFFABLE REALITIES IN J. M. COETZEE’S LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K

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ABSTRACT

South Africa in 1980s is in a state of turmoil of armed conflicts as the social and political situation of the country grew increasingly unstable. J.M.Coezee’s Life & Times of Michael K reflects and participates in this national unease about the future direction of South Africa. The novel suggests the other side of apocalypse, the millennial vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Within the structure of the novel, these oppositions of apocalypse are not conclusively resolved, the camp and the garden, cataclysmic history and millennial shalom, continue to war against each other. Without clarifying catastrophe, lacking a final revelation, the novel is apocalyptic in the most profound biblical sense, obscurely pointing toward ineffable realities.

KEYWORDS: Soweto Uprising, Apocalypse, Apartheid, Gardening, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Life & Times of Michael K published in 1983 reflects and participates in the national unease about the future direction of South Africa. The social and political situation in the country grew increasingly unstable in 1980s. Engaged in armed conflicts both within and without its national borders, subject to continued criticism and isolation from the world community, South Africa seemed mired in an ever deepening crisis. Gordimer in The Essential Gesture described the turbulent atmosphere of Johannesburg: “I live at 6,000 feet in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change” (1988: 262). While the third novel of Coetzee Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), was set in indeterminate time and setting, Life & Times of Michael K, was set in modern South Africa at a time of revolution. After the events of the Soweto uprising in 1976-1978, the level of violence in South Africa increased dramatically. The Soweto protests had occurred primarily in the black areas, but the growing waves of strikes and student boycotts in 1980 took place, for the first time, among the coloured population. The scenes of the novel evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa in 1980s, the novel’s theme represent the fears and concerns of the time. Besieged from within, the South African white minority was also conducting a virtual war with Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe that have newly won independence and raised the specter of black border countries harbouring ANC guerillas.

Given the extensive military and guerrilla activity of the times, it is not surprising that discourse in South Africa at this time became increasingly concerned with war and revolution. South African fiction also apparently reflected the imagery and ideas of war and turmoil in critical and fictional writing. Andre Brink entitled the book of criticism published in 1983 Writing in a State of Siege, and Nadine Gordimer brought out Something Out There (1984) in which a fierce baboon and the threat of terrorists combine to create fear in a town. Other novels have overtly projected the fearsome end of the world: Karel Schoeman’s Promised Land (1978), Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People (1981) and Christopher Hope’s Kruger’s Alp (1984).

Michael K has as its protagonist one of South Africa’s disenfranchised majority and the novel avoids overt
references to racial distinctions. The story is about the suffering of K’s indignities and deprivation of apartheid hardships intensified by the social disintegration of civil war. The primary narrator in the novel makes no reference to the act of narrating and seems to answer the objections of those critics who had faulted Coetzee for not taking a clear political stance in artistic writing, in the manner of the fellow South Africans as Paton, Gordimer, and Fugard.

Life & Times of Michael K received England’s prestigious Booker Mc Connell Prize in 1983, apart from winning Central News Agency (CNA) Literary Award (South Africa) and Prix Femina Etranger (France) in 1984. After convincingly depicting the obsessive and sometimes psychotic thought-processes of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, the labyrinthine broodings of Magda, and the philosophical reflections of the magistrate, Coetzee has again demonstrated his versatility by revealing in Michael K the awakening consciousness of a primitive mind. In the writer’s workshop which Coetzee conducted on 6 March 1984, in Lexington, one of the participants observed that the primary narrator of Michael K employs “a very odd kind of omniscience, as if it were rooted in the individual’s [Michael’s] character.” Coetzee responded:

It’s a mixture. It’s a fluctuation in and out. There is a – If I can use an oxymoron – a limited omniscient point of view operating in part 1 of that book. That is to say, there is someone who is telling the story about Michael K, who looks like an omniscient narrator, but he doesn’t actually tell you very much. And….there is no guarantee that knows very much. (Penner 94)

Thus, the main narrator exercises a certain reserve, usually limiting narrative observations to those which Michael is capable of perceiving. Michael K along with the barbarian girl is one of Coetzee’s two least articulate characters, after Friday in Foe, who cannot speak at all.

