

**Irony and Otherness:
A Study of Some Recent South African Narrative Fiction**

by Johan Hendrik Geertsema

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A Study of Some Recent South African Narrative Fiction**

by Johan Hendrik Geertsema

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Abstract

This study considers the relation between irony and otherness. Chapter 2 shows that there is little agreement on the politics of irony in critical discussions. Nevertheless, irony and otherness do appear to be linked in many of these discussions. Chapter 3 offers a consideration of Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics in terms of his understanding of the other as *face* and *trace*. The tendency of language to foreclose on otherness by reducing it must be interrupted, while otherness must, nonetheless, be Said. The chapter concludes with an attempt to relate Levinas's conception of otherness – as the interruption of conceptualising otherness – to Paul de Man's conception of irony as permanent parabasis in terms of the tropes of prosopopoeia and catachresis. Any *representation* of the other must be interrupted continually as it is a prosopopoeia of otherness (in that it gives otherness a face) and therefore a catachresis (for the other has no face and must be *given* one). The task with which the (reading) self is faced is ironic in that it consists at once of positing and interrupting the face given to the other. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are attempts at reading the interplay of irony and otherness in selected recent South African fiction. Van Heerden's *Kikoejoe*, as an allegory of the refusal to narrativise otherness, is read as being caught in the double bind of irony; Matlou's *Life at Home* is read as a text intimating an otherness at the heart of domesticity and within the reader; and, finally, Coetzee's *Age of Iron* is read as a text in which confession is the nexus of the relation between irony and otherness.

This study brackets the political in order to examine the relationship between irony and otherness from the vantage point of Levinas's 'conception' of the other. The task remains to consider whether it is possible to approach irony ethically, or ethics ironically, and to consider the political ramifications of the relation between irony and otherness postulated in this study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A huge amount has been written on irony, and the need for yet another study of it might seem questionable. Yet, despite the volume of material on irony, no entirely satisfactory definition of irony seems to exist (cf. de Man 1996). Indeed, the very volume of writing on irony seems to imply that irony does not allow for exhaustive definitions. This would suggest that irony evinces a certain refractoriness to definition, which in turn suggests that irony may be resistant to conceptualisation.

Taking this basic assumption as its point of departure, the present study considers the relation between irony and otherness. In terms of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the other exceeds any determination made of it. No conceptualisation of otherness is, in principle, adequate. In fact, any such conceptualisation would reduce otherness. For this reason conceptualisations of otherness must be recognised as being inadequate to the other: conceptualisations of otherness are not 'natural' but linguistic. The confrontation with otherness entails at once a confrontation that is *immediate* and *mediated*. It is immediate because the other exceeds any mediating conceptualisation, yet it is mediated because it takes place in language. This would mean that any conceptualisation of otherness – including Levinas's – has to be recognised as not giving access to the other *an sich*, but as being a *representation* of otherness. Yet the other, in Levinas's conception, cannot be represented. Levinas's project is thus caught, inevitably, in an ironic double bind. It is my postulate that irony allows us not to misrecognise the (reductive) representation of the other for the other. Irony *interrupts* the representation of the other and draws attention to its representational status.

An immediate problem with regard to examining the relation between irony and otherness, concerns the kind of language to be used in the study. By this I mean the difficulty (also faced by Levinas) of writing about the beyond of being in the language of being. As Heidegger points out in *Being and Time*, "ancient ontology" understands being as presence:

The outward evidence of this – but of course *only* outward – is the determination of the meaning of being as *parousia* or *ousia*, which ontologically and temporally means 'presence' [*Anwesenheit*]. Beings are

grasped in their being as 'presence'; that is to say, they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time, the *present*.

(1996: 22)

This relation between the Greek terms *ousia* (being) and *parousia* (presence) makes clear that, to ancient ontology, the understanding of beings "has the temporal structure of a pure 'making present' of something. . . . [Genuine] beings . . . are conceived as presence (*ousia*)" (1996: 22-23). How is this language of presence to be escaped? As Levinas puts it, "As a speech directed upon the present, philosophy is an understanding of being, or an ontology, or a phenomenology" (1996c: 66).

It is one of the hypotheses of this study that the approach *by* the other, in language, and the consequent putting in question of the same and the self by the other in her or his proximity to that self, introduces into the language of presence as the thematisation and comprehension of beings in their being, an otherness which may be read, if not understood, as the staging of infinity through irony. The methodological question of transcending the language of presence is crucial within the context of this study: its title may, for example, by virtue of using the word 'otherness', be understood to imply that there is an essence of the other, or even an essential other. 'Otherness' would then be that essential quality which makes the other other, which, as it were, defines the being of the other, which would 'make present' the other to me. Clearly, such a conception of otherness would amount to reducing the other to a concept. It would be to circumscribe and comprehend the other, to place the other at the mercy of a self who would thus contain the other and destroy the otherness of the other, or even kill the other herself or himself. The other would no longer be other if its otherness were circumscribed and comprehended.¹

How then, is the otherness of the other to be maintained? Of course, this sentence in itself maintains a relation of power between the self as subject and the other as object. 'Maintaining otherness' sounds suspiciously like a Heideggerian 'letting be' of otherness, something Levinas rejects repeatedly because of the implied power of self over other such a relation would imply (cf. Levinas 1987a: 3; 1996: 6ff.). How is one then to write about otherness without circumscription and comprehension? These are questions which will remain unanswered, but which will continually hover over this study. The point needs to be made that this study is *not* an attempt to comprehend the other in her or his otherness. Rather, and at the risk of invalidating the study before it has properly begun, the study will be an attempt to

understand the *relation* between irony and otherness – understood not as a making present of the being of the other, but as the enigma of the other in her or his pastness: “*Alterity occurs as a divergency and a past which no memory could resurrect as a present*” (Levinas 1996c: 72; his italics). In very basic terms, the study will postulate a link between otherness and irony, and will propose that this link is to be found in *interruption*.

Not only does irony interrupt conceptualisations of otherness, but it also relativises one’s position towards the other. Irony unsettles clear-cut positions and oppositions. Perhaps because it tends to interrogate positions, to interrupt conceptualisations and thus disrupt reductions of all manner of otherness, there seems to be a general suspicion of irony. This would certainly seem to be the case in the South African context. Thus Zoë Wicomb (1993: 11), in an illuminating review of three post-apartheid anthologies of stories, parenthetically refers to irony as “that politically suspect trope”, without, however, explaining why it is that irony is so clearly politically suspect, or why it would be in need of being “rehabilitated”.² Indeed, an aspect of post-apartheid writing which has not received the attention due to it, is the relation of such writing to irony. This seems somewhat strange, particularly in view of the emphasis on irony in the influential critical paradigms of Njabulo Ndebele and Albie Sachs.³ In terms of these paradigms, apartheid writing in all its ‘spectacularity’ could be said to have been characterised by a *lack of irony*, while a thoroughly post-apartheid writing – that is, one rid of apartheid – would presumably be ironic in taking account of all the ambiguities of life. It is remarkable that, despite this insistence on irony in these two influential theorists of (post-)apartheid writing, little attention has been accorded this phenomenon in the criticism of post-apartheid art. Very little, if any, critical work has been done in which the mode of irony as it operates in late and post-apartheid writing, is considered.

Not only is irony routinely ignored in much critical writing on South African literature, but when it *is* mentioned it is, as often as not, dismissed as inconsequential. An important recent example of the routine dismissal of irony as expendable in the struggle against injustice is that of Michael Chapman in his *Southern African Literatures*. Referring to the condition of art under the emergency of the 1980s, Chapman (1996: 428-429) states that

What the expression of the emergency continues to remind us is that, in dangerous times throughout the South African story, many people who in other circumstances would have been less than artists have had to become more than artists. Without the protection of ambiguity, irony or even the expensive package of the literary book, they have had to find the words to speak out boldly against injustice.

Yet Chapman can continue, in the next sentence, to assert that his study “has defined literature broadly as the rhetorical act of writing and speaking” (1996: 429). Chapman, strangely, seems to be either of the opinion that irony is not rhetorical, or that it is not rhetorical enough and is, consequently, unable to serve the cause of justice. Such a view of irony is suspect because of the instrumentalist view of language it propounds. To Chapman, irony is something without the “protection” (1996: 428) of which people in the struggle against apartheid had to transcend the confines of the aesthetic, as if irony were an article of clothing with which to cloak, luxuriously, optionally, the stark realities of oppression in something dubious called ‘art’. Even worse, irony is lumped together with ambiguity and the elitism of the literary book as something behind which one can hide and which consequently obscures *real* meaning. Irony, to Chapman, is clearly a sign of inauthenticity. In its dismissal of irony as aesthetic luxury and inauthenticity, such a view merely manages to re-establish the New-Critical assumption that irony, on a formal level, can be used to transcend contradiction (cf. Dane 1991: 117, 153; Behler 1990: 102). Irony, tellingly associated by Chapman with ambiguity, separates essence and truth from phenomenal appearance and obscures the former by means of the latter. Chapman implies that irony necessarily involves a dialectic of essence and appearance (a highly questionable assumption),⁴ and that irony thus defined characterises an elitist approach to art which takes the latter as involving a moment of transcendence over history as essence and truth. On the contrary, Chapman states (with reference to the imbrication of certain “forms of expression” with the “hyper-reality of the emergency”) that “the issue for the literary critic is not whether or not Mzwakhe’s oral utterances, or Tutu’s sermons, have the ‘art’ to transcend their own moment” (1996: 428).

In dismissing irony in this way – in urgent times more drastic measures than mere irony are called for, measures which “speak out *boldly* against injustice” (1996: 429; my italics) – Chapman seems to be proposing the transcendence of the supposedly transcendent. That is, his view seems to be that irony involves the denial

– the false transcendence – of history and that this transcendence itself needs to be transcended by “speak[ing] out boldly against injustice”. Chapman thus manages to dismiss irony, if not as irresponsible, then at least as politically irrelevant. His conception of irony uses New Critical assumptions of irony and ambiguity which define art through conflating ‘art’ and ‘irony’ in the process by means of which works of art “transcend their own moment”. But, of course, Chapman only sets up such a conception of irony in order to dismiss it, and with it the type of art he thinks is characterised by it.⁵

Such a view of irony (which Chapman sets up only in order to dismiss) is closely related to a Romantic, post-Kantian heritage torn between “the relationship between subject and object – or aesthetic process and product” (Sychrava 1989: 51). Chapman’s view of irony (as underlying ‘art’) tends to conflate art and criticism and enables him to dismiss irony as supposedly allowing art to transcend the contradictions of history. Such a view is, ultimately, organicist and his dismissal of irony in political terms merely serves to underscore a general lack of agreement *vis-à-vis* the politics of irony.

I consider a number of divergent positions with regard to the politics of irony in Chapter 2. This chapter is an initial attempt at justifying this study in that I undertake to establish that there is, indeed, a link between irony and otherness. This link, in the work of the critics I consider, appears to be *political* in nature. But there seems to be little agreement on what the nature of the politics of irony might be in the approaches of these critics. I therefore, in Chapter 3, depart from the politics of irony in order to move towards a possible intersection between irony and otherness on the basis of Levinasian ethics. Where Chapter 2 may be said to move from irony *towards* otherness, Chapter 3 is an attempt to take the other as a point of departure for the discussion of irony. Irony itself is approached *vis-à-vis* Paul de Man’s understanding of this complex trope.⁶

The next three chapters consider three contemporary South African texts. Each chapter is an attempt to read a particular text with regard to the ways in which irony seems to be related to the representation of otherness. Chapter 4 considers Etienne van Heerden’s novel *Kikoejoe* (1996), Chapter 5 Joel Matlou’s *Life at Home* (1991), and Chapter 6 J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990). These texts were selected on the basis of a number of similarities they seem to evince, which would suggest that they might be fruitfully compared. It is significant, in the first place, that each of the

texts may be said to narrativise the past. Each, to a varying degree, is written in an *autobiographical* mode, and unsettles autobiographical procedures. As such, each text involves the interrogation of memory and its capacity reliably to recall, indeed, represent the past. This problem of the reliability of memory, which is central with respect to autobiography, is dealt with in autobiography by means of the trope of prosopopoeia. Thus the past is *faced* by the narrating subject: a face is given to the past and, consequently, to the narrating subject in the attempted recuperation of her or his past. But this ordering gesture – this prosopopoeia – is interrupted, or threatened with interruption, at least partially because of the very attempt to narrativise. In spite of the self-reflexive recognition in each text that the ordering gesture of narrative is just that – an *imposition* of order upon what has none, and therefore a linguistic rather than a natural process subject to uncertainty and unreliability – the urge to impose order, closure and completion compels the narrator to proceed.⁷

Because of the coexistence of the urge to narrate and the recognition of its impossibility, each text is caught in a dialectic involving at one and the same time a tendency towards closure *and* towards fragmentation. It is for this reason that each text may be said to be ironic in terms of form: despite the recognition of its incapacity to establish closure, completion and finality, each text nonetheless evinces attempts to achieve just such impossible finality. This dual tendency may explain the preoccupation of the texts I discuss with the radical absence that is death. Death figures prominently in *Kikoejoe* in the faceless servant Windpomp burning in the haystack. The Thing Kikoejoe itself is associated with time and death, while all the characters in the novel die and the farm goes to waste. In *Life at Home* death is not figured as such, but absence and madness nonetheless appear as key elements in the text. In *Age of Iron* the narrator of the novel speaks, impossibly, of her death.

