Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture:

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

Literature … is guilty and should admit itself so. Action alone has its rights, its prerogatives. I wanted to prove that literature is a return to childhood. But has the childhood that governs it a truth of its own?

– Georges Bataille[1]

The challenge of idleness to work, its power to scandalize, is as radical today as it ever was.

– J.M. Coetzee[2]

Introduction

More than any other of Coetzee's fictions, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) revealed stark divisions in his readership at the time of its publication, divisions that bespoke the rift, now largely a thing of the past, between Coetzee's prosecutors and defenders in a debate about responsibility.[3] But if this struggle has effectively been won by Coetzee's champions – if, as the great majority of Coetzee's readers agree, he is now figure of significant 'ethical rigour' – this consensus has nevertheless been preserved at a cost: that of at times domesticating Coetzee's

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[1] Georges Bataille, 'Preface', *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alistair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1957).

[2] J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New York: Yale University Press, 1988), 34.

[3] Hereafter *Life & Times of Michael K* will be abbreviated as *LTMK*. All citations which are simply given as a page number will refer to *LTMK*.

more complex and unsettling fictions.[4] Not least among these are *LTMK* and the figure at its centre, a 'hero' with whom even Coetzee's defenders have confessed their unease.

Yet the schism between Coetzee's critics and his (now dominant) proponents was not at bottom as significant as it may have appeared. In retrospect, many of these views have revealed themselves as part of a common approach that seeks to 'define and systematize' Coetzee's fiction by securing its meaning in essentially allegorical readings, political or otherwise – a mode that, as Jane Poyner notes, has by now evolved into 'the signature of Coetzee criticism'.[5] More important, those readers who attacked Coetzee on the basis of an insufficient realism, as well as many of those, largely from outside South Africa, who have helped to propel him to prominence as a mouthpiece for the postcolonial, based their readings on not-dissimilar views of the nature and utility of the literary. Their assumptions required them to find in Coetzee's novel answers to a common question: What type of hero is K? And, by extension: What does he stand for?

The most critical answer to this question came from Nadine Gordimer in her now well-known 1984 review. Re-interpreting the Lukács of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958), Gordimer argued that *LTMK* is fundamentally flawed: 'The organicism that George Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer'.[6] In Gordimer's view, K all too flagrantly fails to become what Lukács, borrowing from Hegel, termed a 'world historical individual': a figure who represents and even impacts the larger movements of history and

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[4] Grammar Bradshaw and Michael Neill, eds., 'Introduction', *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 13. This is not to say that the 'argument' about Coetzee and has completely died. In 2006, Nadine Gordimer claimed that 'In the novel *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being' (reported in *The New York Times*, 16 December, 2007).

[5] Jane Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 10; Jane Poyner, ed., 'Introduction', *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 10.

[6] Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', review of *Life & Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee, *The New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1984, 3-6. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/feb/02/the-idea-of-gardening/

society.[7] Coetzee has effectively refused to meet the novel's responsibility; his 'heroes are those who ignore history, not make it'. Instead of a committed novel, this is an 'allegory' valuing a passive, non-political ideal: 'The Idea of Gardening' (Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening').

But as noted this type of attack on Coetzee (which was preceded by others, for instance Michael Vaughan's argument on 'the prominence given to a state of agonized consciousness' in Coetzee's fiction at the expense of the depiction of 'material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa') has been drowned out by the chorus of witnesses for K's defense.[8] Importantly, Coetzee's defenders have valued K *as* a symbol of 'the idea of gardening': a figure whose heroism consists *precisely* in his stance toward history. Michela Canepari-Labib takes this further than most when she argues that K is of messianic relevance to modernity: 'By becoming the one left with the duty of saving the seeds that will permit the regeneration of human society after the Holocaust, the protagonist emerges as a shining symbol ... [he is] a sort of mythical figure, a prophet'.[9] But her view of K as a transcendent luminary is not an isolated one. If K fails to represent 'the way society moves' (a phrase applied to Gordimer's own fiction by Stephen Clingman), for many of Coetzee's readers this is only because K is involved in a (futural) project of historical redemption.[10]

Derek Wright, for example, argues that K 'plants to keep the earth, not himself, alive … [and] not for the present but for posterity'; what K 'stores up on his allotment, it seems, are hopes for the earth's future'.[11] Rita Barnard describes a K who redresses the past through a series

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[7] See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 146.
[8] Michael Vaughan, 'Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9 (1982): 118-138; 126, 137.
[9] Michela Canepari-Labib, *Old Myths – Modern Empires: Power, Language and Identity in J.M. Coetzee's Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 275-6.
[10] See Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, second edition (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).
[11] Derek Wright, 'Black Earth, White Myth: Coetzee's *Michael K*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 38 (1992): 435-444, 439.

of symbolic gestures: his garden is 'a utopian vision: a dream of rural life without patriarchal or colonial domination'.[12] For Jane Poyner, K is a hero of postcolonial autonomy whose response to history resides in his status as the hero of his *own* story: he is the 'author of his own life [as he] bespeaks [and re-writes] the familiar postcolonial tropes of writing the body and writing the land' (Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, 2). Laura Wright's K struggles to free himself of the 'binary' categories of apartheid thought, exemplifying the wisdom that 'it is enough to be … out of all the camps at the same time'.[13]

In Gordimer's reading K fails history; in the above, K redresses, transcends or resists history's evils. For Gordimer and her allies, *LTMK*'s failure within the Lukácsian paradigm is a pedagogical failure; it turns away from 'a long history of terrible wars' and never gives a serious answer to the question of 'what [our] course should be'.[14] But the assertion of K's defenders to the contrary also indicates their deeper assent to similar underlying principles, and a consonant view of literature's role. With Gordimer, do not many (even the great majority) of K's champions, too, consider the form of the novel to be driven by 'a humanist impulse to teach and educate', promoting a 'movement to historicized revelation and understanding which is the point of the [fictional] exercise' (de Groot, 29)?

In this essay I wish to show that it is a mistake to try to recuperate K in the terms of history or politics: the offense taken in Gordimer's reading is, within the terms she sets for literary value, justified. For Coetzee's novel ventures into such fraught territory to test, not answer to, the terms both his prosecutors and defenders have often set for the valuation of fiction. In doing so, *LTMK* returns us to a major rift in the reception of literary modernism even

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[12] Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.
[13] Laura Wright, *Writing Out Of All of the Camps: J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (New York, 2006), 10.
[14] Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 29.

as the novel pushes at the limits of our current models for valuing the literary, and in particular the dominant 'mode' of reading Coetzee's fiction.

The figure at the heart of these debates – in the twentieth century and today – is not the hero but his opposite: the adult who is unable to engage with the political, who thus effectively remains a child, and who is therefore considered an outsider, an 'idiot'. 'The Greek word for the person who does not lead a politically engaged life', Coetzee reminds us, 'is *idiotes*, idiot.'[15] If the heroic is always political, as Coetzee's readers – on both sides – have insisted, *LTMK* reminds us how and why it is that the idiot scandalizes the desire that the literary *be useful*. Especially today – when readers and writers are summoned, by the state, to answer for the 'impact' of literature and literary studies – the idiot retains the power to unsettle and provoke. It is this power that many of Coetzee's defenders have done their best to efface.

I.