The novel is in three parts. In part, Michael K escapes Cape Town with his mother, intending to take her to the safety of a remote farm where she spent her youth. She dies on the way and K proceeds to the farm with her cremated ashes. He is detained for a time in a labour camp, and then arrives at the farm, located near the town of Prince Albert. He buries his mother’s ashes on the farm, taking the earth as his symbolic mother, and begins his life as a vegetable gardener. This existence is disrupted by the arrival of a grandson of the farm’s owner, who attempts to make K his servant. K hides in the mountains barely surviving by eating roots and insects. Near starvation, he walks to Prince Albert and is arrested and taken to Jakkalsdrif, a resettlement camp, where he becomes aware of the plight of other detainees. K escapes and returns to the farm in Prince Albert to cultivate a new crop of pumpkins and melons. This time his task of cultivation is disrupted by the arrival of a small revolutionary force from the mountains, though K remains undetected. He lives in a burrow in the earth, planting and tending his garden at night. Again near starvation, K is discovered and arrested by soldiers who mistakenly assume he has been supplying food to rebel guerrillas.

In Part 2, K is interned in the Kenilworth camp and is taken care of by a military officer who works at the hospital of the rehabilitation camp where K is imprisoned. This part is narrated by the Medical officer who becomes obsessed with K and attempts to impose charity upon him. K passively resists until he escapes from the camp.

Part 3 is set in Cape Town in the war-torn ruins. Michael K encounters some pimps and whores who also treat him as an object of charity. Alone at the end, K envisions a scene in which he helps a derelict old man obtain water from a water puddle with the help of a spoon by saying “one can live” (1983: 184).

Coetzee realistically portrays conditions that exist in many of the war-torn areas of South Africa of the recent past and present. There are the smoldering remains of burned-out buildings and overturned lorries and automobiles, smashed store windows, scattered gunfire by police and snipers, armed troop carriers, road blocks, crowds huddled under
“Relocation” signs, the shrill wail of the curfew siren – in short, the milieu of violence that the world witnessed until the apartheid imposed strict news censorship in 1986.

Michael K is a Gardener, grade 1 for the parks service of the City of Cape Town at thirty-one years of age. He abandons the job as his invalid mother is dismissed from a hospital and asks him to care for her. He takes her to an unventilated, unelectrified room beneath the stairs leading to the apartment of her former employers who have fled Cape Town for whom his mother worked as a domestic servant. In the social and economic turmoil of South Africa, they are required to carry a “green card” and a travel permit which he was not able to obtain. These implications suggest that they are not the members of the ruling Afrikaner tribe. The narrative steadfastly avoids any direct mention of race. Despite Coetzee’s fastidious silence about race, it becomes apparent that Michaela K is not “white” by the masterly way in which authority figures speak to him. Nadine Gordimer in her review of the novel “The Idea of Gardening” cited in Kossew Sue’s Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee says that the fact that Michael’s mother is a house servant in Cape Town indicates that in South Africa he would be classified as a “so-called coloured.” (1988:139) As a result, the racial issue is muted in a way that sets this novel apart from comparable works by Gordimer, Brink, Fugard and others. One tends to think of Michael K more in terms of his individuality than a representative of any group.

Silence is Resistance

The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. (3)

Coetzee here is drawing attention to something other than the colour of his protagonist. The first thing the midwife notices is Michael K’s harelip which represents him that he is not going to be Everyman. In fact, Michel K’s deformity identifies him with a group of freaks. As the midwife says of Michael K to his repulsed mother, “You should be happy, they bring luck to the house-hold.” (3). On the issue that so resoundingly defines South Africa, its politics and its people, the issue of colour, Coetzee chooses to be silent. Coetzee deliberately omits mentioning Michael K’s colour precisely because he doesn’t want Michael K to be labeled or formulated. A person is a person irrespective of his colour. One of the problems with the process of politicization particularly as it operates in South Africa is that it systematically reduces people into categories. It de-individualizes and dehumanizes them. By creating a protagonist who eludes classification Coetzee can be seen to be resisting this process.

While it is true, as Gordimer says, in “The Idea of Gardening” that Michael K “ignores” history, (140) it is also true that Michael K is the one figure in the novel who is able to compete to some extent, with history. Michael K’s desire to live as he wants is the source of his strength. This forms the core of his peculiar kind of resistance. Michael K is “out of the war” (138) because his whole being is engaged in existing on his own terms. He is simply not responsive to being determined by anything outside of them. Those terms, however, make him vulnerable to others, particularly to those embroiled in and subject to the history of the regime. There is a special allegorical meaning that can be drawn from Michael K’s deciding to build a shelter on the grounds of a farm forcing himself to live in a burrow underground leaving no trace of his living. In this dwelling he can relish his own kind of food, grown from the earth and tended by him and it is a place in which he can enjoy the activity he is good at, gardening. And he speaks, in his garden, of the cord of tenderness stretching from his to the patch of earth he tends. The melons he grows are “his sisters,” the pumpkins, “his band of brothers,” (113).