In keeping with the retrospective gaze of the texts I discuss in this study, childhood is a constant preoccupation in them. Most of *Kikoejoe* and much of *Life at Home* have child narrators. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren is preoccupied with *her* childhood, as well as with her children (her daughter in America as much as her cancer). Not only is the future (death) given a face, but also the past (childhood). Prosopopoeia as the giving of a face to what has none thus features quite explicitly in all the texts I discuss.

In addition, this prosopopoeia is in each case interrupted and fragmented in the text. The end of *Age of Iron*, in its undecidability, makes of the novel a fragment.

Determining the import of the novel (whether it is 'positive' or 'negative', a statement of salvation or damnation) would ignore the essentially undecidable status of this text as fragment. *Life at Home*, as a short story cycle following in the wake of the farm novel, is explicitly an exercise in interruption and fragmentation. *Kikoejoe* explicitly thematises its fragmentary nature in its unreliability with regard to the recuperation of the past.

Because of the preoccupation with its status *vis-à-vis* the past and its inadequacy, its fragmentariness in the face of the past, one should not find it surprising that *writing* itself is an important facet in each text. *Kikoejoe* is, self-reflexively, written as a *bricolage* by the retrospectively Fabian. Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter, which constitutes *Age of Iron*, provides a focus on the written nature of the text by drawing attention to its status as writing in the face of death. Moreover, the letter is interrupted by the extra-linguistic, the contingency of the other upon which the letter depends as much as the other which is death. *Life at Home* self-consciously plays with language, in particular so-called Standard English. It is also explicitly self-referential as quasi-autobiography.

The above common tendencies with respect to the three texts discussed in this study, should serve to some extent to justify their selection. As should be clear by now, the danger any reading faces (including the ones in which I engage in this study) is that of reducing the otherness of the text it reads. In particular, my readings here might result in further readings, which would bring into play the issue of canonisation. Derek Attridge (1994: 250) has argued, with regard to Coetzee in particular but also to literature in general, that the process of canonisation entails domestication, that is, a reduction in otherness because "traditionally [it has been] the task of criticism and pedagogy . . . to *reduce* otherness in the texts it reads". This problem is exacerbated, as Attridge recognises, in the case of canonised authors and works. And J. M. Coetzee, of course, is a largely canonised author, the recipient of many prizes and the subject of many books and essays. *Age of Iron* in particular has been the subject of much critical activity, the result of which would be, in terms of Attridge's argument, that its otherness will have been significantly reduced already prior to my engagement with this text. The same applies to the work of Etienne van Heerden, who is an important writer in Afrikaans literature. Nonetheless, at the time I wrote the chapter on it, *Kikoejoe* was still a very recent text and had in fact not even been translated into English (the fact that it has since been translated of course may imply that it is being

canonised). In contrast to *Age of Iron*, there is therefore a comparative paucity of work on *Kikoejoe*. Similarly, despite his celebration by Ndebele, the work of Joël Matlou has been, relatively speaking, neglected by critics. The important point I am making here is that each text, whether canonised or not, tends to have its otherness reduced in being read, something of which I am very aware and which I have tried to counteract in my readings by (ironically) *unreading* readings, including my own.

As it happens, each of the texts I discuss is also engaged in reading (or *unreading*) canonised texts. Whether the texts I consider respect the otherness of the texts *they* reread, is an interesting and important question on which I have not elaborated in this study. Nevertheless, the canon does play an implicit role in my discussions. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren is a retired classics lecturer who has spent her life giving voice to the dead in her study of ancient languages. Indeed, the text may be read as a rereading of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as of a number of other texts (such as Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Virgil's *Aeneid* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). *Kikoejoe* explicitly engages with Van Wyk Louw's *Raka* as well as with the work of Olive Schreiner, and *Life at Home* (perhaps less explicitly) with the farm novel (for instance, Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith). Clearly, classics are implicitly of some importance with respect to the readings in which I engage here.

Even though Attridge's statement quoted above is correct, one might argue, in view of de Man's paper on Benjamin, that it is in fact the otherness implicit in the canonisation process which allows texts to survive. If theory, criticism and translation serve to canonise texts, then these processes inherent in canonisation uncover an otherness at the heart of the text being subjected to them. Canonisation would then not only be a conservative force, but would enable otherness to 'appear' in texts:

Both criticism and translation are caught in the gesture which Benjamin calls ironic, a gesture which undoes the stability of the original by giving it a definitive, canonical form in the translation or the theorization. In a curious way, translation canonizes its own version more than the original was canonical. That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation; it cannot be definitive since it can be translated. . . . The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice. . . . [In the work performed by a translator] the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority. . . .

(de Man 1986: 82-83)⁸

It is my hope that this study, in examining the relation between irony and otherness, will also make apparent the otherness implicit in the texts I read. In that case, my readings would not only destabilise these texts, but also indicate the degree to which they enact destabilisation in the act of being read.

Notes

- 1 This implies that it may not necessarily be a *lack* of understanding which would result in the destruction of otherness by the self, but precisely the self's *understanding* of the otherness of the other. Understanding would thus be understood as comprehension, as reduction of otherness, as adequation of otherness to sameness, as taking the other in terms of the same in not respecting the otherness and difference of the other.
- 2 As it happens, I agree with Wicomb that the politics of irony is anything but clear. It is for this reason that I, after Chapter 2, attempt to move away from a consideration of the *political* nature of the relation between irony and otherness.
- 3 I examine at greater length these paradigms in Chapter 5.
- 4 See Lang's (1988: 35ff.) elaborate discussion of this dialectic, involving as it does the binary "phenomenon-opposed-to-essence, expression-opposed-to-meaning".
- 5 This is a move which may be associated with a post-Kantian Romantic aesthetics indebted to Schiller, as noted by Sychrava (1989). Briefly, to Schiller the two aesthetic modes of the naive and the sentimental "must be harmoniously reconciled in a higher synthesis" (Sychrava: 1989: 13) so that "the whole of rational man and the whole of sensuous man [may be brought] to a conscious reconciliation in the aesthetic state" (1989: 25). However, according to Sychrava (cf. 1989: 46ff.), Romantic aesthetics draws on Schiller's distinction between the naive and the sentimental while ignoring his attempt at synthesising these two opposite modes. This results in a privileging of the sentimental over the naive, which is set up as a kind of straw man for the sole reason of pulling it down, thus to strengthen the sentimental. Dane (cf. 1991: 9, 81), similarly, identifies the tendency in much theory of irony to set up two kinds of irony, one rhetorical and one other than rhetorical. In this move, rhetorical irony is set up simply to be dismissed in favour of the second type of irony. In Chapman's case, it seems as if a kind of irony is set up in order thus to dismiss irony as such.
- 6 I do not approach de Man's work in terms of the "reevaluation of the ethics of deconstruction" (Buell 1999: 8) subsequent to the posthumous republication of his wartime journalism for the reason that this study is not primarily concerned with the ethics of irony (nor with its politics), but with its relation to otherness (which might, indeed, have ethical implications). 'Alterity', 'otherness' and

'the other' are, of course, key terms in the current flowering of ethical approaches to literature. See Attridge (1999: 21-22) for a consideration of the import of these terms.

- 7 This urge may, of course, be understood in terms of desire. In other words, the presence of an urge towards totality lends itself towards a psychoanalytic consideration of narrative, something which falls outside of the purview of this thesis.
- 8 J. M. Coetzee makes a similar, ironic point as far as the role of criticism with regard to the survival of 'the classic' is concerned (cf. Coetzee 1993: 20).

Chapter 2

Approaches to Irony: Towards Otherness

2.1 Introduction

This chapter has three main strands. It is concerned with attempting to define irony more clearly, establish that there is a relation between irony and otherness, and indicate that this relation is taken by critics as having a political nature.

The main purpose of this chapter is to establish that there is a relation between irony and otherness and, in the course of this attempt, to clarify the concept irony itself. The second purpose is to consider how the relation between irony and otherness figures in some recent studies of irony, and to indicate the importance of the political nature of this relation in these studies. Thus the chapter, if not this thesis, may be said to be concerned broadly with the politics of irony.¹

In this chapter I elaborate concepts of irony, working towards a usable concept of irony for this study. I do this fully aware of having to justify the current enterprise and of the difficulty of defining a usable concept of irony. Anyone embarking on yet another study involving irony – as I am doing here – faces a daunting task. So much has been written on irony over the last couple of decades, not to mention the last two millennia (cf. Hutcheon 1994: 1ff.; 35; 44-45), and such a diversity of functions have been ascribed to it (cf. Dane 1991: 8ff.; Hutcheon 1994: 56), that any attempt at comprehensiveness is doomed from the outset.² This is why I wish to use this chapter to indicate where my focus *vis-à-vis* irony lies – on otherness – and to provide some justification for this focus.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section I attempt to delineate a conceptual background to irony at the same time as establishing a link between irony and otherness. I do this with reference to three recent studies, those of Dane (1991), Hutcheon (1994) and Behler (1990). Each of these studies, useful as it is, has a focus different from that of the present one. Dane emphasises the politics of irony as a *critical* construct, while Hutcheon investigates the politics of irony in terms of what might be called its ‘empirics’, its uses. Behler, on the other hand, devotes his attention to the relation between irony and the discourse of modernity. That is, in terms of self-reflexivity, irony is seen as being symptomatic of the self-contradictory nature of the move beyond the modern.

In the second section, I focus briefly on the problematic nature of the politics of irony (already evident in the discussions by Dane, Hutcheon and Behler) in terms of the relation between irony and transcendence. I do this with reference to Shershow's (1986) book on comedy and Lang's (1988) distinction between 'irony' and 'humour', and discuss Flay's (1990) essay on dialectic in order more clearly to define the relation between irony and transcendence.

2.2 *Approaches to Irony*

2.2.1 *Irony and the Politics of Criticism*

One of the problems confronting any discussion of irony is what Joseph Dane (1991) calls the critical mythology of irony. The term 'irony', Dane argues, is essentially a nineteenth and twentieth century appropriation and domestication of a philosophical concept which may be related to Plato's Socratic dialogues. In effect, the concept of irony was perverted by the Romantics and, via them, became the hallmark of Great Literature to the New Critics, their "principle of structure" (Behler 1990: 102).