Heroism, ambivalence, irony

To read K as an idiot we would need to follow Coetzee's prompting that *LTMK* is 'about a time when it is too late for politics' to the end, even to see the novel itself as allied to the 'idiotic' in ways that the court of politics would (rightly) pronounce 'guilty'.[16] Some steps toward such an attempt have, I feel, been made, if only in the very few readings of the novel that have resisted the dominant 'mode' by establishing *LTMK*'s more unusual aspects – such as its manipulation of tone, readerly expectation, or narration – in ways that keep us from allegorical accounts and a K

[15] J.M. Coetzee, 'Interview', *Modernism/modernity*, 18 (2012): 847-853, 850. 'Idiot' (in its ancient Greek form, *Idios*) has a long history and it is not insignificant that Coetzee seizes upon the word's relation to politics. The word could signify a private person, a common man, or one who has no professional knowledge. The word also indicates the peculiar, the different, and the separate. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 374.

[16] J.M. Coetzee, 'Too Late for Politics?' (Interview), *Buffalo Arts Review* 5.1 (1987): 6.

who is 'heroic' in any straightforward sense.[17] In particular, Patrick Hayes presents us with a K who remains poised *between* heroic seriousness and foolishness: a constant 'referential equivocation' in the novel that Hayes insists is yet 'truly political'.[18] 'The tone and register of the text', he argues, '[tends] to elevate Michael's aspirations into a seriousness … worthy of a hero' while there is also often a 'reality that pulls him back down with a thud' (Hayes, 90). This complex reading indicates that the novel works to alter our parameters *for* conceiving the 'heroic' and the 'political' (in this sense it is not wholly unlike those by Attridge and Attwell), and that *LTMK* is therefore political in 'a deep sense' (Hayes, 103). Yet what if – as such a reading actually reveals in practice – the 'heroic' overtones of the novel (whether generated by K's narrator or K himself) *always* collapse into bathos, irony and the unheroic, and never the other way around? What if heroism in the text in fact inevitably functions as a form of misrepresentation, and as part of a larger textual mechanism that does not open onto real 'equivocation' but *heroism's opposite* – the strange, private realm of one 'who does not lead a politically engaged life' at all (even despite his desire, at times, to do so)?

In order to reconsider the many accounts of K as the guardian of gardening or its idea, or even a view of K's text as equivocal, we could do worse than begin by looking briefly at a few

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[17] I am thinking here of three main readings. David Attwell's K is a nuanced figure in a complex type of metafiction: a 'protagonist of extraordinary symbolic power who becomes … the focus of a struggle for control over the resources of fictionality itself'. See David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University Of California Press, 1993), 92. Derek Attridge's rich reading finds that *LTMK* resists the 'already known' of allegory, in part through its ambivalences and its detail 'far in excess' of fixed meaning. 'Allegory', Attridge points out, 'cannot handle perhapses'. See 'Against Allegory' in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, 63-82, 76. The third reading is by Patrick Hayes and is discussed above.

[18] Patrick Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* (Oxford, 2010), 90, 103. Hayes' argument for a deeply political 'referential equivocation', or 'play' with Erasmian 'folly' in the novel, must be differentiated from idiocy as I understand it here – which simply fails to engage with the political (Hayes, 90). As we shall see, this is not least because idiocy's realm lies outside of language. It is therefore closer to what Bataille, writing of Beckett's idiot Molloy, describes as 'the silence of animals' than the (linguistic and political) world of man. Georges Bataille, 'Le silence de Molloy', *Critique* 48: May 1951, reprinted in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 55-64, 64.

examples of the ironies that pull down the novel's heroic aspirations. We could choose any number of passages, but one of the most important for Coetzee's readers has been the following, in which K explains his decision not to announce himself to the guerrillas.

> His heart was pounding. When they leave in the morning, he thought to himself, I could come out of hiding and trot behind them like a child following a brass band.
>
> ….
>
> [Yet] K knew that he would not crawl out …. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time of gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children (109).

The elevated, mythic language K deploys here – the earth as a mother who may forget those children bound to her – has unsurprisingly been a source of encouragement for Coetzee's prosecutors and champions alike. Quoting this passage, Gordimer claims that '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' (Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening'). But such a reading ignores the fact that there is more than one kind of child in this passage; and the image of K, 'crawling' out to 'trot' behind the guerrillas (the 'men') 'like a child following a brass band' suggests we ought to consider his rather elevated abstractions here with reserve (109). For doesn't the novel simply contradict the notion that K expresses here – that if he neglects to keep gardening (or its idea) going 'the earth would grow hard and forget her children' (109)? This

escape into the language of myth quietly ignores the facts on the ground: earlier in the book K acknowledges that 'the pineapples don't know there is a war on. Food keeps growing' (16). A heroic narrative about a man sustaining the generative cycle in dark times collapses into the less glamorous facts: food, born of blind vegetal processes, just 'keeps growing' despite K, his life, or his times (16).

Nor, we should note, is K himself satisfied with his answer in the above. His mind 'baulks' at some 'hole' in his answer even as he remembers a time when, as a student, he faced a similar frustration in the form of a math problem:

> He remembered Huis Norenius and the classroom. Numb with terror he stared at the problem before him … twelve men eat six bags of potatoes. Each bag holds six kilograms of potatoes. What is the quotient? He saw himself write down twelve, he saw himself write down six. He did not know what to do with the numbers. He crossed both out. He stared at the word *quotient*. It did not change, it did not dissolve, it did not yield its mystery. I will die, he thought, still not knowing what the quotient is (110).

How ironic that the problem this gardener/hunger artist cannot solve concerns eating produce. We feel pity for K the student, but just as K's (self-gratifying) story about 'the earth and her children' doesn't add up, the text won't let us take his failure with his math problem very seriously either: 'he stared at the word quotient. … I will die, he thought, still not knowing what the quotient is' (110). Here we are reminded of K's first act of reading in the text: idling away the time in the Buhrmann's house, he pushes to one side the heroic story of *Aeneid* ('he found nothing to engage him here') for 'picture-books' ('Finland Land of Lakes') (17). The individual

that begins to flicker into view here is hard to describe as 'the guardian of an idea' or even someone who swings between hero and fool; better, we might think: a man who is somehow still a child – even, perhaps, a dunce.

The book is full of disjunctions like these – that accumulate between the aspirational representations of K by his narrator or himself, and what else we know of K and his world. It is hard, in fact, once we grasp the novel's consistent use of ironic bathos, to see its representations as truly equivocal, much less heroic. Consider the following, in which the guerrillas have left and K is happily tending his garden.

> The pumpkins grew. In the night K would creep about, stroking the smooth shells. Every night they were palpably larger…. He woke during the day and peered out over the acre; from under the camouflage of grass a shell here and there glinted quietly back at him.
>
> Among the seeds he had sown had been a melon seed. Now two pale green melons were growing on the far side of the field. It seemed to him that he loved these two, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers. Under the melons he placed pads of grass so that their skins should not bruise. (113)

Note how the story K told himself earlier – that instead of becoming a 'rebel' he has stayed behind to keep the 'idea of gardening' alive – inflects the language of this passage. The pumpkins are 'camouflaged'; they are like 'a band of brothers' (a rebel band?) who send secret signals in a kind of pumpkin morse code. But are K's actions really those of the resistance fighter, or are they actually more like those of a child *playing at* being a secret soldier, a

gardener, even a lover? How, in fact, might this scene be heroic in any meaningful sense at all? The novel asks us to imagine a grown man creeping around at night to stroke the shells of his crop: we see him peeping from his hideout in the daytime at his pumpkins; we watch them transmit their comradely signals back at him. The crowning touch is the note of weird chivalry: K padding the fair-complexioned melon sisters with pillows of grass 'so that their skins should not bruise' (113).