Michael’s life reveals many truths about the oppressive systems of South African life in its evocations of future, present, and past. In situation after situation, Michael stumbles over his words, whispers a response from a dry throat, or
simply does not answer a question. “You don’t talk,” says a man working with him to clear the railway tracks. “I thought you must be sick” (43). Michael’s silences frustrate the medical officer, who is himself an effusive talker. “I am not clever with words,” Michael tells him (139). Most of Michael’s silences occur when he is confronted by a person who wishes to exercise authority over him, which evokes a feeling of stupidity within him. After reveling in the freedom of garden, Michael feels “the old hopeless stupidity invading him: when the Visagie grandson appears and claims his position as master (60). In the last section of the novel, Michael thinks, “at least I have not been clever, and come back to Sea Point full of stories of how they beat me in the camps till I was thin as a rake and simple in the head. I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end” (182). The camps have not made Michael mute. When he is young, his mother takes him to work with her because the smiles and whispers of the other children bother her:

Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother other people’s floors, learning to be quiet (3-4)

At Huis Norenius, not only did he learn to sit in the classroom with his “lips pressed tightly together” (68), but the first rule posted on the dormitory door was “there will be silence in dormitories at all times” (105). Michael’s race and position with respect to institutions in the novel, his silences testify to the history of the silencing of Others in South Africa. As a physically handicapped, coloured, apparently simple-minded gardener who works for the Council and lives in a hostel, Michael epitomizes those at the margins of power and authority who have been repeatedly silenced in South Africa.

As one who has been silenced, Michael is unable to tell his own story, neither in the construction of the narrative nor in his encounters with people. Other characters in Life & Times of Michael K tell many stories. Michael’s mother tells the nostalgic story of her pastoral childhood; the Visagie grandson relays the events of his desertion and his memories of Christmas on the farm; Robert narrates his family’s story with a political interpretation; the pimp and the prostitutes Michael K meets at the beach explain their urban survival skills. Michael thinks with longing about the stories of the guerrillas:

The stories they tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp, because the camp was for those left behind…people who have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured. Whereas these young men have had adventures, victories and defeats and escapes. They will have stories to tell long after the war is over, stories for a lifetime, stories for their grandchildren to listen to open-mouthed (109)

Throughout Michael K’s adventures, people continually attempt to get him to become a storyteller. The officials at the hospital where his mother dies, the Visagie grandson, the police in Prince Albert: all are curious about Michael K’s story. The medical officer is the most insistent, becoming obsessed with Michael K’s silences. Michael K wonders about the doctor’s concern that he eat. In a letter addressed to “Michaels,” (the medical officer calls Michael K as Michaels) the doctor responds: “…Because I want to know your story” (149). When Michael K watches the guerrillas leave the farm without him, he struggles to articulate why he has chosen to stay. Although he attempts to define himself as a gardener, he remains unsatisfied with this story:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110)

He experiences similar inadequacy when he attempts to tell his story to the pimp and the prostitutes. Much like the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, Michael recognizes the incompleteness and silences that fill his story, even
when he occasionally struggles to articulate it.

The official papers about Michael portray him as an arsonist who “was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured” (131). In his eagerness to understand the significance of Michael’s life, the medical officer readily composes stories for Michael K. When he refuses to answer questions about the guerrilla operations in Prince Albert, the medical officer makes up a story to satisfy the police, telling Michael “by my eloquence I saved you” (142). Within his narrative the medical officer supplies a final story for Michael. Envisioning him as a new Adam who lives outside history, the medical officer understands his “persistent No” (164), his resistance to the life and food of the camp, as bearing an ultimate significance. “You are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees,” he tells in his journal

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory….of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it (166)

**Awareness, Ethics and Self-Conscious Reflections**

The novel depicts major changes of awareness that Michael undergoes. He finds the physical intimacy of his mother’s small, dingy room unpleasant:

But he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty. The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenius, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother. (7)

When his mother suggests that they should travel approximately 270 miles overland in a war-torn country without proper permits and, as it turns out, with no mode of transportation but a wheelbarrow, Michael “accepted without question the wisdom of her plan for them” (8-9). Coetzee also conveys Michael’s cognition through visual imagery:

He saw, not the banknotes spread on the quilt, but in his mind’s eye a whitewashed cottage in the broad veld with smoke curling from its chimney, and standing in the front door his mother, smiling and well. (9)

While slow of wit, Michael is a man of great patience who uses his imagination to invent solutions to the problems that confront him. An excellent example occurs early in the novel when he has to find a mode of transportation to carry his mother from Cape Town to Prince Albert. Michael remembers a wheelbarrow in a storage shed and breaks in and takes it. He persuades his mother to ride in it and is disconcerted to discover how unwieldy it is bearing her weight. He thinks the wheels from his bicycle would improve the balance, “but he could not think where to find an axle” (11). Several days later, he comes upon a scrapyard and buys a steel rod one metre long. He returns to his project and finds that while the rod fits snugly into the wheel bearings,

...he had no way to prevent the wheels from spinning off. For hours he struggled without success to make clips out of wire. Then he gave up. Something will come to me, he told himself. (16)

As the violence increases in Cape Town during the next few days, he returns to the problem of keeping the wheels on and finds a solution. This shows Michael K’s steadfast determination. Though he is slow-witted, he is not without invention.

Coetzee also develops Michael’s self-awareness, particularly with regard to ethics, cognition and being. Ethical considerations do not often concern Michael, but a few instances stand out. On the road alone after his mother’s death, he adopts an animal-like existence, scavenging what food he can, including half-spoiled fruit, “taking bites of good flesh here
and there, chewing as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant” (39). Coetzee tempers Michael’s creature-nature by having him reflect that taking the fruit from a farmer’s land may be stealing. In contrast to such double-thinking characters as Magda and the magistrate, Michael cuts through the ethical question quickly: “It is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief” (39). When a man who befriends him, Michael suggests “people must help each other,” Michael reflects upon, but does not resolve the question: “Do I believe in helping people? He wondered. (48). Thus, Michael perceives a category of ethical consideration but avoids accepting an absolute principle when the context of choice is not known.

When Michael must choose a path of action within a specific circumstance, he can act deliberately. The burial of his mother’s ashes that he has carried to the farm is charged with significance for Michael. He meditates, 

…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 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 …he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth. (59).

Coetzee’s slow-witted gardener thinks with more clarity and deliberateness than many of his more cerebral thought-tormented characters. Michael also reflects on the nature of cognition. After exhausting himself killing a goat, only to discover that the flesh repels him, he attempts to draw significance from the event:

The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals. (57)

Similarly, toward the end of the novel, he considers the meaning of his experiences:

Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the curse of events, when you least expect them? (183)

Even more than questions regarding ethics and cognition, the nature of being preoccupies Michael. He considers the relation of life to death and perceives a duality. He hopes that his mother,

..who was in some sense in the box and in some sense not, being released, a spirit into the air, was more at peace now that she was nearer her natal earth. (57)

At the same time, he projects the disposition of his physical being after his death in a memorable image,

If I were to die here, sitting in the mouth of my cave looking out over the plain with my knees under my chin, I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand. (67-68)

But it is life and nurturing that absorbs his attention most. Upon planting his mother’s ashes in the earth, he has an awakening concerning the essence of his being:

It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature…There were times, particularly in the mornings, when a fit of exultation would pass through him at the thought that he, alone and unknown, was making that deserted farm bloom. (59)

He is no longer the kind of gardener he had been with the parks department in Cape Town, tending well-kept lawns, but a gardener, a parent of plants, one so closely allied with the earth that his nature is transformed:
I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush form me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. (67)

The Elusive Urge

Stephen Watson in “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” pointed out that in Coetzee’s first four novels all of the protagonists except Michael K “beat against the shackles of their historical position in vain” (1986:378). Eugene Dawn, Jacobus, Magda, and the magistrate are all trapped in insoluble dilemmas, they “begin succumbing to the attractions of a world of being as opposed to a world of becoming” (384). “Being” in this context means the capability of existing in oneself, as a stone exists, outside the forces of history and time; “becoming” is acting within the historical moment; as Watson says, to become a participant in “a world of event…in which there is direction and purpose” (386).