Because of his belief that, historically, irony has become an instrument of criticism tending towards the displacement of authority (on to the critic and away from the author and text) rather than – as it ought to be – a rhetorical tool, Dane situates his survey of the history of irony in terms of its "critical function" (1991: 6) and states quite clearly that his interest lies not so much in irony as a *linguistic* than as a *critical* phenomenon. As he puts it, "ironies are not embedded in texts awaiting discovery" (1991: 4) and, of definitions of so-called 'Romantic irony', he repeats his general point that "These definitions (as well as their critiques) are actually readings of selected romantic literature and evaluations of that literature. Romantic irony is itself a product of such readings and of associated critical polemic" (1991: 73). On the contrary, rather than being 'found' in texts, irony "lies at the intersection of [two] views" (1991: 6), each of these being critical with "one directed toward the literature [on irony] and its history . . . [and] the other toward the critical reception of that literature" (1991: 6). Dane's study examines the ways irony has been used by various critics – "my object of study is the critical institution" (1991: 5) – and attempts to determine the political consequences of such uses.

Dane calls irony a "critical myth" (1991: 5) the purpose of which has been, as was noted above, to shift interpretive authority to the critic. It is worthwhile quoting

at some length the passage in which Dane lodges his initial accusation against an authoritarianism masquerading as liberation from that very authoritarianism:

Irony, however defined, always suggests an authority. The history of irony outlined here will show a shift in that authority: from the domination of spoken statements by intended meanings, to the usurping of that linguistic authority by the romantic writer, to the final usurping of that authority by the postromantic critic. This final move entails the reconception of the ironist, who becomes associated more with the critic than with the poet. . . . In its history, irony generally involves an authority (for example, the authority of meaning over statement in rhetorical irony). In deriding such an authority or claiming to eliminate it altogether, critics only relocate that authority in themselves.

(1991: 11)

The target of the vehemence evident in this passage is, in particular, the tendency Dane identifies in some “recent structural studies of irony” (1991: 9) which, he points out, “attempt to define irony (or types of irony) by opposing it to another term or terms” (1991: 9). Nonetheless, while earlier definitions are ostensibly rejected, “the most heated attempts to revise definitions of irony have consistently repeated the assumptions underlying earlier definitions” (1991: 81). Thus it would seem that there is a tendency to define irony in such a way as to denigrate ‘traditional’ definitions of irony in order to privilege the irony defined by the critic as being somehow superior to earlier, inadequate definitions. This tendency has the result of enabling the critic to present her/his view of irony – and therefore herself or himself – as somehow superior to the views s/he discards. At the start of his study, Dane (1991: 9-10; 194, note 15) cites two examples of this tendency: those of Wilde (1987) and Lang (1988). Furthermore, and this is a point of some importance to this study, Dane traces this tendency to German Romanticist conceptions of irony, in particular those of Schlegel, Solger and Müller (cf. 1991: 82, 126). According to Dane (cf. 1991: 124, 126), in critical conceptions of Romantic irony two types of irony are without fail identified: “A common strategy in the scholarly development of the notion of romantic irony . . . has been to divide romantic irony into two forms: either a higher and lower form . . . or a theoretical and practical form. . . .” (1991: 75-76).³ To Dane, such an approach to irony repeats the elitism inherent in any account of irony, and therefore inherent in irony itself as an hierarchical phenomenon (cf. 1991: 81).⁴

Irony has come to be associated indubitably, via the Romantics, with the New Critics and their particular critical ideology. It might be worthwhile at this point to follow Mileur's discussion of organicism and its link with irony. According to Mileur (1998: 199), "irony in this new romantic, modern sense . . . becomes virtually identical with critical and theoretical writing *about* literature". Mileur (1998: 201) attempts to trace this Romantic change in the definition of irony, according to which it was no longer seen as "merely another trope in the taxonomy of classical rhetoric: saying one thing while meaning another", a trope, moreover, which was deemed to have "a relatively isolated and finite effect". Instead of being regarded as a trope with limited provenance, irony came to be viewed as being a "defining characteristic of whole works and even genres" (Mileur 1998: 201). This development may be characterised as a movement from a conception of irony as *litotes* to one which understands it in terms of hyperbole: "The Schlegelian expansion of irony enacts a shift from a litotic to a hyperbolic conception of its operation, more commonly associated with 'Literature,' which is to say literature that is also its own theory or philosophy. . . ." (Mileur 1998: 201).⁵

Mileur states that Friedrich Schlegel's appropriation of the sentimental – despite Schlegel's exaggeration of the difference between Schiller's category of the sentimental and his ironic appropriation of it – is what, among other things, leads to "the new ideal of the work of literature that is also its own theory" (1998: 207). Similarly, Sychrava takes irony as a sentimental phenomenon and comments that viewing "poetry as [involving] ironic or self-critical consciousness" (1989: 51) is the result of the "contrived coincidence of theory and practice" (1989: 51), which to her is a definition of poetry that may be ascribed to what she terms a "sentimental principle" (1989: 52). The criticism of poetry itself is taken to be poetic, while irony is deemed a defining characteristic of both poetry and criticism-as-poetry. According to Sychrava, these tendencies (of collapsing criticism and poetry, as well as poetry and irony) entail a sentimental move by the Romantics and result in organicist conceptions of the text, which is taken to be a whole.⁶

It is such a conception of the text as an organic whole – which allegedly can be traced back to Romantic conceptions of irony – that, according to Dane, allows critics to take irony as a unifying structural principle (cf. 1991: 153). Dane's entire thesis may be said to consist of a polemic against this organicism (as it functions in critical approaches) and its roots in a hyperbolic conception of irony.

Romantic irony for Dane is mythological because it shifts the emphasis on irony as a mode of (literary) production to irony as a (critical) tool of reading, a shift which can be traced back to the mediaeval association of irony with allegory: “The apparently innocent association of the word [irony] with allegory in Isidore [of Seville] is significant. Irony . . . shifts from a word dealing with literary production to one dealing with literary reception” (1991: 54). This shift causes irony to become “a powerful interpretive tool” (1991: 54) and results in “a refocusing of the question of irony onto the reader-exegete” (1991: 54-55).

To Dane this is also the crux of Romantic approaches to irony. Thus Romantic aesthetics privileges the critic as artist (cf. 1991: 117), which enables New Critical approaches to literature to use “irony as a tool for analyzing literary works of art. The notions of irony that developed in the nineteenth century can be considered a bridge: the ironist changes in character from a philosopher-poet to a critic” (1991: 121). This change is analogous to the mediaeval shift from the author and text to the (critical) reader of that text, a shift from a perception of irony as a rhetorical tool functioning in terms of litotes to an emphasis on irony as a structural principle to be discovered by the critic. Moreover, Dane also emphasises that this shift not only privileges the critic over the author and the text, but also implies a sly, elitist hierarchy involving initiates and those excluded from and unaware of irony. Dane explicitly traces this alleged elitism back to Romantic, in particular Schlegelian conceptions of irony (cf. 1991: 150, 155, 158).⁷

Thus, according to Dane, a New Critic such as Cleanth Brooks saw irony as a mark of excellence in poetry: “Brooks applied the word [irony] to lyric poetry, strengthened the evaluative force of the word, and attempted to redefine irony not as a vertical hierarchy of statement and meaning but rather as a horizontal tension. Ironic literature was better than other literature. . . .” (Dane 1991: 149). The audience needed to appreciate such ‘superior’ literature (even though it is supposed to be the result of a horizontal, democratic impulse) is in essence elitist. Indeed, the democratic impulse perceived in irony is inherently fallacious to Dane: “. . . irony can never be fully democratized, even in New Critical hands” (1991: 151; cf. 157). He argues that irony *always* implies a vertical relation, a hierarchy, and therefore authority.

Associating irony with ambiguity and tension, as the New Critics did, implies a dissolution of authority *vis-à-vis* the ironic statement. However, according to Dane, when “romantic poets or New Critics assert such a multiplicity of competing

meanings and call that multiplicity irony, they adopt for themselves the role of authority attributed in rhetorical irony to an articulable meaning” (1991: 143). All conceptions of irony, whether overtly or not, appeal to authority and are therefore explicitly or implicitly progeny of ancient rhetorical irony:

. . . my argument here is that the popularity of the word irony in literary criticism is firmly rooted in the implications of rhetorical irony. Rhetorical irony involves an appeal to an absent authority – a meaning opposed to its superficial statement. Under later theoretical forms of irony, such an authority is not canceled; it is rather displaced, either onto the poet (romantic irony) or onto the critic. . . . Rather than a subversion of authority, what this history reveals is a displacement of authority. The authority of the poet’s meaning has yielded to the authority of the poet’s sensibility, and to the authority of the critic who analyzes these matters.

(Dane 1991: 136-137)

Dane warns against the way in which New Criticism, under the influence of German Romanticism, and in keeping with the history of irony viewed as a mythologising of irony (a process Dane attempts to sketch in his book) defines irony against itself.⁸ In other words, irony is sought to be defined and valorised against another conception, often called ‘rhetorical irony’.

Despite Dane’s methodological warning, though, it seems that conceptions of irony will inevitably have to be contrasted in terms of the degree to which they are adequate for the task at hand. As far as this thesis is concerned, in focusing on a particular manifestation or version of irony, moreover, I do not hope to valorise that version against other, supposedly less adequate versions. Nonetheless, even though this is not my aim, it might on occasion quite conceivably be both possible and necessary to do just that.

Thus Hutcheon (1994: 61ff.), for instance, points to the implications of viewing irony as more-or-less corresponding to *antiphrasis* – a view which might be said to parallel that identified by Dane as being the traditional, ‘proper’ view of irony. She shows how such a view of irony is inadequate and reductive because it is unable to account for some empirical manifestations of irony and indicates that this is a view based on an overly simplified understanding of the way irony happens.

And Lang’s discussion of irony/humour, even though it operates in terms of two views of irony which are set up against each other (as Dane indicates), one of which approximates the rhetorical conception of irony as a trope, is valuable in that it

points out some of the problematic aspects of taking irony to be a trope. Understanding irony as a trope “entails the elimination of contradiction within the original utterance and/or between the utterance and its context, by transporting the true meaning of the expression *elsewhere*” (Lang 1988: 43). Such a view of irony would accord with Lang’s characterisation of irony as conservative. As it tends towards closure, authority, and clarity, this method of interpreting irony involves “the replacement of an illogical or unacceptable utterance with an acceptable, logical one”, with the object being “to phrase in logical, coherent language an original intention that unifies all parts of the text by subordinating them to a central core of meaning” (1991: 43). Lang contrasts this view of irony with another so radically different that she forgoes the name “irony” and calls it “humor” (cf. 1991: 35).⁹

Dane’s rejoinder to this would be that laying claim to authority is part of the structure of irony, and that consequently it is not true that some forms of irony do *not* “[transport] the true meaning of the expression *elsewhere*”.¹⁰ Apart from accusing Lang (to my mind persuasively) of misreading Barthes and Derrida (cf. 1991: 171), Dane reiterates his oft-repeated point that distinguishing forms of irony in terms of a dichotomy involving an inadequate (often rhetorical) irony surpassed by a more adequate definition, is to use irony in the services of a particular critical position, and therefore amounts to an exercise in the politics of the institution of criticism: “To assume a good and a bad form of irony is useful primarily as a weapon for promulgating new theories of irony and denouncing old ones, as Barthes himself realized full well” (1991: 169).

In Dane’s estimation, then, the critical history of irony tells us a lot about the institution of criticism and not that much at all about literary texts, the objects of that criticism. Irony tells us more about the critics who discern or attribute it (to use Hutcheon’s term) for purposes of scoring points, than it does about any particular (literary) text. While Dane’s wide-ranging study may serve as a useful point of departure concerning the politics of irony – or rather, the politics of the institution of criticism – his dismissal of almost all critical work concerning irony, and his reduction of all irony to rhetorical irony on the basis of his implicit belief that irony is inherently elitist and authoritarian, seems unproductive of a better understanding of irony itself. It is in order to reach such an initial understanding that I would now like to turn to Linda Hutcheon’s recent comprehensive book on the subject.