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The novel's consistent deployment of ironic deflation might seem enough to unsettle any reading of *LMTK* as a heroic allegory about gardening or its idea, but such accounts must also politely keep silent about a number of embarrassing truths. For example, it is hard to ignore the fact that K is in fact a far from capable cultivator who harvests but a single crop. As a solitary who is likely 'saved' from starvation by a marauding army, it also seems difficult to read K as a symbol for such values as vegetarian communality or ecological integrity. And how can we see K as an exemplary (postcolonial) 'author of his own life' when the overalls he steals from Kenilworth are branded with the logo 'TREEFELLERS', and the last name which he is given in the novel is 'Mister Treefeller' (Poyner, 2; 157, 174)? If K revisits and reworks the oppressive domination of the land exercised in modernity, and if he is charged with the task of 'saving the seeds that will permit the regeneration of human society after the Holocaust', why does Coetzee allow the soldiers to blow up the dam and destroy K's garden (Canepari-Labib, 275)? And why does K lose the majority of his seeds in the forest and end the novel dreaming on a cement floor?

Despite all this, Gordimer remains the only reader blunt enough to point out that K 'appears to be, and perhaps is, retarded', following up with the equally frank '[but] did it all have to be laid on so thick?' It is to rescue the novel from being 'yet another evocation of

commonplace misery' that she, like many of K's defenders, then goes in search of 'allegorical symbols' concealed within K's behavior.

But what if, as even Gordimer cannot accept, K *is* an idiot – not a symbol (successfully or unsuccessfully) masquerading its truth (the truth of the idea of gardening) as idiocy, or even a figure forever suspended between heroism and foolishness? What does it mean to re-think K as what the novel calls 'a different kind of man', one that, in a political sense, is not a 'man' at all (66)?

To answer these questions we need to position *LTMK* within two main fictional contexts in which idiocy is deployed by the novelist as the function of both a novelistic and a philosophical problem. The first is that of the South African farm novel. The second bespeaks an older, broader tradition within European fiction.

II.

Idiocy and the *plaasroman*

K is not the first idiot character in South African farm fiction. In *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee outlines the essentially philosophical problems that for C.M. van den Heever particularly became part of a fictional dilemma – for which the figure of the idiot provides a partial yet finally unsatisfactory solution. According to Coetzee, Van den Heever's farm novels revolve around the problem of how best to serve 'the ultimate purpose of the *plaasroman*, namely, to provide transcendental justification for ownership of the land' (*WW*, 106). Simply put, Van den Heever's answer is to make a claim about lineage. The farmer must own and remain on the land because it is his duty to the ancestors who have invested a history of labour in the soil, were 'wedded' to the land in life, and have become a part of it in death.

In order to posit this claim Van den Heever needs to demonstrate what Coetzee calls 'lineal consciousness' within his farmer heroes: a consciousness through which the ancestors (and perhaps the race) might speak, affirming the farmer's mythic, supralegal right to the soil (*WW*, 91). It also becomes clear that such consciousness must represent not only the voice of the ancestors but 'the voice of nature', 'natural consciousness' (*WW*, 97, 94). Only in this way can the land itself (and the ancestors now merged with that land) affirm the farmer's duty.

Self-consciousness or 'alienated' consciousness (alienated from nature, from the natural order) is typical within the Novel. Yet an alienated consciousness could never speak the kind of natural, revelatory truth Van den Heever requires. The difficulty faced by Van den Heever thus largely concerns how to make the transition from a typical to a generically aberrant lineal, natural or 'prereflective' consciousness (*WW*, 94). One solution is simply to circumvent this problem: to include natural consciousness through a character who is himself aberrant, non-reflective and thus like an animal, capable of acting not as his own agent but as 'the agent ... of the universe' (*WW*, 94). Datie in *Droogte* (1941), Faan in D.F. Malherbe's *Die Meulenaar* (1926), and Jochem van Bruggen's eponymous hero Ampie (1930) are such figures, idiots: 'The idiot represents a form of consciousness that does not question the meaning of experience, and hence does not feel the *weemoed* (melancholy) that Van den Heever and Malherbe … associate with reflectiveness'; the idiot therefore 'may represent a way of living wholly at one with the natural world' and act as nature's representative (*WW*, 95).

K's defenders, if they were willing to admit K into such company, might have argued that he is precisely such a figure, but one whose particular truth does not shore up but resist the mythic underpinnings of the *plaasroman*. To bolster their argument they might also have pointed to the many comparisons made in the novel between K and animals – a point to which I will

return. The ‘way’ in which ‘one can live’ figured in the brimming spoon at the novel's end might thus come to ‘represent a way of living wholly at one with the natural world’ that (literally, like the spoon itself) is drawn up from the earth by K (*LTMK*, 184; *WW*, 95). Such a reading would in fact imply that K is a new type of idiot-protagonist: one who is at certain moments – like the novel’s end – able to annex what Coetzee calls ‘islands of certainty in the story’ (*WW*, 97). As in Van den Heever’s fictions, such moments in *LTMK* might manifest ‘the voice of nature’ *and* the voice of the hero’s natural self (the two are one in the idiot), though here the message would appear to be one of ecological integrity or pacifism rather than the assertion of rights of land-ownership (*WW*, 97).

Yet this reading quickly begins to unravel. For such moments of insight also have a narrative function in the *plaasroman*, a function which is

> not so much their content as the new-found self-certainty they mark in the questing subject. To attain such an island of truth in the narrative means that the subject will be understood to act henceforth on the basis of his own truth. The subject therefore becomes an exemplar of man in a state of integration (*WW*, 97).

‘Because the words emerge from him “naturally”’, Coetzee reminds us, such a protagonist ‘cannot doubt them; nor may anyone else, including the reader’ (*WW*, 97). Unreflective certainty, then, is the hallmark of such revelations. But as we have seen, *LTMK* does not allow us to accept K’s own readings of himself with anything like certainty: his story is ‘always wrong’, it always has a ‘hole’ in it (110). K, in other words, is an idiot who would fail Van den Heever as surely as he would fail contemporary readers who might desire to view him as ‘a form of consciousness

that does not question the meaning of experience', or 'an exemplar of man in a state of integration' (with nature, or, in the postcolonial reading in which K becomes the author of his own story, with himself) (*WW*, 95, 97). K's idiocy does not provide the requisite stability to be read as a 'justification' of either a colonial fantasy of land ownership nor its ecological counter-paradigm.

In what way, then, is K an idiot?

Idiocy, biography, and the Novel: Dostoevsky's example

The connection between K's continual double-thoughts and the novel's treatment of idiocy comes into focus when we consider the way *LTMK* draws on another tradition of novelistic idiocy and specifically one book in particular: Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869). I will be taking my reading of *The Idiot* from a study to which Coetzee refers in his essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts': Michael Holquist's *Dostoevsky and the Novel*.[19] And it is worth noting that the connection between Coetzee's and Dostoevsky's novels by way of Holquist's study is robust at the level of theme: Holquist highlights the theme of fatherlessness; he stresses the importance of a break in generations between the protagonist and his past; he argues for the significance of the main characters' status as a child or holy fool; he indicates that, like Christ, Dostoevsky's protagonist has no descendants. Likewise, K's novel goes out of its way to point out that K is fatherless and has only the most tenuous connection with the past; like Myshkin, K is treated by others as not fully a man (and his only sexual encounter with a woman consists of the non-procreative act of oral sex); on an obvious level, K is repeatedly referred to as an 'idiot' (131).