Coetzee, in each of his novels has placed his central characters in relationship with inanimate stones or sticks to illuminate the characters’ potential for being or becoming. The stone imagery associated with Eugene Dawn (Dusklands,1974) suggests sterility and impotence. He remembers as a boy growing a crystal garden which he observed through the glass walls of a jar, “stalagmites obeying their dead crystal life-force.” In contrast to Michael K, he is incapable of growing the “other kind” of seeds; the beans he plants rot (30). Magda, (In the Heart of the Country, 1977) who lives “in the dead centre of the stone desert” (129), is torn between her desire for a life of “event,” or becoming, and its opposite. She goes so far as to contemplate entering a stonelike existence. Ultimately, her desire for human communication and understanding leads her to reject this possibility:

I hold the goats and stones….suspended in this cool, alienation medium of mine, exchanging them item by item for my word-counters….words alienate. (26)

The magistrate (Waiting for the Barbarians, 1980) in the end realizes that he “wanted to live outside history” (154). Unable to attain a life of being or to escape his role in the historical world of event, he attempts to decipher history by reading the enigmatic wooden slips he has discovered but fails to decipher their message.

Of the protagonists in Coetzee’s first four novels, only Michael K can be said to have escaped historical event to enter a realm of being outside of linear time. Rather than attempt to penetrate the mysteries of stones, as Jacobus does, or permute them, as Magda does, Michael from the beginning identifies with stones: “Perhaps I am the stony ground” (48). Michael is content to let things exist without meaning. Staring at the rust-tracings on the corrugated roof of his barrow,

…he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy; he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. (115)

Unlike Magda, who believes that “it is the first condition of life forever to desire” and who speculates that “only stones desire nothing” (114), Michael is described as having and at another point, as feeling “as deep joy in his physical being” (102). It is his physical being which sets the outer limits of his ability to be detached from all desire:

You are forgetting to breathe, he would say to himself, and yet lie without breathing. (118)

Michael achieves what the magistrate desires but could not attain – to live in the cyclical time of nature: “He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time” (60).

It is the medical officer in part 2 who provides an external view confirming Michael’s unique existence.
He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone...enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions...like a stone. Through the intestines of war.

(135)

Nadine Gordimer in “The Idea of Gardening” praises Coetzee’s moving depiction of “what white has done to black” in South Africa, but questions his putting such a passive individual at the centre of this novel: “For is there an idea of survival that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine?” (1998: 142).

Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her. (142)

The Plaasroman: A Return to the Land

Nadine Gordimer is right to conclude that one of the primary concerns of Life & Times of Michael K is humanity’s relation to the earth, to gardening, to the farm. In the Heart of the Country, a subversion of the idyllic farm novel is presented. In addition, Coetzee has evidenced considerable interest in and erudition concerning the farm in history and in fiction. Coetzee has published an essay entitled “Farm Novel and Plaasroman,” in which he focuses on the farm novels of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith but evidences a broad understanding of the fictional genre.

In this essay Coetzee observes that one of the characteristics of the Afrikaans plaasroman and he novels of Schreiner and Smith is a “silence about the place of black labour,” which “represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll...of African pastoralism” (71-72). Coetzee credits Nadine Gordimer’s Conservationist (1977) with having laid the ghost of the “pastoral solution to the question of how the white man shall live in South Africa...that he should retreat into rural independence” (81).

Michael’s story depicts the rejection of the corrupt town and embrace of rural life. The Visagie homestead resembles both those farms being deserted on the western border of South Africa in the 1980s and the future crumbling ruins of white farms left following the revolution, such as those depicted in Schoeman’s Promised Land. Michael’s return to the land offers a strategy for the future rather than a mystification of the past. Life & Times of Michael K proposes the garden as a millennial alternative to the cataclysm of the camps. Michael’s story rejects several common South African versions of pastoral to explore an alternative way that human beings might live in relationship to the land and to each other.

When Visagie’s grandson arrives at the farm, having deserted the army, he immediately attempts to reinstate the peasant order, giving Michael orders and trying to “turn him into a body-servant” (65). Michael rejects this program, fleeing the farm, just as he also rejects the material and linear consciousness represented by the Visagies and typical of the Afrikaner myth:

He was wary of conveying the Visagies’ rubbish to his home in the earth and setting himself on a trial that might lead to the re-enactment of their misfortunes. The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam. Even his tools should be of wood and leather and gut, materials the insects would eat when one day he no longer needed them. (104)

This rejection of property rights and lineage, however, does not result in a purely savage or primitive relationship to the land. Without the capitalistic mechanisms of production and consumption, he thinks at first that the only way he can survive is by killing the wild goats roaming the farm. He spends the entire day hunting:
At such moments, closing stealthily in on them, K felt his whole body began to tremble. It was hard to believe that he had become this savage with the bared knife. (52)

Repulsed by the goat’s carcass, nauseated by the act of cleaning the animal, he eventually eats the meat without pleasure. He does not discover his calling as a gardener not the significance of the occupation until he has escaped the civil institution and reached the apparent freedom of the rural setting. Tossing on his cardboard bed when he returns to Sea Point, Michael continues to affirm his vocation: “It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth, the truth about me, ‘I am a gardener,’ he said again, aloud” (181-182).