2.2.2 Politics and the Uses of Irony

As far as the politics of irony is concerned, the first point that needs to be made here is that Hutcheon disagrees with Dane's notion that irony is *necessarily* elitist and hierarchical, or, at least, disputes the idea that irony functions in terms of an implied superiority involving different parties.¹¹ On the contrary, she persuasively argues that irony is dependent for its efficacy on shared or overlapping discursive communities, while limiting the supposed elitism of irony to one particular function of irony, namely the 'aggregative' (cf. 1994: 54). Apart from this function, which she says is one of the functions operating on the basis of discursive communities – which, to her, constitute a *sine qua non* of irony: discursive communities enable irony rather than the other way around (cf. Hutcheon 1994: 18; 54) – Hutcheon identifies a number of other possible functions of irony. Her approach celebrates the plural nature of irony: she recognises that it is possible to identify different functions of irony and that one should not delimit the concept too closely, which should not be taken to imply that for Hutcheon it is impossible to define irony clearly.¹²

On the most basic level, Hutcheon defines irony by distinguishing it clearly from other rhetorical figures on the basis of its affective dimension: "Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to evoke emotional responses. . . . That affective dimension of irony's edge is the starting point of this study; it is also its (deliberate) limitation" (Hutcheon 1994: 2). In terms of this "affective dimension" of irony, which involves its "evaluative edge", Hutcheon delimits the aims of her study by saying that hers is an attempt "to understand how and why irony is used and understood as a discursive practice or strategy" (1994: 3), focusing in particular "on how irony comes into existence (or does not) for me as an interpreter" (1994: 4). She states that her "concern here is more with inference than with implication, more with the attribution of irony than with any 'original' intent to ironize" (1994: 45). That is, the focus of Hutcheon's study is the process by which irony comes to be 'attributed' (cf. 1994: 3, 5) by the interpreter. Her focus is thus deliberately more empirical and political than philosophical (to use these terms in an extremely broad sense), which is not at all to suggest that her work is not philosophically sophisticated.¹³ But Hutcheon's study is overtly concerned with how irony "happens" (1994: 12; cf. 89ff.), in what might be

termed 'real-life situations': what generates it, what effects it might have – that is, how irony *works*.

This is quite evident from Hutcheon's schematic exposition – in the course of an attempt to define more clearly how, exactly, irony may work – of the ironic situation from the different points of view of the ironist and the interpreter:

From the point of view of the *interpreter*, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon. However, from the point of view of what I too (with reservations) will call the *ironist*, irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented.

(Hutcheon 1994: 11; her emphasis)

What is evident from this passage – apart from Hutcheon's 'empirical' focus (compare her use of terms like "move", "evidence", "markers", "transmission") – is the importance to the ironic event of *difference*, of the presence of absence. Hutcheon makes the important point that irony "is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated"; it involves "an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid"; "irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented". And she adds that irony

happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. . . . [The] said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter . . . to create the real 'ironic' meaning. The 'ironic' meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said . . . : it is always different – *other than* and more than the said.

(1994: 12-13)

Hutcheon's emphasis on this aspect of the ironic event leads to a thorough investigation of variables such as race, gender and interest which are involved in the creation of the discursive communities (cf. 1994: 18ff. & 89-115) which furnish the contexts – both the context and the difference in context – within which irony can happen. In a restatement and refinement of her initial definitions of irony, Hutcheon states that "For me, it [irony] is the superimposition or rubbing together of these

meanings (the said and plural unsaid) with a critical edge created by a difference of context that makes irony happen" (1994: 19).

While Hutcheon's emphasis on difference and, indeed, otherness is provocative and provides some justification for a closer investigation of the relation between irony and otherness, it needs to be emphasised that my study is not particularly concerned with *how* irony works as a speech act, nor with what Hutcheon calls its "affective dimension" (1994: 2). Nonetheless, a basic understanding of this process is important for the reason that my study focuses on one aspect which to Hutcheon *always* seems to be involved in the ironic event: otherness. But the present study will, as it were, bracket empirical occurrences of the phenomenon irony and move on, or rather step back, beyond the politics of irony and towards the ethical.

Hutcheon's discussion is admirable in the way it very persuasively addresses the tendency to view irony as a 'rhetorical' figure – often equated with antiphrasis, in terms of which the unsaid is equated with the opposite of what is said and thus with the ironic – without falling victim to Dane's objections discussed above concerning the definition of irony against another, supposedly simpler definition. Hutcheon indicates, on the contrary, the complexity of the phenomenon irony and does not valorise her own more adequate view of it, which is that a model of irony based on the logical exclusion of opposites – one of which is said, another unsaid – is simplistic. As we have seen, according to Hutcheon ironic meaning is "not necessarily [constituted] only by an *either/or* substitution of opposites but by *both* the said *and* the unsaid working together to create something new. The semantic 'solution' of irony would then hold in suspension the said plus something *other than* and in *addition to* it that remained unsaid" (Hutcheon 1994: 63; cf. 12, 19, 39, 89).

It is on this "*other than*" that I focus in this thesis, specifically *vis-à-vis* the problem of defining the excess of meaning which is different to both the said and the unsaid, to use Hutcheon's terms for a moment. A point which is to be elaborated on in the next chapter needs to be made here, namely that this study operates on another, more abstract level, and with another problem: that of the representation of otherness. And an immediate question which arises is whether it is possible at all to represent otherness if it exceeds, as Hutcheon seems to imply, both the said and the unsaid. Might such a representation of otherness by means of irony not, ironically, be viewed as resulting in the dissolving of otherness within the ironic communicative act? If irony lies in the otherness beyond what is said and not said, does it not per

definition disappear when the irony is understood? And if the otherness of irony lies beyond what is said and what remains unsaid, does this mean that otherness is ultimately recuperated in the course of ironic communication?¹⁴

The event of understanding what is other (which seems, to Hutcheon, always to be required if irony is to be understood) – that is, an understanding of what is other by virtue of an understanding of the irony involved in a given communicative process through the interplay of the other – would, rather, amount to *not* understanding the other. This is so because understanding the other would reduce the otherness of the other. Irony cannot lead to a greater understanding of what is other because that would reduce its otherness. This is to say that irony cannot be *located* in otherness, but that irony might infinitely approach otherness in terms of the problem of understanding and thus annihilating it.¹⁵

The objection might be raised here that this event may also be understood in any number of additional ways, for instance as paradox (cf. Hutcheon 1994: 62, 64ff.), or in terms of parody and allegory, in particular as regards the etymology of allegory, implying as it does an “other speaking” through *allegoresis* as interpretation (cf. Ulmer 1982: 558). Indeed, it will be the burden of the next chapter to elaborate, among other things, the complicated relation between irony and allegory, in particular as worked out by Paul de Man. The reason for situating the paradoxical event of representing the other – the interplay, or even the appearance and thus re-presentation of otherness – within the ambit of irony rather than other tropes, lies in the important link which, hypothetically, may be drawn between irony and otherness: each is potentially infinite. And each, while linguistic, *escapes* language. The other, even though it appears in language, can never be apprehended in that language, while irony, similarly, even though it operates in language, exhausts language or the attempt to close it off so it can mean fully.¹⁶ As Hutcheon says, it seems that “we can use language to convey messages that are different from what we are actually saying” (1994: 58), that is, messages which exceed the language that we use.¹⁷

These points are not to be taken as exaggerated claims for the provenance, effect, or power of irony. I do not subscribe to views of irony which inflate its significance as some sort of master trope or way of seeing the world, and, on this point, find myself in full agreement with Hutcheon’s assertion relating to her study: “. . . it does not treat irony as a keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of

knowledge, a philosophical stance *vis-à-vis* the universe, an informing principle of personality, or a way of life. . . ." (Hutcheon 1994: 3).

However, where Hutcheon limits herself to questions relating to "how and why irony is used and understood as a discursive practice or strategy" (1994: 3), my study departs from hers in its emphasis: it is concerned with irony, not as a "practice or strategy" (which does not mean to imply that irony is not or cannot be *used* as a "practice or strategy"), but precisely as an *effect* of the other rather than the *action* of the subject. My focus is not on the employment of irony (and the point needs to be stressed again that this should not be construed as a denial of such a possibility) by a subject in control – or not – of irony, but rather on irony as it is generated *beyond* the subject, be the subject that of irony (the 'ironist'), or the interpreter, or the butt of irony. My use of the terms 'understanding' and 'comprehension' involves something other than the empirical relation between the ironist generating an ironic effect "and the comprehending (attributing) interpreter not far below" (Hutcheon 1994: 54), a relationship which implies a hierarchy resulting from an "assumption of superiority and sophistication on the part of both the ironist and the intended (that is, comprehending) interpreter – at the expense of some uncomprehending and thus excluded audience" (Hutcheon 1994: 55). It is for this reason that I shall shy away from terms used by Hutcheon such as "the intending ironist" or "the intended receiver" (1994: 6), even though she does qualify her use of terms related to "intentionality" (1994: 11) by making clear that some ironies may *not* be intended (cf. 1994: 10) because of irony's "indirection", which may result in "attribution" and "interpretation" of irony taking place "regardless of the intentions of the ironist" (1994: 11).¹⁸

Given her focus on the empirics and politics of irony, the effects it has and how it works in everyday life, Hutcheon's study may be said to fall within the ambit of 'cultural studies'. She "uses the public controversy over the interpretation of a particular cultural text (a museum exhibition)" (1994: 4-5), and her examples come "from a range of media – music, fiction, academic discourse, film, opera and popular music performances, visual art, museum exhibits" (1994: 5). Hutcheon emphasises that irony occurs "in all kind of discourses (verbal, visual, aural), in common speech as well as in highly crafted aesthetic form, in so-called high art as well as in popular culture" (1994: 5).

Throughout these various instances of irony, Hutcheon stresses the *performative* nature of irony: “I have sometimes chosen ironies with public and discernible consequences. . . . Hence, the emphasis on performances, because of the overtly public and social nature of their reception” (1994: 5).¹⁹

A key problem in relation to the politics of irony in use (with which this study will not be concerned) is determining whether it is conservative, or subversive and oppositional. In feminist circles, for instance, there is both a “suspicion of irony’s instability” and a “realization of the power that lies in its potential to destabilize” (Hutcheon 1994: 31),²⁰ which Hutcheon ascribes to the “transideological nature of irony: people of all political persuasions have been known both to endorse and to condemn its use” (1994: 46). A similar problem is evident with respect to the political relation with the other as regards postmodernity, as articulated in the study by Behler (1990), to which I would like to turn next.

2.2.3 *Irony, Postmodernity, Politics*

Hutcheon’s study of irony makes explicit reference to the relation between irony and what is other, and recognises the nature of the politics of this relation as a problem. Similarly, the important relation between irony and otherness (with which this thesis is primarily concerned), as well as the relation between irony and politics (with which it is not), forms an important moment in Ernst Behler’s (1990) study of irony. This is evident, for instance, in Behler’s following general description of irony:

The ironic manner of expression can be described as attempting to transcend the restrictions of normal discourse and straightforward speech by making the ineffable articulate, at least indirectly, through a great number of verbal strategies, and accomplishing what lies beyond the reach of direct communication. This attitude, however, automatically constitutes an offense to common reason and understanding. . . . Socrates was the first example for that constellation.

(Behler 1990: 111)

Behler here links irony with both otherness and politics. Irony involves making the “ineffable articulate”. This ineffable (which is other) lies “beyond the reach of direct communication” and therefore cannot be grasped. For this reason irony involves the transcendence of “the restrictions of normal discourse”, something which “constitutes

an offense to common reason and understanding". The example of Socrates' execution by the Athenians completes the link between irony and otherness via politics.

Behler's description of irony not only convincingly establishes the importance of the complex interrelationship among irony, otherness and transcendence, but also enables a first consideration of what is perhaps the key problem with which my study is concerned. If irony is, as Behler contends, an attempt at transcending ordinary language – albeit indirectly – to make present ("articulate") what is not present ("ineffable", other), then the implication is that irony *presents* otherness.²¹ Irony would then be a strategy in the service of reducing the other to the same, and would collaborate in the metaphysical project of establishing understanding as presence to the self. Irony would become a subspecies of understanding in its comprehension of what is not to be comprehended and its articulation of the ineffable, *despite* the offence this would apparently give to understanding and reason. Ordinary language – as normal, direct and straightforward – would be the vehicle of understanding and reason, while ironic language – as abnormal and indirect – would become the vehicle for gaining access to and a grasp on what is *beyond* both ordinary language and its understanding. Irony would make understandable that which is beyond understanding. This is to say that irony, ultimately, would be *the* tool of understanding. Ironically, irony would only *seem* to give offence to common sense.