[19] Coetzee discusses Dostoevsky's novel at some length in his essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts', *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 251-293; see pages 281-286. For Coetzee's mention of Holquist, see page 281.

It is perhaps worth mentioning, too, that there is also a telling link between the innocence of these two characters in their mutual manuscript origins. As Konstantin Mochulsky points out, plans for *The Idiot* initially indicated a double life for Myshkin: one with adults, and another, the real one, with children.[20] Myshkin forms a secret club with children that revolves around shared innocence; to his child-cohorts, the Prince teaches that 'it is necessary for an intelligent man to be a really great man in order to prevail even against common sense' (Dostoevsky's notebooks translated and quoted in Mochulsky, 350). It is intriguing therefore that in Coetzee's '#4 version 6' of the *LTMK* manuscript, something not unlike the interaction between Dostoevsky's idiot and his child companions begins to take shape between K and two boys who come to visit him on the farm.[21] This early K is gentle and inquisitive; and when the boys tell him that their school has been closed, he, like Alyosha or Myshkin, seems set to become a new type of mentor for them – an outsider to politics who seeks to prevail against 'common sense'. But Coetzee seems to have realized that this re-writing of Dostoevsky's protagonist would not do: two deserters – the precursors to the Visagie grandson – appear at the farm, and K's idyll with his child-cohorts is ruined (*LTMK* MS, 58-63).

More important than such parallels, however, is the way that *LTMK* appropriates a question that Dostoevsky asks about the novel as a form and its relationship to history. Comparing *The Idiot* with *Don Quixote* (which fascinated Dostoevsky at the time of *The Idiot*), Holquist shows that just as Cervantes' novel presents a series of ironic contrasts with chivalric narratives, so *The Idiot* presents an ironic contrast to the system of biography. *The Idiot*, whose problem in this sense is the problem of novelistic hero writ large, is always left grasping after the

[20] Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, trans. Michael A. Minihan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 350.
[21] Coetzee has of course written on Dostoevsky's manuscripts and is familiar with Dostoevsky's fascination with children and their connection to innocence. See, for example, his review of Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: the Miraculous Years* in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 134-148.

meaning of his own life, always ironically failing to establish *a permanent reading of his own identity.* As Quixote attempts to subordinate his life to the demands of chivalry,

> so, in most later works, do the major characters thirst for a code, an absolute that will release them from their own contingency, even if the system is no more than a biography capable of knitting together the discrete moments of their lives into a continuous identity.[22]

The kind of meaning one secures through revelation (one thinks here of Van den Heever's 'natural consciousness') or perceives in a life told after the fact is unavailable to Myshkin: ultimately, he cannot live as the hero of his own biography.

Dostoevsky highlights his hero's failure in this regard by setting up Myshkin's story against the 'perfect' biography: the life and times of Jesus Christ. Myshkin is the 'perfectly good man' but he will always appear a fool when his life takes Jesus' life as its master plot. This is because, unlike Myshkin's, Christ's life has a consistent and universal meaning.

> The problem … for Myshkin is that … his task is precisely to find a *telos*…. Christ, by contrast, always exhibits the attributes of his role: he is the same yesterday today and forever, not only in his Godhood, but, for a believer, in his biography as a man as well …. Myshkin is saintly one moment, silly the next; now he is certain, now confused – and what is more, he *knows* there is no unity in his life (Holquist, 112).

[22] Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Evanston, Illinois, 1977), 110.

Myshkin's identity is always shifting, not only because he keeps changing, but because he is prone to self-doubts, to what he calls *double thoughts* (*dvoinaya mysl'*).[23] One moment he feels himself the hero of the story, the next he is its fool. In contrast, Christ knows who he is and is always at one with this identity. His meaning is not private, but has significance for others. Jesus' life literally sets the times.

Dostoevsky's novel, then, poses a question: What would happen if the story of a perfectly good man were told not with relation to an 'exterior, universal meaning' but as the actions of a man whose meaning is 'inner, particular' to himself – a meaning that is always private and always changing (Holquist, 107)? The answer is in Dostoevsky's title. Such a man will appear an idiot, and not only in the sense that he is constantly and quixotically attempting to discover the particular truth of his own life, and failing. He will be an idiot in the sense that this quest renders him incapable, finally, of leading 'a politically engaged life' (Coetzee, 'Interview' with Lawrence Rainey, 850).

LTMK deploys a similar strategy. But its master plot is not the religious, but the politico-historical biography and its correlative in the world of the realist novel, the *Bildungsroman*. Consider two dynamics at work in *LTMK* which its readers have largely neglected: the narrator's attempts to endow Michael with a serious, consistent meaning, and Michael's own attempts to tell his story. Most obviously, note the title, which clearly sets up K's life as a story reflective of or influential upon history. This framing of K's story is further emphasised in the book's epigraph, a fragment from Heraclitus:

> War is the father of all and king of all.
>
> Some he shows as gods, others as men.

[23] For Coetzee's account of this dynamic in *The Idiot* see 'Confession and Double Thoughts', 282.

Some he makes slaves, and others free (epigraph, *LTMK*).

We might expect such a weighty statement before a biography of someone like Alexander the Great or Lord Nelson. But is it appropriate for a man who fancies himself a gardener, or an earthworm? Which one *is* Michael, anyway – God, man, slave or free? The answer which the narrator pushes, and many of Coetzee's readers have accepted, is that Michael is a man who achieves an almost divine status in his freedom from Father War. Subtly, the narrator tries to write K into a story in which Michael increasingly exhibits Christ-like qualities. It is not so much what happens in the story that is important here, but how it is represented. This is how K takes what is literally his last supper (in the novel, and some have suggested, his life): 'Lightheaded from the wine, gripping the earth every now and again to steady himself, K ate of the bread and condensed milk' (175). As in the archaic English by which we are enjoined to receive the sacrament with due self-examination in the King James Bible, K eats 'of' the bread – his action elevated and charged with apparent significance through the narrator's use of style alone.[24] This is the kind of language to which Coetzee's readers are responding when they speak of K taking on 'Christ-like qualities … assuming an almost divine role' (Canepari-Labib, 276).

But once again this reading ends up ignoring the ironic gap between the style and the substance of this narrative. K may have 'refused the sausage' (175) (note the narrator's use of an emphatic verb instead of the more delicate 'declined' or the more consistent 'did not partake of'), but if he is really meant to stand for a pious vegetarianism why then does he lust after the 'gleaming flank of roast pork' in the Buhrmann's old magazine (16), gulp down a chicken pie outside the Stellenbosch hospital (30), and feel his stomach growl at the smell of frying bacon

[24] 'But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup', 1 Corinthians 11:28. http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=1+Corinthians&chapter=11&verse=28.

(35)? If K is meant to be a saint, why does he booze when he is given the chance, and why does he submit to being fellated by a prostitute in the public toilets? And why, when this has been done, does he 'surprise in himself' the desire to 'dig his fingers' into the 'backsides' of young girls? (180).[25]

Most important, K, like Myshkin, cannot inhabit a saintly biography because he cannot remain on 'an island of truth'; he is decidedly not 'a man in a state of integration' (*WW*, 97). Consider the following, in which K wonders if he has begun to inhabit a *Bildungsroman*:

> Is this my education? he wondered. Am I at last learning about life here in a camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that the scenes all cohered. He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be (89).