Michael calls himself a gardener, not a farmer, and the difference between the farm and the garden is an important one, for the former suggests a social order, with South African implications of hierarchy, while the latter evokes a personal and religious order. He associates the land with a maternal deity. The childhood home of his mother, the tomb for her ashes, and the womb in which he engenders life, the land provides both the maternal love and the transcendent meaning missing from Michael’s life.

Michael’s return to the land also includes responsibility and ritual. His belief that some must tend the garden while the guerrillas work to establish political and social freedom is based upon his recognition that human beings must live in harmony with the land and with other human beings. As long as he can remain outside of social history, Michael is content to live in natural history: “He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time” (60). But the arrival of the Visagie grandson prompts Michael to realize that he cannot live outside of history:

I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson. (61)

Coetzee in “Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987” with Tony Morphet says,

Nor, I think, should one forget how terribly transitory that garden life of K’s is: he can’t hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of South Africa has been surveyed and mapped and disposed of” (1987: 456)

When Michael returns to the garden for the second time, after his retreat to the mountains and his incarceration at Jakkalsdrif, he resolves, “I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived” (99). However, to achieve that goal, he must hide from the world around him. Michael’s earthen burrow, then, is not the ultimate symbol of his penetration of and union with the earth but rather demonstrates his inescapable historical situation. Living in fear of the return of the Visagies or the arrival of the police to send him into another camp, Michael tends his crop by night and camouflages the growing vines with cut grass. He chooses this beast-like existence over becoming entrapped in oppressive social structures again. Michael’s pastoral is not pure idyll. He fears

…hefty men who would hold their sides laughing at my pathetic tricks, my pumpkins hidden in the grass, my burrow disguised with mud, and kick my backside and tell me to pull myself together and turn me into a servant to cut wood and carry water for them and chase the goats towards their guns so that they could eat grilled chops while I squatted behind a bush with my plate of offal. Would it not be better to hide day and night, would it not be better to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs? (106)

It represents a stubborn and difficult compromise with the realities of his historical situation. Michael himself realizes when his body weakens, he finds he does not know how to store the ripening pumpkins, and his burrow is flooded.
In a dream an old man grips his shoulder and warns, “You must get off the land….You will get into trouble” (118-119).

Even before the soldiers discover him, Michael has left his burrow and resolved, “One cannot live like this” (120).

Coetzee’s recasting of the myth of the return to the land, then, reveals both the oppressive patriarchy at the heart of the Afrikaner myth as well as the historical conditionality of Michael’s Edenic myth. The failure of Michael’s history does not necessarily imply its impossibility. Instead, his story provides a prophetic guideline for the new order that will emerge from the ravages of the war. In keeping alive “the idea of gardening,” Michael posits a new history for his land.

In the final pages, the novel has intimations of the new heaven and new earth that could result from a chaotic South Africa. Michael’s last dream vision is of a return to the country with a companion, an elderly father-figure with whom he will share the bounty of the earth. He will plant many different kinds of seeds and scatter them across mile of the veld. The novel closes with an image of cleansing and communion, as the old man looks at the pump that the soldiers have blown up and wonders what they are to drink. Michael clears the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, and bends the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and ties the string to it. He lowers the spoon down into the earth, and he brings up water in the bowl with the lowered spoon “and in that way, he would say, one can live” (184). Hewson in “Making the “Revolutionary Gesture”: Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer’s Responsibility” says

The conditional tense of the final line of the novel points to a possibility. One of the possibilities is that through creative, cooperative enterprise, a community can be founded. It need not posit a rural utopia, this idea of tending the earth, but suggests a means of achieving some personal power, independence and interdependence against a backdrop which denies individual integrity and privacy. (1988: 68)

As in Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee closes this novel in a spirit of tentative hope and affirmation.

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