Despite Behler's distinction between two kinds of irony,²² the second of which he associates with Romanticism and subsequently with postmodernity/postmodernism,²³ it needs to be pointed out that the distance between the irony which appears in the course of his study and the rhetorical irony he rejects, does not seem as vast as appears initially. Behler distinguishes between kinds of irony by linking what he calls a "new notion of irony" with "the consciousness of literary modernity that marked the beginning of romanticism" (1990: 75). This new notion of irony Behler opposes to "rhetorical irony" (1990: 81) which allows for the actual communication of intended meaning: "Although in rhetorical irony the intention of the speaker is contrary to what he actually says, rules insure that we actually understand the intended meaning. This irony is based on complete agreement, perfect understanding between speaker and listener, and an absolute notion of truth" (1990: 81).

The new notion of irony, in contradistinction to rhetorical irony, subverts such complete understanding through the link between all forms of irony and otherness.

To Behler, irony “is not to be taken in any restricted literary meaning, but in that broad mode of saying it otherwise, of circumlocution, configuration, and indirect communication characteristic of today’s humanistic and scientific discourses” (1990: vii).

Behler’s linkage of irony and otherness finds expression in a trajectory which traces the extension to poetry of the notion of infinite perfectibility, and therefore of progress, evident in Romantic writing. This notion forms a crucial component of modernity as a mode of self-awareness. Behler traces the link between irony and otherness via modernity through Romantic writers like Friedrich Schlegel and Mme de Staël, and asserts this link as being of a defining nature with regard to not only modernity but also postmodernity. Thus, in his discussion of Schlegel’s conception of Romantic poetry, Behler emphasises the central position of irony and its link with otherness: “Since total communication is impossible, poetry transforms itself into indirect communication, into saying it otherwise, by spacing and temporalizing. The imagination therefore finds its necessary correspondence in irony, in ironic construction. . . .” (1990: 67). And, in terms of Mme de Staël’s consideration of modern literature in terms of perfectibility, Behler delineates the characteristics of modern poetry²⁴ in opposition to those of ancient poetry in terms of the link between irony and otherness:

Ancient poetry, to use the later distinctions between classicism and romanticism, is that of a full identity with itself, or self-presence, perfect integrality, and a harmonious display of poetic power and joy in life. Modern poetry is that of longing, nonidentity, otherness, reflection, dissimulation, and melancholy. . . .

(1990: 54)

Finally, in defining *post*modernity as being subject to the paradoxical expression of its own impossibility, Behler makes explicit this linkage between irony and otherness:

The prefix *post* seems to suggest – as in postcapitalist, poststructuralist, postfeminist, or postnuclear – a new period, another epoch after a former one, a relief, so to speak, from the past, and, because of a lack of a new designation, contents itself with canceling out the previous system without completely deleting it. Yet in the case of postmodern, this does not work, because modern is already the most advanced period designation and cannot be outdone. Postmodernity therefore reveals itself as an ironic notion communicating indirectly, by way of circumlocution, configuration, and bafflement, the

necessity and impossibility of discussing the status of modernity in a straightforward and meaningful manner. Postmodernity, in its twisted posture, seems to be the awareness of this paradox, and consequently of the status of modernity, in a somersaulting fashion.

(1990: 4-5)

Behler discusses this link between otherness, irony, and postmodernity by indicating that postmodernism may be defined in terms of its retrospective nature, its sceptical, self-critical relation to the past, as opposed to the avant-garde, which is oriented towards the future (Behler 1990: 5). Postmodernism does not amount to an overcoming of modernism, but is “a critical continuation of modernism which is itself both critique and criticism” (1990: 5). As Behler puts it, this implies that postmodernism is a criticism of criticism: “Criticism now turns against itself, and postmodernism thereby becomes a radicalized, intensified version of modernism, as would seem to be implied through a certain nuance in the prefix *post*” (1990: 5). Postmodernism continues modernism, but critically. It continues modernism, as critique, by means of the very fact that it departs from it. Modernism, as critique, in an impossible gesture turns its critique upon itself. It thus continues itself in the act of bringing itself to an end:

. . . we can see postmodernism as that situation in which all the ideals of modernity have come to their exhaustion. . . . [Yet] if postmodernism opened an entirely new phase of intellectual history, of antimodernism or the accomplished transgression of modernism, it would continue the innovative trend of modernity, something which seems to be precluded by the paradoxical configuration of its name.

(Behler 1990: 5-6)

This brings Behler to a statement of the anti-totalitarian, anti-systemic drive of postmodernism, which is described as “the rejection of any totalized conception of truth”, as “a radical pluralism of thought and opinion” (1990: 6). This rejection of totalised conceptions of truth and embrace of radical pluralism, of course, leads Behler to touch upon the problematic *political* relation between the postmodern and alterity. While one could say “that postmodernism protects the position of the other side, that of the nonsystem, of the woman, the suppressed minority” (1990: 6), such commitment runs counter to “the antisystematic and atotalitarian drive in postmodernist thinking” (1990: 6). That is, while the postmodern might be said to

engage with otherness, this engagement can only be of an ironic nature as, otherwise, otherness would become a new project and would, consequently, be totalised. To Behler, this clearly would run counter to the nature of postmodern thinking,²⁵ which is why the relation between otherness and the postmodern would be mediated by irony. To put it differently, as far as Behler is concerned, irony is an *essential*, even universal, aspect of the relation between postmodernism and otherness. It is in the nature of postmodernism, because of its rejection of totalities, to include the excluded (for Behler the other), but this very inclusion of otherness runs counter to “the antisystematic and atotalitarian drive in postmodernist thinking” (1990: 6). Such an understanding of otherness, as always necessarily involving irony, would make postmodernism vulnerable to accusations of political irresponsibility, as Behler’s argument implies that postmodernism subverts commitment. This is a point on which Behler does not seem to elaborate.²⁶

2.3 *Irony, Politics and Transcendence*

2.3.1 *Irony, Transcendence and Dialectic*

It is clear that the relation between irony and politics is viewed as being problematic by Dane, Hutcheon, and Behler, albeit to different degrees and on different levels. The problem may also be approached in terms of comedy generally (to which I shall refer in the next part of this section), in particular via an investigation of the link between irony and transcendence, a relationship touched upon very briefly in the previous section. It could be argued that the transcendence at issue in that discussion, pertaining to irony’s ability to articulate the ineffable by transcending ordinary language, is not true transcendence for the reason that it *presents*. In order initially to elaborate on this contention, without introducing Levinas’s conception of transcendence into the discussion yet, I would like to turn to Joseph C. Flay’s essay on the relation between irony and dialectic.²⁷

While this thesis does not pay much attention to Hegel – since its focus lies elsewhere, it is not particularly concerned either with Hegel’s views on irony (cf. Behler 1990: 85-92 and *passim*) or with Levinas’s complicated relationship to Hegel (cf. Williams 1992: 297-301) – it is worth noting that Hegel’s dialectic may be said both to involve alterity and to be thoroughly ironic (cf. Williams 1992: 111). In fact, one could argue that Hegel’s celebrated discussion – in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

(1977: 111-119) – of the life and death struggle and the relationship between master and slave illustrates this irony in terms of otherness (cf. Williams 1992: 174). Robert R. Williams indicates that

Hegel's *Phenomenology* employs a skeptical dialectic of tropic reversals. It is an extended application of the principle of equipollence. Each *Gestalt des Bewusstseins* begins with an immediate, naive and one-sided expression. The original *Gestalt* is self-confident, but such self-confidence is only a presumptive certainty that self-destructs under the conditions of experience, the impact of the other.

(Williams 1992: 169; cf. 123)

Thus the encounter with the other “shatters the immediate presumption that self-certainty simply is the truth” (Williams 1992: 173). On the contrary, “truth will turn out to require the inclusion of the suppressed other” (Williams 1992: 172). However, the “other eludes me” (1992: 173), and thus ensues the life and death struggle. This tendency towards self-destruction – which is the result of the requirement that the other be included in the relationship in order for the self to be recognised, combined with the attempt by the self to destroy the other in order to master it – leads, according to Williams, to irony:

The irony is that the self can fulfill its need to intuit itself as absolute negation of everything fixed, only by seeking to eliminate the other, and yet it depends on the other for recognition of its freedom and negativity. The self cannot demonstrate its freedom and transform its certainty into truth without seeking the elimination of the other, and yet it also depends on the other to confirm its freedom. . . . Cancelling otherness by attempting to kill the other is thus self-subverting. For the point is not to end life, but to secure recognition and intersubjective legitimation of one's certainty.

(1992: 174)

This irony occurs in the one particular, determinate manifestation of recognition discussed by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind* (cf. Williams 1992: 186, note 1), that of master and slave. Master/slave self-destructs because it does not entail genuine recognition of and by the other: “Hegel observes that master/slave is a deficient mode of the concept of recognition, that self-destructs and falls apart from its own internal incoherence” (Williams 1992: 180). It achieves the opposite of the

effect intended – the destruction of the master and the liberation of the slave. The relationship between master and slave is not premised upon genuine otherness:

If the slave is no longer an independent being, but merely unessential, so is the recognition the slave bestows. . . . Thus, the truth of the master is the slave. The reduction of the slave to a mere commodity makes explicit what mastery is. . . . [The] slave's confirmation of mastery is worthless because the slave is *for the master* unessential.

Since the slave is unessential, merely an extension of the master, recognition by the slave does not count even for the master. The slave is not genuinely other, it is only "the master's other". . . . Mastery represents a vain attempt to reduce mediation by other to self-mediation. However, mastery succeeds merely in reducing the other to a slave, only to discover that coerced recognition is both phony and worthless. But phony recognition is the truth of mastery. Thus, mastery turns out to be self-subverting and brings about the opposite of what it intended. Mastery ends in failure, a dead end which can only be maintained by force.

(Williams 1992: 176-177)

Recognition entails that a relationship be constituted in genuine otherness. The self is absolutely dependent on the other if it is to exist in and for itself; existence for-itself requires existence "for-itself-for-an other" (Williams 1992: 172). Alterity is essential if the self is not, ironically, to destroy itself in asserting itself and its freedom. And, ironically, the other must be both included and not included within the relationship. It must be included, for otherwise there can be no recognition. It must not be included, for it must remain genuinely other for true recognition to take place. The paradox is that the other must both remain transcendent and be immanent if the self is to gain recognition from that other. The other's position as other – its otherness – must involve complete separation from, indeed, a nonrelationship to, the self in order to remain other and thus enable recognition, and *at the same time* must stand in proximity towards the self.²⁸ It is important to underscore that the logic of recognition is ironic, as it entails a simultaneous approaching and distancing motion. One gets closer to oneself in getting closer to the other. And one gets closer to the other in getting further away from it.

The tendency towards self-destruction (in particular in terms of self-preservation) is inherent in Hegel's dialectical method generally. Flay, in an essay on Hegel's *Logic*, approaches the irony of this self-destruction in terms of the categories of the understanding. The essay examines dialectic in terms of Hegel's "rational-

speculative critique of the ways in which the traditional logic and metaphysics – the logic and metaphysics of the understanding – deal with their respective problems” (1990: 154). Flay argues that “the rhetorical framework of Hegel’s dialectic is in general governed by irony” (1990: 157). In arguing this case, and in indicating how what he terms “destructive” as well as “constructive” irony (1990: 157 note 8; 159ff.) contributes to the necessarily negative and positive moments of dialectic (cf. Williams 1992: 96), Flay defines irony as occurring in “a situation that contains or shows the incongruity of an outcome contrary to what was or might have been expected, recognizing this not in the form of sarcasm, but as *the nondeliberate emergence* of a meaning different and often the direct opposite of the meaning intended” (1990: 157).