But of course K never finds out what this meaning is and never steps into his novel of education, just as he never makes the grade for his saintly biography. This is evident in the many instances when K tries to tell his story, and finds himself changing the story. At the end, he tries to tell the truth about himself *and* excuse himself from finding that truth at the same time:

> The truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground.

[25] 'At the foot of the steps … two girls passed him, averting their gaze and, he suspected, holding their breath. He watched their backsides ascend the steps and surprised in himself an urge to dig his fingers into that soft flesh' (*LTMK*, 180).

> K tossed restlessly on the cardboard. It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. 'I am a gardener'*, he said again, aloud. On the other hand, was it not strange for a gardener to be sleeping in a closet within sound of the beating of the waves of the sea?
>
> I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor? (182).

These are Dostoevsky's double thoughts, the (comic) failure to establish a 'continuous identity': a failure that *LTMK*'s generic staging as a politico-historical biography throws into ironic relief. K cannot tell his own story, much less stand as its hero. For he is a person with a deeply private, and constantly shifting meaning, an outsider to any 'single meaning' upon which a story told after the fact might converge (89).

Childhood, idiocy and the father's law: Karl Rossman and Michael K

In Dostoevsky's novel, the depiction of idiocy is an artistic response to a theological and philosophical problem. Through Myshkin, the question of how Christian belief might be lived in the world is dramatised by inserting a latter-day (yet imperfect) Christ-hero into chronological time. But what are the novelistic and philosophical challenges to which K is a fictional response?

It is now necessary to define more sharply the nature of K's idiocy, his inability to enter into the social, political and ideological world. And the term 'idiot' here – the term that is applied to Myshkin and to K from the outside – is less useful than its correlative: 'child'. Both characters see themselves, and are not infrequently understood (especially in K's case) as

children. Recall that when the moment of lineal consciousness is granted to K on the farm (that may or may not have been his mother's) it unsurprisingly affirms no empowering paternal right; rather, it speaks of vulnerability and puerility: 'To me [my mother] was a woman but to herself she was still a child …. And her own mother, in the secret life we do not see, was a child too. I come from a line of children without end' (117). Instead of a 'transindividual figure standing for the line of patriarchal farmer-fathers' K sees a series of maternal figures marked by a profound immaturity (*WW*, 98).

The references to Coetzee's hero as a child or as childlike, and the evidence of his affinity with the maternal rather than the paternal, are easy enough to find (I will mention more instances of both momentarily). Yet what is this 'secret life' of which K speaks that is the realm of childhood, of *being bound to the mother*? And what does K's childlikeness have to do with the novel's relation to history and the heroic?

The nature of K's childishness comes into closer focus when we note a hitherto unsuspected parallel between *LTMK* and another text: one of Kafka's fictions. I am thinking not of 'A Hunger Artist' (1922) or *The Trial* (1925) – two works whose relation to Coetzee's novel have been discussed – but that perhaps least read of Kafka's books: *The Man Who Disappeared* (set aside by Kafka in 1912; published in 1927 as *Amerika*). *LTMK* bears the traces of Coetzee's borrowing from Kafka's unfinished novel on a number of levels, but let me point out the most obvious one first – from the fragment 'Brunelda's Departure'. Here, Kafka's hero, Karl Rossman, a youth sent to America in disgrace (and the first of Kafka's protagonists to bear the initial 'K') takes charge of Brunelda, one of the novel's powerful maternal figures who has earlier adopted Karl as a kind of child/slave. Karl carts the swollen Brunelda through the streets in an 'invalid carriage', a hand-wheeled cart-like contraption in which she conceals herself under a grey

blanket.[26] On the way to their destination the pair is stopped by a policeman and harassed by a man with a cart of milk jugs. The policeman demands to see Brunelda's papers and treats the travellers with contempt (there are suggestions in the text that Brunelda is involved in prostitution). The man with the cart hounds them, chasing Karl and tugging forcefully at the blanket. As they shelter from their persecutors behind a wall, Brunelda weeps and begs her protector to wait until dark to continue their journey.

The curious echo of Michael K's situation with his mother is unignorable: K's own invalid barrow with its blanket ('like a tall perambulator'), the harassment by the officials, the need for travel papers, the relationship between a physically swollen, tearful mother figure and her hapless protector-'son' – and the parallels will multiply, become more intriguing the harder we look (20). What does this gesture toward Kafka's first novel signify?

Perhaps the most direct way of approaching 'Brunelda's Departure' and *The Man* is to read the novel as an extended dramatization of the experience that preoccupied Kafka his entire life, and is inseparable from the mythic, even spiritual dimension of his work: the experience of being a son. (Kafka wished to publish the first chapter of this novel with *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and 'The Judgment' (written in 1912) in a single volume to be titled *The Sons.*) In this reading, *The Man* explores its son-protagonist's struggle and failure to escape the state in which we find him at the beginning: one of near-helplessness before a series of ruthless father-figures who govern their world through violent acts of expulsion, reinforcing their power through fear. As Anne Fuchs puts it in her Lacanian reading of *The Man*, Karl's 'degradation at the hands of those who represent the social order reflects the phobic nature of this order itself'.[27]

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[26] Franz Kafka, *The Man Who Disappeared*, trans. Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 192. Hereafter the title of Kafka's novel is abbreviated as *The Man* and cited as *TMWD*.

[27] Anne Fuchs, 'A Psychoanalytic Reading of *The Man Who Disappeared*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25-41, 26.

One need not adopt a psychoanalytic tack to appreciate this dynamic in Kafka's novel, but aspects of such an approach can help illuminate Coetzee's borrowings. Of particular relevance is the way that Lacan's 'paternal metaphor' in his discussion of the symbolic order helps clarify what it means to be a child, and specifically a son. In the story Lacan tells, the father of the Freudian Oedipal drama is not simply or only biological; he is a symbolic representation of authority such as law, God, economic or political order which stands over the child, requiring him to take on the father's attributes and forsake his urges for the maternal. As Kristeva points out, the act of leaving childhood to participate in this symbolic order or 'law of the father' – the world of law, of society – is fundamentally based on one's command of language.[28]

Yet from the beginning Karl is unable to justify himself or those weaker, less articulate individuals (like the Stoker he befriends in the novel's opening pages) before a host of powerful paternal figures like his uncle Jakob, the Captain, and the Stoker's enemy, Schubal. Despite his attempts to appeal to decency or fairness, before he can begin speaking he finds himself overpowered and rushed off (as before the Captain), shouted down (as by the Head Waiter and the Head Porter), or interrogated (as with the policeman who detains and questions Karl after he is fired from the Hotel Occidental). Without the proper travel documents (the novel suggests that Karl, who has been abandoned by his real parents, has been sent off without a proper visa) the only questions that matter are finally those of identity – a test Karl, as an effective orphan cum illegal immigrant, will always fail. Only when he publicly acknowledges Jakob as his uncle at Jakob's command and kisses his hand does Jakob answer Karl's question: 'What will happen

[28] Coetzee's potential relationship to Lacan was the subject of the first major study of Coetzee's work, Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1988). For Coetzee's own comments on Lacan and speech, see *Doubling the Point*, 29-30, 65. For Kristeva's comment see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 67.

now to the Stoker?' (*TMWD*, 25). But the answer is: 'What he deserves … and what the Captain thinks is right' (*TMWD*, 25). In this world the fathers' judgments and justice are identical. It is fitting then that when Jakob quickly abandons Karl on 'principle', leaving him with nothing but his suitcase and a train ticket, Karl slides down the social scale into homelessness (62). Yet even there, as he finds at the Theatre of Oklahama [sic], an organization that accepts everyone, he is asked for the *Legitimationspapiere* (papers that legitimize him) he lacks.