The justification Flay offers for privileging irony in this way – over, say, metaphor – is that irony, when used as a rhetorical framework with which to approach an argument, does not involve either “a problem of truth” or “a question of the appropriateness of the framework or of the use to which the framework is put” (1990: 157). This is so because in the case of irony truth is not taken to transcend the argument. In this it differs from a trope such as metaphor, which “carries us away from the original” (1990: 158).²⁹ Irony is not transcendence (nor does it lead to transcendence or is it transcended itself) for the reason that the truth is not outside the argument, and the argument is not measured against such an extra-argumentative truth:

what goes on in a framework of irony is the relating of claims to their justifications, not claims to the ‘things’ to which those claims refer us. . . . With irony one offers a critique which shows that the original form of the original position *itself* has consequences and outcomes which are directly in opposition to the consequences and outcomes intended. Instead of being drawn away from the original position . . . one is more deeply implanted in the original position.

(Flay 1990: 158-159)

This irony is intimately connected with alterity, as is clear from the metaphor (“implanted”) within which this description of irony is couched, which suggests the rootedness of the other position *within* the original position. Irony goes nowhere; according to Flay, if it transports us at all, then the direction of this transportation is not away from, but simultaneously away from and towards the original position.

Irony is here described as the same which leads to an other within itself, which leads to itself but also to other outcomes. These other “unexpected and perverse outcomes are demonstrated on no grounds other than those of the original position” (1990: 159). The original content “presents its own irony” (1990: 159), which is simultaneously present and not present and must therefore be dis-covered. It would seem that the irony with which we are dealing here is not to be controlled.³⁰

Irony, for Flay, does not occur when the truth of a claim is questioned right from the start. Rather, it occurs when the truth of an argument is accepted for argument’s sake and therefore taken to be justified within the parameters of that argument. The force of a particular argument is not assessed on the basis of a thing outside of it, but is provisionally accepted. The locus of truth is taken to be inside, not outside the argument. Truth, within an ironic approach to an argument, is not empiric. In fact, the empiric might be said to be bracketed within such an approach. Approaching an argument on the basis of accepting the justification of its claims, and investigating the justification of those claims on the basis of the argument itself, leads to irony when those claims are shown to be untenable if the argument is followed consistently in the justification of its claims. In the problem Flay is discussing – the claim that a particular category of the understanding is absolute – the argument is shown to refute itself. If the refutation of the argument by itself

occurs in the framework governed by irony, this means that it has been shown, by means of criteria intrinsic to the original position itself, that the claim of absoluteness made for the category in question involves us in a self-destructive contradiction in some specific, determinate way. . . . [Something] explicitly denied in the original position is in fact entailed by the original position. The irony is that precisely what was to be avoided, denied, or excluded, must, for totally unforeseen reasons, be accepted, affirmed, or included.

(1990: 160)

Irony opens the argument to the contamination of what it is not or, rather, exposes the argument to have been contaminated all along by what it is not, by what it opposes. Irony is not *against* the understanding; rather, it indicates that the understanding tends towards self-destruction if it is followed in its search for an absolute category (for instance, being) at the cost of excluding what it is not.

This irony can be elucidated by tracing Flay’s argument relating to the two levels of irony – what Flay terms “destructive” and “constructive” irony (referred to

above) – in Hegel’s dialectic. While destructive irony “occurs in the primary negation of the original positive term”, constructive irony occurs “in the negation of this negation” (1990: 159). First a category which has traditionally been taken to be absolute is taken up for consideration “*just because* it has been held up by the tradition either to define the absolute or to be an integral part of some *one* category that defines the absolute” (1990: 159).³¹ This initial *positive* moment of the dialectic involves a “description of it [the category] and the claims made for it, not by Hegel, but by those in the tradition who held it to be absolute or to be a crucial moment of the absolute” (1990: 159). This “description of it and the claims made for it” leads to “and in part constitutes the second or dialectical moment proper, and evidences a self-destructive contradiction in the category as defined and described” (1990: 159-160). At this moment we find the first, destructive kind of irony: “The rhetorical framework of irony gives us a necessarily self-destructive *negation* which has absolute force because within it we find a determinate *negation* such that something explicitly denied in the original position is in fact entailed by the original position” (1990: 160; my emphasis).

This initial destructive irony, based in the positive moment of the description of the claims made for a particular category, results in negation. And this negation is the negation of the claim put forward in the course of putting forward the claim. But Hegel’s project is not to destroy the project of the understanding; on the contrary, Hegel is “in agreement with the understanding’s desire to find the absolute” (Flay 1990: 160) and therefore attempts to save “the project of the understanding . . . from its own self-destruction” (1990: 161).

This is a most important point, and it is necessary to trace the argument at some length. According to Flay, the dialectic must continue after one has indicated, in the first moment of negation which constitutes the dialectical critique, that the claim of the understanding refutes itself. The second moment of this critique, which moves *beyond* the dialectical critique, constitutes a speculative moment: “The significance of the move beyond the first negative moment lies in Hegel’s commitment to the preservation of the power of the understanding” (1990: 161).³² So a double irony is at work, an irony of irony.

The first, negative moment which constitutes the dialectical critique through destructive irony, leads towards the dialectical moment proper by moving beyond destructive irony: (destructive) irony is transcended by means of (constructive) irony.

If irony is to be transcended at all, this would, ironically, be by means of irony. Flay terms this irony of irony, which involves the ironising of irony, “constructive irony”.

The entire process described here by Flay constitutes the dialectic and involves, ultimately, *Aufhebung*:

Finally, in the stage following the speculative moment characterized by this second form of irony, one finds and takes up a category from the tradition that will embrace the constructive contradiction and formulate a new claim to absoluteness or a new claim to something that is in part constitutive of absoluteness.

(1990: 161-162)

Flay illustrates this dialectical process – involving the negative critique of the understanding (*Verstand*) through destructive irony, the positive speculation of reason (*Vernunft*) through constructive irony, and the new claim, the *Aufhebung* – with reference to the three categories ‘being’, ‘nothing’ and ‘becoming’. Being, which would seem to be the fundament, is supposed to exclude nonbeing (nothing) and becoming. Flay proceeds to trace how Hegel indicates that the attempt to determine ‘pure being’ as the absolute category is self-destructive as it “turns out in fact to be indistinguishable from ‘pure nonbeing’ or ‘pure nothing’. . . . The attempt completely to exclude nonbeing from being leads not only to including it in being, but to making it *identical with being*” (1990: 163).

The self-destruction of being is not inevitable, but can be prevented. This is to be done by speculating how the self-refutation occurred in the first place. And the way the self-refutation came about, is through the attempt “to determine the absolute as being. ‘Being’ was to give us all that which is and to completely exclude that which is not. . . . It was to allow us fundamentally to differentiate what-is from what-is-not” (1990: 164). But in order to achieve this differentiation, what-is-not is completely excluded from what-is. This exclusion has the result of forcing the identification of what-is with what-is-not because of the attempt to make the dissociation complete. Flay explains this by elaborating in the following way on the ironic turn in this attempt completely to separate being from nonbeing: “. . . to understand ‘being’ as designating that which is without any further determination – for any determination would involve us with negation and thus with what-is-not – is

to make it completely indeterminate and thus indistinguishable from what-is-not or nonbeing” (Flay 1990: 164).

That is, the attempt to determine being as absolute is bound to fail. Being, if it is to be absolute, is to be absolutely distinguishable from nonbeing, from its other – not only from what is not but, determinedly, from what *it* is not. It cannot be defined in terms of what it is not, because “any determination would involve us with negation and thus with what-is-not”. But not determining being would be to make it indeterminate. And nonbeing is, precisely, what is indeterminate, what-is-not. Being would thus be equal to nonbeing. What is therefore to be avoided in determining being as absolute is “the absolute separation – the absolute nonrelation – of being to its opposite, nonbeing; for it is that nonrelation which is the source of the ironical self-destruction” (1990: 165).³³

This destructive irony, which shows how the claim to the absolute nature of being refutes itself, is followed in the dialectic by a second, constructive irony, as we have seen. This second irony governs the speculative moment, which attempts to prevent the understanding from self-destructing. If separating being from nonbeing (in determining that it is absolute) is only possible by *not* determining it at all (which therefore results in it being indeterminate and therefore equal to what-is-not), then, ironically, one should not separate being *from* but relate it *to* nonbeing: “. . . to not separate the two in order to avoid self-destructive contradiction is to relate them, and the category that relates them is ‘becoming’” (1990: 165).

Not only is it ironic that being is to be related to rather than separated from nonbeing (ironic, that is, for the reason that separating being from nonbeing in order to determine it, results in the self-destruction of the category being through its identification with what is indeterminate, namely nonbeing), but it is ironic too that becoming (which was deemed a category inferior to being) should now be taken to *be* being:

. . . ‘becoming’ was first held to designate either something to be totally rejected, or to be relegated to the status of the illusory, or to be made dependent upon ‘being’. However, we now see that only if we take being as becoming, only if we define and describe the category ‘being’ in terms of what has been traditionally held to be the definition and description of the category ‘becoming’, will we avoid the specific and determinate cause of the first, self-destructive contradiction that emerged from the category ‘being’.

(Flay 1990: 165)

Understanding being as becoming enables one clearly to distinguish between being and nonbeing in two ways, namely in terms of “the movement from nonbeing to being” and “the movement from being to nonbeing” (1990: 165). A “corollary irony” (1990: 165) is that not only does being include nonbeing (from which it is nonetheless clearly differentiated as becoming), but nonbeing precedes being: “When being is accepted as becoming, nonbeing turns out to ‘logically’ precede being; for becoming is a movement from nothing to nothing” (1990: 165).

Thus the project of the understanding is saved, but in a way repugnant to the understanding (by means of contradiction – cf. 1990: 161), which turns out to be constructive: “What we have now is a *constructive* contradiction framed within a *constructive* irony, an intelligible unity of opposites, a unity which preserves the opposites as opposites” (1990: 165). Nonbeing and becoming, which were to be avoided in order to define pure being absolutely, have turned out to be “what *is* real and fundamental about being” (1990: 166). This contradiction is what “preserves as a possibility the whole intention and project of a metaphysics of the understanding: to get to what is absolutely fundamental concerning what-is through the establishment of the difference between being and nonbeing” (1990: 166).

It is important to note here that irony is conceived, ultimately, as not unsettling the order of metaphysical understanding, but as preserving it. However, that order is preserved in unsettling it. Irony is not negativity, even if it starts out as such. And the result of irony, in the case of the relation between being and nonbeing, is that we find that “[becoming] as a category gives us a stable whole that is the framework for internal, qualitative difference” (1990: 165). That is, irony does not undermine the understanding but strengthens it: ultimately, in this conception, it would have a restorative function.³⁴ Moreover, irony is what enables the comprehension of being: “. . . we have a conception of what-is that reflects both its unity and its internal difference and that gives us our only chance of comprehending being” (1990: 166). Being is comprehended as *Dasein*, “determinate being, being-there, existence. We have left behind as an illusion pure being, *Sein als solches*, and now understand the absolute to be a being-there that involves difference” (1990: 166). However, this determinate being-there must now itself, according to Flay, be comprehended, something he sees as the “task at this point”.³⁵

Flay qualifies the restorative closure attributed to irony as inherent in dialectic by concluding his discussion of Hegel's dialectic in the following way: "To posit a linear structure to thought and being is self-destructive. Only the dialectic in the unity of thought, in the unity of being, and in the unity of thought and being can give us what the original nondialectical understanding wanted, but has now been shown to be never capable of achieving" (1990:167). This intimate link between irony and dialectic, crucially, involves a closure which is open. Hegel's philosophy, according to Flay, does involve a certain kind of closure:

However, it is a closure which is dialectical in nature, which constantly opens up new categories and developments by working on and out of itself. The ultimate irony is that closure can be truly achieved only by recognizing the openness installed by dialectic and the irony which makes the dialectic itself matter.

(1990: 168)³⁶

The dialectic ends but does not end. It attains a closure founded on openness, "a closure which is dialectical in nature".³⁷

This returns us to the point at which the detour to Hegel, via master/slave and the irony of dialectic, was taken. The discussion has indicated the degree to which irony forms part of dialectic, in particular as far as its complicated relation to transcendence is concerned. In short, irony inheres in that which is ironised. It is immanent in the claim or position subjected to irony. This means that no claim or position is really *subjected* to irony, but rather that it may be indicated to contain irony within itself. However, this irony cannot be contained without altering the claim or position. Indeed, the irony is shown to be the other-in-the-same to which the same stands in a relation of non-identity, but which is, nonetheless, included within itself. Irony, as that which exposes the contamination of the supposedly pure by its other, is transcended only by itself. Irony is necessarily ironised itself, which involves an impossible movement of irony beyond itself, a doubling of irony. In this movement it not only articulates the ineffable (to return to Behler's terminology), but exposes the ineffable as being contained within what is apparently clear and can be expressed in straightforward language. This exposure/exposition of the other within the apparently straightforward does not entail a move *beyond* the straightforward as much as a move beyond the straightforward which is a move *into* it. The movement

beyond is a movement backwards. Thus irony does not provide resolution through transcendence, but opens to itself *as other* that which was thought to be closed off, self-sufficient and whole. In irony *Aufhebung* is *aufgehoben*, which is to say that the *Aufhebung* is never final because it can itself be shown to contain within itself an other. Irony provides no resolution and no closure; or rather, it provides a resolution which is never finite. Irony provides infinitely deferred closure, which is the same as saying that there is no resolution of the antinomy self/other (or same/other), no articulation of the ineffable. The ineffable remains ineffable, but this ineffability is approached (or, rather, approaches) through irony as the non-articulation of the other.

In addition, I would like to argue, in view of the discussion above, that the ineffable, if it is ineffable, *cannot* be articulated, because such articulation would amount to a reduction of the other to the same. If it is to be ineffable, it must be truly beyond the grasp of phenomenality. This is the same as saying that the ineffable cannot *appear*, because if it appears (if it is articulated, in other words, Said) it no longer is ineffable at all. Its otherness will have been elided. And this elision will have taken place as a consequence of a movement beyond the phenomenal, articulable towards transcendence. But transcendence, if it is to be transcendent, precisely must remain *beyond* the grasp of phenomenality. The transcended cannot be grasped, cannot be articulated, if it is to be transcendent. Not only can irony not be transcended, as I have attempted to argue in this section, but transcendence itself, as *beyondness*, is an impossibility in the sense that it *is* not. If irony, which cannot be transcended, gives access to the transcendent, then this access always remains the outline of access.

2.3.2 Irony, 'Humour' and Transcendence

The previous section has ended on a rather abstract note. I would now like to return to the discussion, temporarily suspended at the conclusion to section 2.2.3 (above), of the relation between irony and otherness in more concrete terms, by referring briefly in this section to the studies by Shershow (1986) and Lang (1988).

The politics of irony forms an important part of the discussion of comedy and its relation to transcendence in Scott Cutler Shershow's book on comedy (1986). Comedy, according to Shershow, articulates a "double vision" (1986: 26). This double vision is the result of two contradictory impulses, and leads to conflicting

critics, which she terms their “‘humorous’ critical discourse”, and what she calls “a politics of subversion” (1988: 66). The “Anglo-American” critics, such as Muecke, Knox and Booth (cf. 1988: 38-46) as well as Wilde and Handwerk (1988: 46-50), entertain what is, ultimately, a conservative conception of irony for the reason that it can be traced back to the recuperation of unitary subjectivity.

Lang deems ‘irony’ to be a rhetorical device which functions on the basis of the discrepancy between form and content, or signifier and signified (1988: 3). As such, ‘irony’ is constituted by a ‘vertical’ relation, “because the meaning is said to be concealed *under* the language (1988: 2). Such irony is resolvable as it is premised on the authority of intention (1988: 2) and functions “within a system of vertical transcendence” (1988: 35). However, according to Lang “another (‘horizontal’) conception of irony (and of language)” (1988: 2), which she designates as “*humor*” (1988: 4; her italics) rather than ‘irony’, also occurs in Kierkegaard’s treatise. This conception Lang calls “horizontal” (1988: 2), as it conceives of meaning as a play of signifiers which hides “*no positive content*” (1988: 3; her italics). Language is no longer understood as a container of meaning. The reason why Kierkegaard settles for the ‘vertical’ as opposed to ‘horizontal’ conception of irony is that “to accept all the consequences of irony conceived as an irreducible text would be to renounce his [Kierkegaard’s] belief in a transcendent signified and ultimately in Transcendence itself (or Himself)” (1988: 3).³⁸

According to Lang, then, to think of irony as ‘humour’, as being other than a rhetorical device, other than the concealment of intent through inversion, is to forgo transcendence. ‘Irony’, in terms of Lang’s terminological distinction between ‘irony’ and ‘humour’, precisely *depends* on transcendence as it is ultimately a trope which functions within a theory of meaning as expression and language as medium (cf. 1988: 5). ‘Irony’, as a figure of speech, depends on the authority of an originary meaning, whether it be that of “a speaker who knows his own thought while couching it in potentially misleading language” (1988: 15) or, within an ironic world view, of a Transcendent Being whose meaning as Truth is to be investigated and gradually revealed – “a Knower whose infinite wisdom is communicated only obscurely through the phenomenal world” (1988: 15). To Lang this traditional conception of irony still has its supporters – she refers to the “ironic critic”, who would define “the critic’s task as the discovery or revelation of meaning (i.e., authorial intent). The

ironic critic assumes that language is by nature subservient to conceptualization. . . .” (1988: 5)

Lang points out that that the conflation of ‘irony and ‘humour’ may be traced back to Quintillian’s confusion of the distinction between trope and figure, a confusion which implies that irony as figure is situated *after* the trope irony: Quintillian extends “the notion of figure to include the ironic persona in terms which imply that the ironic figure is a later (and somewhat deceitful) development or proliferation of the ironic trope” (1988: 39). In thus rejecting the conflation of ‘irony’ and ‘humour’ – which “conflation of two fundamentally different textual phenomena [is fostered] with dismaying regularity” by recent literary critics (1988: 35) – Lang also by implication rejects the notion that ‘irony’ somehow precedes ‘humour’, and the concomitant slur that a conception of ‘irony’ as a rhetorical device is less adequate than a conception of irony as ‘humour’ (cf. 1988: 40).

Nonetheless, it is clear that Lang, inconsistently, detects a historical process at work which tends towards the contemporary supersession of ‘irony’ by ‘humour’. Thus she invokes Kuhn’s work on paradigm shifts in order to distinguish between ironic and humorous world views, where the former clearly precedes the latter (1988: 15ff.). And Lang makes clear her preference for what she calls “the humorous critical paradigm” (1988: 8), that is, for

the critical practice of treating meaning either as an effect of language or as the product of the reader’s interpretive activity (or some combination of the two) [which] is one manifestation of a paradigm whose determinate feature is the presupposition of a universe without Transcendence.

(1988: 15-16)

‘Irony’ and ‘humour’ are here no longer simply critical terms: they become world-historical determinants. Indeed, Lang characterises her project as follows: “The following chapters constitute attempts to read selected works from both the modern and postmodern periods with an eye to whatever traces of an ironic or a humorous world view may be discernible in each text” (Lang 1988: 69). In addition, as we have seen, ‘humour’ and “the humorous critical paradigm” are invoked as “one manifestation . . . of a universe without Transcendence” (1988: 16) because of “the relinquishment of the ego” (1988: 49).

Lang is quite right to argue that transcendence is not possible (otherwise it would not be transcendence, as I have argued). While the conception of irony I am employing in this study is analogous to what Lang understands under 'humour', I do not wish to insist, as Lang does, that 'irony' and 'humour' are "two fundamentally different textual phenomena" (1988: 35). This might well be the case, although (as we have seen Dane argue) such a clear-cut distinction would be questionable. While I am aware of the dangers inherent in less than rigorous distinctions (and would not claim that irony or, indeed, otherness, constitutes a monolith), I do not find taxonomies of ironies particularly helpful for the reason that they seem to obscure what is common to all irony, albeit in diverse manifestations. I am thinking here, of course, of the importance of otherness for any conception of irony. Otherness is as important in traditional, rhetorical conceptions of irony as it is in other varieties of irony. It is, in any event, as I indicated at the start of this chapter, not my intention to play different critics off against one another (although, to some extent, comparisons are inevitable). Similarly, my interest does not lie in formulating a new, more adequate theory of irony, but in establishing the link between irony and otherness, in particular in terms of de Man's conceptions of irony and Levinas's of otherness.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to return briefly to Lang's distinction between 'irony' and 'humour', a distinction which I find interesting but which does not appear unproblematic. As I argued earlier, I do not conceive of irony as being beyond transcendence, nor do I conceive of transcendence as being 'beyond' irony. On the contrary, if transcendence is to be truly *beyond*, then it is never to be reached, never to be within the compass of being and comprehension. Irony (or, in Lang's terminology, 'humour'), as I shall argue in the next chapter, is precisely one manifestation, not of a universe without transcendence, but of an infinite approach *from* the beyond of being towards the subject of language which interrupts the subject's conception of the other.

Lang uses the concept 'transcendence' in terms of what she calls a *vertical relationship*. But the terms of her argument make clear that she abolishes the possibility of such a vertical relationship: ultimately, to her, Kierkegaard's postulation of a vertical relationship between the subject and a God above and beyond serves merely to recuperate the fullness of the subject:

. . . in the Kierkegaardian scheme, the ego is redeemed in its infinite eternal validity through the subject's relationship to God. Both irony and Kierkegaardian 'humour' function within a system of vertical transcendence; the recuperation of the self in a transcendental Other remains as egotistical a theoretical gesture as the self-aggrandizement practiced by the ironist.

(Lang 1988: 35)³⁹

If transcendence is truly beyond being, as I have argued above, then it leads not to closure and comprehension but to their deferral. In terms of Lang's scheme, this means that 'irony' is not truly transcendent because it leads to "the recuperation of the self in a transcendental [*sic*] Other". That is, the transcendent is used by the self in the service of its reconstitution of itself through irony. Ironically, Lang's 'humour' might be said to 'be' transcendent precisely because it does *not* reach a final resting place, a dis/solution. It suspends that on which to Lang 'irony' depends: the distinction between form and content, appearance and reality – and thus moves beyond essence, being and phenomenon.

2.4 *Concluding Remarks*

I hope to have established in this chapter that there is, indeed, a link between irony and otherness. I also hope to have indicated that this relationship is, more often than not, defined in terms of politics. Moreover, I hope to have indicated the controversial nature of the politics of irony.

Irony has been found to be discussed, approached and used in terms of the politics of criticism (Dane), in terms of irony as it happens in empirical, everyday events (Hutcheon), as a distinguishing mark of postmodernism and its privileging of the marginalised (Behler), as a trait of what appears as a rather deficient mode of comedy (Shershow), and as an embodiment of a politics of subversion (Lang). It has been seen to be portrayed variously as hierarchical and conservative, and therefore necessarily elitist (Dane), as transideological, sometimes conservative, and sometimes subversive (Hutcheon), as the *sine qua non* of modernity and therefore postmodernity, in the service of which its support for the marginalised is cancelled out as a result of its subversion of system and totality (Behler), as caught in a finite dialectic of the utopian and conservative (Shershow), and as split between a conservative ontotheological mode on the one hand, and a radically subversive assertion of the

death of God and the impossibility of transcendence within a 'humorous' paradigm on the other (Lang).

I hope to have established, therefore, that there is little agreement on the nature of the politics of irony. Instead, there seems to be a multitude of contending and sometimes strident voices who variously seek to discard or deify irony *vis-à-vis* politics. One contribution of this thesis will hopefully be, by bracketing the question of the politics of irony and stepping back towards an ethics of irony defined in Levinasian terms, to offer at least a conceptual framework from which one might attempt to establish more clearly the nature of the politics of irony, an ethical base upon which might be constructed a theory of the politics of irony.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to indicate the importance of the notion 'transcendence' in discussions of irony, particularly as far as its relation with otherness – understood as a political relation – is concerned. 'Transcendence', as I also hope to have suggested, is a crucial notion in any understanding of irony. This will prove to be the case, too, in the next chapter, which is concerned not with the politics of irony, but with what will hopefully turn out to be an ethical dimension of the relationship between irony and otherness.