What type of novel is this? Max Brod suggested a travel chronicle by giving the book the title *Amerika*, but it clearly runs counter to the journeyman traditions of the *Bildungsroman* and the travel guide alike. Karl develops no sense of mastery or understanding over himself or the world he passes through. Instead, he loses all of the tokens of identity with which he began: his passport, suitcase, and family photograph. This loss is best figured in Karl's acceptance of the title 'Negro', a name that in (early) twentieth-century America, as in (late) twentieth-century South Africa doubly 'underlines … the loss of his social status, true history, name and voice' (Fuchs, 38).

*

K's status as a child/idiot is literally written on his face. The harelip is not simply a disfigurement, but it impedes his speech and becomes a flaw on which his listeners fixate; it is the mark by which K is recognized as a person who cannot partake in the social, ideological and political world. 'Because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick' K does not attend a regular school; 'because of his face' he never has 'women friends' (4). Most important, because 'the whispers' of other children wound Anna K she takes him with her to work so that K spends his early days 'learning to be quiet' (4). The novel's opening sets up a pattern: K is sheltered by the maternal even as he is marginalized, dismissed or abused by the authorities, thus

reinforcing his bonds with the maternal, the silent and the infantile. If, for Lacan, the Father seeks 'to unite (and not to set in opposition) a desire and the Law', thereby turning the child's urges away from the maternal, we can read K's journey as the story of one who *im*matures: 'I would be the worst of fathers' K acknowledges on the Visagie farm; 'I am like a woman' (104, 111).[29]

The response of the father-state is to discipline and expel K according to its law. And as in *The Man*, as in Lacan, the father's name here *is* law:

> My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in dormitories at all times', and the woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we … marched two abreast to the church… to be forgiven. They were my father… (104)

Not unlike *The Man*'s vision of a brutal commercial enterprise overseen by exploitative patriarchs, *LTMK* depicts a state ruled by oppression thinly veiled as parental care. 'Who builds houses for you … ? Who gives you tents and blankets …? Who nurses you, who takes care of you… And how do you repay us? Well from now on you can starve!' screams Captain Oosthuizen (91-92). In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren describes such figures this way: 'The bullies … grown up now and promoted to rule the land'; 'What absorbs them is power', she notes, and then the Freudian imagery comes: 'Huge bull testicles pressing down on their wives, their children, pressing the spark out of them'.[30] As in Kafka's tale (one thinks of Jakob's 'notorious' treatment

[29] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 321.
[30] J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 29.

of his workers and his cruel abandonment of Karl), we find the fathers robbing, corralling and effectively enslaving the weak. ‘What do you think the war is for?’, K asks the soldier who steals his mother’s savings, ‘For taking other people's money?’ (37). Of Jakkalsdrif K thinks, ‘The camp was for those left behind, the women and children … the idiots’ (109); it is a place where these ‘parasites’ wait for their final expulsion from the system in death (116).

The Man’s obsession with official records (‘papers’), Karl’s vulnerability without these documents, and the re-naming of the novel’s main character return in *LTMK.* K’s attempt to obtain a travel permit is the first of many such attempts to categorize him (as, for instance a ‘CM’, a coloured male (70)), re-name him (‘Michaels’), or otherwise officially inscribe his identity onto his person (for instance, by means of the drills he is forced to undergo at Kenilworth as part of ‘having [his] thinking set right’ (132)). No wonder that, even among the nameless of this society, men like ‘December’ (a man who changes his name as he sees fit), K is misapprehended (as ‘Mr Treefeller’) as surely as Karl is described as ‘Negro, Technical Worker’ by the Theatre of Oklahama. More subtly, the metonymic relationship established between Karl’s lost suitcase, the evaporation of the official traces of his identity in that container (his passport and parental photograph), and his ensuing state of homelessness, resurface in Coetzee's novel. But here the traveler/orphan’s suitcase is connected not only with the absence, but the death of the mother, and her *literal* last traces – as a body. K fittingly abandons this vestige of his identity when he is robbed by a soldier in a transparent gesture of the law’s (hidden) brutality: ‘Papers in order – you can go’ (37). (The episode ends on a final act of patronization when the soldier flicks K a ten-rand note: ‘Buy yourself an ice-cream’ (38).)

LTMK, too, is a type of anti-*Bildung* narrative, a travel story in which the self undergoes a social devolution rather than an integration. The ‘homeless and the destitute’ whom K passes

on his way to St Joseph's Mission at the novel's beginning, like the masses of the poor Karl glimpses lining up to work for his Uncle Jakob, will soon admit him (13). And if Karl eventually describes himself as the lowest form of human being in his society, K at the end questions his status *as* a human: he is a 'mole', an 'earthworm' – animals that are not often anthropomorphized because they are so 'low' as to literally live underground (182).

It is now possible to put a finer point on our description of K's anti-heroic childishness: like Karl, Michael never accesses the symbolic order and the authority of the fathers (110). Karl and K never 'grow up' because, as Kafka's Statue of Liberty suggests (in *The Man* the statue holds a *sword*), their worlds are governed by expulsive, phallocentric socioeconomic and political systems that have no place for all who are effectively useless within that order. Unsurprisingly, then, neither Karl nor K can tell his own story (in the form of a travel narrative, say, or a biography) much less become the author of that story. When questioned, neither character can satisfy his audience nor his conscience. Cut off from the maternal, thrust into a world of brutal fathers, their 'memories all [seem] to be of parts, not of wholes' (49).

III.

Idiocy and offense

The generic links with van den Heever and Dostoyevsky, the character-model offered by Kafka: these paradigms lead us back to the experience of offense. It is through asking 'In what way do these characters give offense?' that we might answer the more pressing question I posed earlier: 'What are the novelistic and philosophical challenges to which K is a fictional response?'

Yet the nature of the offense in Coetzee's case concerns not only the umbrage taken within K's fictional reality, but in the experience of reading that world. The notion that K is

unable to enter the sociopolitical realm – that he is in this sense an idiot, not a symbol we might mistake for idiocy – will offend Coetzee's prosecutors and defenders alike.[31] And if idiocy cannot speak for itself, if it is all that which is *spoken for* or simply dismissed within the discourses of history, philosophy and their frequent ally, literary criticism, the offense it offers these discourses is revealing. In all of these cases idiocy poses a challenge to foundational values: it troubles our assumptions regarding what we might the term *the question of the work of culture*.

It is within the discourse of literary or cultural criticism however that idiocy has stood as the ultimate judgment upon refractory writing, at least since Lukács pronounced his verdict on Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) as 'the ne plus ultra' of the idiotic development of literary modernism itself:

> [*Molloy*] presents us with an image of the utmost human degradation–an idiot's vegetative existence. Then, as help is imminent from a mysterious unspecified source, the rescuer himself sinks into idiocy. The story is told through the parallel streams of consciousness of the idiot and of his rescuer.[32]

Defending Coetzee from this charge, from Lukács' inheritors in fact, K's readers have naturally glossed over his idiocy or attempted to show how he represents (for instance) a vision of 'rural life without patriarchal or colonial domination' '*in spite of* his deformity and

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[31] As it offends K, too: 'He thinks I am truly an idiot', K thinks of the Visagie grandson, though he does not specify how he differs from this boy-soldier's ideas about him as one who 'sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards' (62).

[32] Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 31. The Beckett text may have greater relevance here than its reception only: like Molloy, K too ends up as a derelict in the city who retreats, in a kind of second infancy, back to his mother's room to sleep.

"slowness"'(Barnard, 10; my emphasis). Even Coetzee's most attentive reader argues that K's characteristic moments of puzzlement and doubt (for example, over whether he might help strangers in future – 'He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible…' (48)) should not lead us to conclude he is 'more animal than human, or that he is perhaps still an infant at heart': K's double-thoughts are 'open-minded speculation[s]' indicative of a 'profound ethical awareness' (Attridge, 'Against Allegory', 76).

But the threat these readers are warding off is also a considerable source of *LTMK*'s literary power to disturb. If we as readers have been captivated by a vision of the Novel's potential for useful work – a vision of the utility of culture (often in the service of history or philosophy) – what is to be done with a compelling fiction that, at least from the vantage point of history and its allies, might be considered a *work of idiocy* (like Lukács' *Molloy*), a non-work that, with its non-hero, is incapable of being *put to work*?

What challenge does idiotic idleness pose to the work of culture?

Idiocy and the 'ideology of work'

If the idiot's offense lies in his fundamental idleness ('vegetative existence' seems to fit K well (Lukács, 31)), we should remember that idleness in its South African context has itself been read by Coetzee as a type of 'authentic' 'response' to the demands of an encroaching ideology: the 'ideology of work' (*WW*, 34). And for Coetzee the offense constituted by native idleness was of a particular kind, one that 'represents a reaction to a challenge, a scandal, that strikes particularly near to [South African white writers] as *writers*' (23). White writing, endorsing an ideology of work (inseparable from a vision of history) therefore saw idleness not only as a useless 'practice' within the new colonial economy, but as valueless currency within an economy of *writerly*

material: idleness 'aborts one of the more promising of discourses about elemental man' for it 'holds no promise save that of stasis' (*WW*, 23, 25). Idleness is the fundamental trait of those who, within the family of humanity, are 'static', who remain children. 'What is common to [the accounts of the white writers] is that they mark the Hottentot as underdeveloped – underdeveloped not only by the standard of the European but by the standard of Man' (*WW*, 22).

Like the idleness of natives in South Africa, the idiocy of some literary texts scandalizes the readerly desire to make meaning out of silence; and it especially offends those who require that silence *be useful* – within a vision, say, of history (*WW*, 23). As Coetzee reminds us, the urge 'to say that there is something *at work* when there is nothing is always strong', and this is not a temptation (or a need) that this essay can itself claim to completely resist (*WW*, 34). But the effort might be made to more fully acknowledge the challenge posed by this silence. What then does *LTMK* – a text whose protagonist learns 'to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour …. But as a yielding up of himself to time' – have to say about the offense it offers to history (time as progress) and its ally, the ideology of work?

Especially in one episode, the novel speaks to these concerns in a way that limns an answer to my question about the force of idiocy in this novel and its challenge to the work of culture. But this answer is so extreme that there may yet be no adequate model – within literary criticism, within philosophy – to fully accommodate the text in which it appears within a system of values.

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The passage in question describes K's sojourn in the mountains. Here he spends his time in increasing 'idleness, sitting in the mouth of his cave' until he finds himself transforming: 'I

am becoming a different kind of man', he thinks, 'if there are two kinds of man' (66,67). This new man is no longer in love with the organic, with growth, but is increasingly fascinated with the static, the lithic: 'I have lost my love for that [nurturing] kind of earth… It is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard' (67). K now finds it easy to experience time in a way that is utterly divorced from work, even that mental labour required of a desiring self that projects its aims and objects into future time: 'he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing' (69).[33] He is 'in a pocket outside time': 'Everything else was behind him' (60, 66).

What does it mean to be 'in a pocket outside time'? The next sentence seems a clue: 'He went to sleep easily and had a dream in which he was running as fast as the wind along an open road with the cart floating behind him on tyres that barely skimmed the ground' (66). Here the novel appears to tempt us, as Coetzee's writing often does, to enter into an allegorical reading – for if there are symbols then they are here, and if the cart is a symbol then it is surely a figure for the loads it has carried. We might say then (to entertain such a reading) that the burden lifted from K in the dream is: the memory of labour. K, we remember, stole the barrow around which he builds his cart from his old job at Parks and Gardens, but a fuller reading of the cart as 'duty' would account for its role in bearing K's mother, too. More: given the association between labour, lineal/familial duty and the pastoral fantasies that drive the South African farm novel, the cart seems to become a figure for history, the burden of South African colonial history.

This reading could be fortified by a passage in the early manuscript of *LTMK*. Here K's 'son' (at this stage acting as the narrator of the story) describes looking at a painting coloured

[33] The phrase invokes Beckett, whose Watt, likely speaking of Molloy, prophesies that 'One shall be born of us [Beckett's early characters] who having nothing will wish for nothing, except to be left that nothing he hath'. Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (London: John Calder, 1999), 114.

with the gentle tones of a 'pastoral vision': men and oxen straining at a wagon, attempting to cross a mountain.[34] The son conjectures that this painting had meaning for its viewers in the past (it sounds like a popular painting of the Great Trek), but it has now lost that meaning. He therefore provides his own interpretation by focusing on an incongruous, even ridiculous detail: 'a child, without pants, bending to examine something (a lizard?), oblivious of the struggle to cross' (*LTMK* MS, 10). 'Is that child me?', K's son wonders, Did the painter 'paint an image of me going about my childish business while the ox-wagon of history trundles on behind my back?' (*LTMK* MS, 10).

Such a reading seems to turn idiocy in this novel neatly into an allegory of itself, but like the other figurative readings the novel suggests, it is finally unsustainable. It makes sense that K's son (like K) was envisaged at this point in the text's evolution as a type of revolutionary, as *politically committed*. For doesn't the son's self-awareness translate into an effective refusal to carry the 'ox-wagon of history' (a phrase that reappears in the final text (159)) – a comportment that is subtly different from the experience of the child (or K) who is, in a much fuller sense, 'oblivious' (*MS LTMK*, 10)? As we have seen, idiocy cannot provide a stable reading from within: any meaning we draw from the dream will come from an act of imposition, from a position of knowledge. As we interpret K's text or its silence – even as a statement about that which is 'outside history', outside narrative – the idiotic force of its idleness slips away from us. *From K's perspective* (as Elizabeth Costello asserts of animals who do not regard themselves as 'ghostly reasoning machines'), the dream could not be further from the experience of reading a symbol; it is an affective reality: 'being a body with limbs that have extension in space.'[35] K and

[34] Manuscript of *Life & Times of Michael K*, uncatalogued holding, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, #4, version 3, notebook 1, 10. Hereafter abbreviated as *LTMK* MS.
[35] J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 33.

his text, it seems, cannot carry out the load-bearing work we require of them – like the cart that is so weightless that it floats, idly, idiotically, barely skimming the earth … ?

Limits of the human

To venture into K's cave is not only to ask what it might mean to leave allegory or narrative behind; it is to entertain the idea of forsaking language itself: as in Van den Heever, the realm of idiocy here lies at the limits of the human. If K were to remain in this 'pocket' of what Coetzee calls 'nonhuman time' (*WW*, 64), his fate would be complete silence and inanimation; he would become that which is no kind of man at all ('his bones growing white in this far-off place' (69)). In answer to my question, 'What are the novelistic and philosophical challenges to which K, as idiot, is a fictional response?', this part of the novel, where K reaches a summit of idiocy, appears to answer: a challenge to the founding relationship between language, labour and meaning – to those processes underpinning the philosophical, political, and cultural enterprises themselves.

Whatever is (or is not) happening in K's cave suggests that what I have been calling idiocy is effectively a non-category, that it has no role to play within (modern) humanity's obsession with categorization, notions of utility, the keeping of time and the progression of history. It has nothing to do with modern man's view of himself as *the animal that works*. (When Coetzee's Cruso proclaims that 'Man is labour', he preaches the depressing gospel that the real Defoe's hero – the mythic figure of modern man if there is one – simply practices.[36] Nor are such notions the province of a particular ideology. As Coetzee points out elsewhere, Marx, too, is 'wholly a child of the Enlightenment when he writes that "the entire so-called history of the

[36] Manusript of *Foe*, uncatalogued holding, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, #5, version 3, notebook 2, 23.

world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour"' (*WW*, 21).) But if labour has made humanity useful, *LTMK* reminds that it also brings us down, as Georges Bataille argued, 'to the level of a thing among things'; work 'makes a worker a means to an end', for 'whatever has no meaning for itself is a thing'.[37]

Bataille's name may at first appear strange next to Coetzee's. But it is Coetzee who invokes Bataille to ally his vision of idleness as an 'authentic … response' with a silence beyond labour and language, and a time beyond history – to 'wonder whether the challenge presented by idleness to the philosophical enterprise is any less powerful or subversive than the challenge presented by the erotic, in particular by the silence of eroticism' (*WW*, 35).[38] The challenge of idiocy is the challenge of all that which lies outside of the category of the useful.

Idiocy simply fails to work, to be productive – even of the meaning of resisting the fixed categories of, say, apartheid thought, and so slipping the harness binding the ox to the 'wagon of history' – because, like a child, idiocy *cannot bear* a harness, a load (159). Idiocy is not even a 'great escapee'; the idiot cannot be recuperated (as the medic of section II, and Coetzee's readers have often attempted to do) in the interests of an alternative heroism: that of the luminary or prophet (145). Positioned to one side in history's painting, the idiot does not merit the term 'man' so much as 'boy', or better, 'beast'. For K is most akin to those animals in his world that, unlike horse or ox, *cannot be made to work* – worm, rabbit, mouse, mole – and are therefore turned into pets, persecuted as pests, or ignored. It is K's particular plight to belong to neither the world of men nor that of animals. K the 'city mouse', the 'earthworm or a mole on a cement floor' is what Beckett's first narrator calls a 'horrible border creature' (182).[39]

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[37] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 1987), 157.
[38] Coetzee here refers to *Eroticism*, 273-6.
[39] Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: John Calder, 1993), 123.

Conclusion: utility and sovereignty

Unable to become an animal yet not wholly 'human', and surely not fully a 'man': we have encountered these creatures before – in Beckett, and of course in that master of liminal beings, Kafka, with his prisoners that are treated like dogs and so act like dogs, with his sons that transform into insects and yet are sons still. And for both Beckett and Kafka these states are versions of a monstrous childhood, the stations of a crucifixion circling the chamber of the hero's primal origins. 'I am in my mother's room', writes the bed-prone, infantilized Molloy, 'It's I who live there now'.[40] Like the idiot-narrators of Beckett's *Nouvelles*, Molloy is condemned to revisit the trauma of a painful expulsion, finding himself tended by a line of maternal figures that burden, haunt and nurture him.

The same could be said of Karl Rossman, Josef K or Michael K. But if reading Coetzee's K as an idiot repositions him within a *literary* continuum it also returns us to foundational divisions within the reception to that history (of modernism), and to the force of literature's power to disturb. For if both those who would critique and those who would value Michael K have often been compelled to read him as revealing or failing to reveal a (historically or politically) serious response to the question of 'what [our] course should be' (de Groot, 29), Derek Attridge is surely right that this novel tests the limits of 'what we feel is appropriate to say as commentators', even 'what we are *able* to say in the vocabulary we have available to us' (Atttridge, 77).

This is not least because the tension between what I have termed idiocy and its opposite, utility, lies at the roots of enduring approaches to the valuation of literature. When Sartre speaks of the 'utilitarian' nature of prose and of the prose writer as 'a man who *makes use* of words', when he defends 'the "committed" writer' as one who 'knows that words are action', like

[40] Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (New York: John Calder, 1994), 7-8.

generations of committed critics after him he reinforces only one side of the paradox outlined more fully by Bataille and elaborated, in different terms, by thinkers like Beckett and Coetzee himself.[41] Work, as Bataille acknowledges, has made us what we are; but *to put to work* is nevertheless to enact and to submit to a fundamental form of violence. Contra Sartre, the power of the literary is, in Bataille's view, the power of that which is '*beyond utility*', a 'return to childhood' which must admit its 'guilt' before the world of action and 'rights' (Bataille, 'Preface', *Literature and Evil*).[42] But then, if the potential idiocy of literature unsettles a 'utilitarian' vision of culture, if it shakes the 'ideology of work' behind it to its core – if it outrages all those who would link the *usefulness* of a thing indissolubly with its *value* – what, it might be asked, is the alternative that what I have paradoxically termed 'the work of idiocy' itself proposes?

By way of answer *LTMK* recognizes another truth only half-acknowledged by Beckett and Bataille, and, at one point, practically disavowed by Coetzee himself: the unsustainability of any argument for literature as, in Bataille's term, 'sovereign' – a view which would effectively situate literature's truth in a position of 'rivalry' to the 'useful' truth of history.[43] We might be tempted, given Coetzee's deployment of Bataille, to map the latter's description of a 'silence' at 'the pinnacle of being' onto K's sojourn on his mountain: Is this the 'supreme moment' of which Bataille speaks – a reality beyond work, even the work of words (Bataille, *Eroticism*, 276)? If so, we have seen that its inner truth cannot be stated, much less lived. As Bataille acknowledged elsewhere, no one can follow in Molloy's footsteps – nor, we might add, Michael K's.[44] The

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[41] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950), 10.
[42] For the definition of sovereignty as all that which is '*beyond utility*' see Bataille's 'Knowledge of Sovereignty' in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 301-312, 302.
[43] For the discussion of literature's 'rivalry' of versus its 'supplementarity' to history, see Coetzee's widely-cited talk, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream* (6.1) 1988: 2-5. Coetzee has not reprinted this talk.
[44] See Georges Bataille, 'Le silence de Molloy'.

Novel as a form cannot survive long here; with K, it will expire without a descent into something more closely resembling a human world.

In venturing into this strange realm, Coetzee's novel will never satisfy the scoring systems used by history or allegory. For even the attempt to acknowledge the text's idiocy (as I have tried to here) is of course to begin to drag it back from the borders of silence, to put it to work, to tell of it a story that is 'always wrong' (110). If this experience is not unfamiliar to the reader of Beckett and Kafka, it nevertheless retains a formidable power to disquiet. For such texts will not grant us a definitive answer to the question of whether or not the experience of reading them is of value. And this is not least because this question always somehow assumes the universal – it regards 'our' good – and perhaps because it (like history, like allegory) too much presumes to know what the good might be. Whatever the figure at the heart of Coetzee's novel knows, it is not a heroic truth, not a symbolic knowledge *for* (the collective, the future, history, redemption). Michael K's quixotic particularity, we might say, is the obverse of 'common sense'.