2.5 Notes

- 1 My use of the term politics in this chapter is rather general. In Chapter 3 I hope to elaborate on a Levinasian conception of politics as constituting the order of the same in its attempted elision of otherness through the egological reduction of the other to the same. My use of the term 'politics' in terms of empirical relationships in the present chapter, if not refined *vis-à-vis* Levinas, hopefully at least anticipates that concept.
- 2 Dane (1991: 221-230) and Hutcheon (1994: 210-238) provide what are probably the fullest bibliographies on irony. General surveys of and specialised monographs on aspects of irony include those by Simpson (1979), Smyth (1986), Handwerk (1985), Wilde (1987), Lang (1988), Behler (1990), Dane (1991) and Hutcheon (1994).
- 3 Lang points out that Kierkegaard also identifies two kinds of irony which are related to two conceptions of Socrates (cf. 1988: 24).
- 4 I disagree with Dane's contention that irony is necessarily always premised upon hierarchy and authority, indeed, upon elitism. Such a view of irony only serves to propound a highly politicised conception of irony and forgets its ethical aspect. In my view, which I shall argue at greater length in the next

chapter, irony possesses the potential to move beyond, or, rather, *before* politics in its interruption of the conceptualisation of otherness effected by politics.

- 5 This shift in the conception of how irony works need not in itself be considered strange. It must be noted that, for Mileur (1998: 199), revisionism is part of the essence of irony: most discussions of revisionism (“whether by Nietzsche or Lévi-Strauss or Derrida”) “are actually guided and made possible by a form of revisionist consciousness. I speak of irony”. Irony is a form of revisionist consciousness, which means that revisionism involves irony. However, irony itself is also always subject to revisionism. Irony, as revisionism, is subject to the revision of itself. (This characteristic folding back of irony upon itself is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter *vis-à-vis* de Man’s conception of irony.) The implication would be that a *single* view of irony would not be tenable.
- 6 At this point it might be worth remarking in passing that more than one critic has noted the intimate link between de Man and the New Critics, phrasing their discussions in terms of the supposed organicism of de Man’s position and his conflation of poetry with its criticism (cf. Sychrava 1989: 102-104; 170-173; Behler 1990: 101-103; Dane 1991: 169; 172-182). Behler, for instance, explicitly defines de Man’s conception of irony in terms of the New Criticism, while specifying it as the *negative* of that of the New Criticism:

One reason for the prominence of irony in de Man’s writings may simply have been the new criticism. Just as irony had been the ‘principle of structure’ in literary works for some of the new critics (e.g., Cleanth Brooks), irony was for de Man the principle of disrapture in a literary text. Whereas the new criticism saw irony, ambiguity, and paradox as forging together the multiplicity and variety of a poetic work to an organic whole of integrality, harmony, complete identity with itself, and self-presence, de Man conceived of irony in terms of a discrepancy between sign and meaning, a lack of coherence among the parts of a work, a self-destructive ability on the part of literature to articulate its own fictionality, and an inability to escape from a situation that has become unbearable.

(Behler 1990: 102)

De Man, contrary to allegations of being a closeted New Critic, was quite open about his indebtedness to the New Criticism (cf. 1979: 4). Moreover, the thrust of his critical enterprise could be characterised as an attempt to put in question the very notions of organicism of which he has subsequently been accused. See the next chapter for a more exhaustive discussion of de Man’s complicated conception of irony.

- 7 In the next chapter I attempt to indicate that irony, at least in de Man’s conception and for the purposes of this thesis, is to be associated with undecidability. It would be a misapprehension to consider irony elitist for the reason that nobody – least of all the ironist – is immune to irony. Indeed,

irony itself is subject to irony and thus structurally tends towards undoing itself and its authority.

- 8 I consider the *problem* of defining irony in the next chapter.
- 9 See my discussion of Hutcheon's and Lang's work, below, for an elaboration of the points made here.
- 10 Dane's insistence on the necessarily hierarchical and authoritarian structure of irony is contrary to the position for which I shall argue in the next chapter. See note 7, above.
- 11 As should be clear from the fact that she attributes hierarchy to *one* function of irony (the "aggregative"), she does not disagree with as much as modulates this view – and refers specifically to Dane's association of a "rhetoric of hierarchy" with irony (1994: 54).
- 12 On the contrary, one gets the idea that Hutcheon is very much in control of her subject matter. Indeed, this control extends so far as to allow Hutcheon to state confidently, as a matter of fact, that "this is a book *about* irony, and not an ironic book" (1994: 7). This claim would presuppose that Hutcheon is in control of irony, a claim apparently borne out by the admittedly impressive taxonomies of and references to irony found in her study. Nonetheless, as I shall argue elsewhere in this study, it is part of the structure of irony to undo itself. In addition, irony can only be transcended ironically, which is to say that irony tends towards ironising itself. On these grounds alone it would be impossible to employ irony unironically or, in Hutcheon's case, to refer to irony without willy-nilly becoming entangled in it. Assuming that one can transcend irony implies an untenable presupposition that one can escape the contamination of irony, difference and, indeed, otherness.
- At least one reviewer has made similar points with regard not only to Hutcheon's work on irony in particular, but to her oeuvre in general (cf. Scott 1997).
- 13 Following Williams's (1992) elaboration on the distinction between empirics and eidetics, one might say that Hutcheon's work is concerned primarily with the empirics of irony (how it works) and with the politics of its effects. Williams characterises eidetics as "analysis of the concept" (1992: 133), and states that it is "an exploration of meaning at the general level of ontology, namely the study of possibility" (1992: 144). Empirics, on the other hand, entails "concrete investigations of the concept in determinate form" (1992: 133). Clearly, Hutcheon does spend a great deal of her time analysing the concept irony. Nonetheless, the burden of her study is to investigate the politics of irony as it is used in determinate, everyday forms. In any event, Williams (1992: 169) cautions against artificially installing an absolute separation between eidetics and empirics:

The distinction between eidetics and empirics, between *Begriff* and experience is not an absolute one; it would be a mistake to conceive it

as an ontological dualism. Eidetics is not some realm apart from or beyond the empirical; rather, as Hegel says, it is only the empirical brought closer, i.e., made explicit and brought into focus. The eidetic structures of being-for-self and being-for-other, reciprocity and reversal, are not actual apart from experience.

- 14 This would seem to be the implication of Dane's position. The other meaning has authority and is recuperated as the proper meaning.
- 15 It is this point which will be elaborated in far greater detail in the next chapter, specifically *vis-à-vis* Levinas's understanding of the other in terms of a trace which is always past.
- 16 The other does not strictly speaking 'appear'. To say that it appears would be to make of it a phenomenon. Rather, it is the trace of the always already past other which appears. I discuss this point in somewhat greater detail in the next chapter (see 3.2.2, below). Some of the other points made in this paragraph are also dealt with in a more thorough way in Chapter 3. In particular, I elaborate on the relation between infinity and the other (see especially 3.2.1, 3.2.2) and between irony and infinity (see 3.3.1, 3.3.2).
- 17 As indicated above, this study is not concerned primarily with the *uses* of irony. This does not mean that irony *cannot* be used. In the next chapter, nonetheless, the easy assumption that irony *can* be used and controlled, to the extent that it becomes a position, will be treated with scepticism.
- 18 Hutcheon's use of terms relating to intention does not seem to have much in common with phenomenology.
- 19 On irony as act, in particular as performative, see Gasché (1981).
- 20 It should be noted that, in the course of her discussion of the problematic nature of the politics of irony *vis-à-vis* feminist politics, Hutcheon offers a brief consideration of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) in terms of its engagement with "both feminist and postcolonial political contexts" (1994: 30). Her comments, particularly with regard to what she terms Coetzee's "ironizing of allegory" (1994: 31) are tantalising if all too brief.
- 21 Such a version of irony implies dependence on a notion of transcendence which encloses just what might be argued to be transcendent itself – the ineffable, the other. It reduces the transcendence of the transcendent by enclosing it within the realm of being-here-below. Such a move is problematic, as I shall argue below *vis-à-vis* Flay's (1990) essay on Hegel's *Logic*.
- 22 As we have seen, this is a move of which Joseph Dane disapproves. Dane does not engage directly with Behler's study, though he does refer to earlier work by Behler. Even though Behler's study was only published in 1990, the lecture upon which the book is based was delivered in 1986 (cf. 1990: vii).

- 23 Behler does not clearly distinguish between postmodernity and postmodernism (or modernity and modernism). I have followed his fuzzy use of these terms in the course of describing his argument, although obviously some form of distinction is desirable. Elsewhere in this thesis I employ the conventional uses of these terms. In other words, modernity and postmodernity may be said to refer to intellectual and philosophical tendencies, while modernism and postmodernism relate primarily to artistic and literary tendencies.

The following brief discussion of Behler's argument *vis-à-vis* postmodernity and modernity is necessary in order to establish his view on the relation between irony and otherness, which is couched in Behler's discussion of the politics of postmodernism.

- 24 Behler indicates the extent to which the tendency of Romantic writers to refer to Romantic poetry – that is, poetry contemporary to them – as 'modern' is precisely an effect of their modernity. Designating this poetry 'modern' is an indication of the self-reflexive nature of modernity and implies a process of progression and infinite perfectibility according to which modern poetry, like science, is seen to exceed that of the ancients. See Behler (1990: 37ff.) for a discussion of the extension of the notion of progress and infinite perfectibility from the realm of science to that of poetry.
- 25 In terms of the argument of this thesis, it would of course also reduce otherness itself.
- 26 Behler does, however, elaborate on what he calls "an extension of art to mass society and mass culture" (1990: 8), which is typical of aesthetic life and production in postmodernism. This leads to "a levelling of art to the standards of a mass culture" which is characteristic of the postmodern, a reduction of the aesthetic to the economic:

Art is no longer the realm of otherness, no longer able to hold a mirror, to point a finger. . . . [The] museum has become a postmodernist architectural building surrounded by shops and restaurants where objects of exhibition are evaluated according to economic standards. . . . [Purpose-oriented] activities based entirely on profit, such as advertising, assume the lofty *l'art pour l'art* attitude of complete purposelessness.

(Behler 1990: 8-9; cf. Steiner 1989)

Nonetheless, finally, the very diversity of styles characteristic of postmodernism leads Behler to identify it with otherness (cf. 1990: 9).

- 27 This detour is of importance not only because it will afford us a better understanding of the relation between irony and transcendence, but because this relation involves otherness. Thus, this discussion may serve as an introduction to the discussions in the next chapter of the relation between irony (*vis-à-vis* de Man) and otherness (*vis-à-vis* Levinas).

28 These are evidently Levinasian terms. I shall elaborate on these terms, in particular on the paradoxical, indeed, ironical nature of the (non)relationship with the other in the next chapter.

29 This is, indeed, suggested by the etymology of the word "metaphor" (cf. de Man 1986: 83). The full quotation from Flay (1990: 158) reads as follows:

To look again at metaphor for a contrast, a critique in these terms is one which takes the original position away from its original form by suggesting and arguing that the original form was deficient because there were aspects of the state of affairs being referred to which had been simply overlooked. The metaphor carries us away from the original.

Irony is more *persuasive* than metaphor as it takes us closer to, in fact, right into the claim.

30 Whether irony can be controlled or not is a question which also arises from de Man's conception of irony, which involves irony ironising itself. See note 7, above.

31 The absolute is defined parenthetically by Flay as being a fundament of being, and thus as being ontological. See the following statements: "The category 'being' is the first, and seemingly most natural candidate for the absolute" (Flay 1990: 162); "the absolute means the ultimate unity of what-is such that there is no need to go beyond it or to look for a more fundamental category" (Flay 1990: 159).

32 Flay emphasises that he is not in agreement with Hegel's project of attempting to preserve the understanding (cf. 1990: 161 note 10).

33 Thus we are here again, as in the discussion of master/slave, confronted with the problem of otherness, which, as otherness, is absolutely separate from, yet completely involuted in the selfsame.

34 On this point, see note 32, above.

35 I shall disagree that it is the task at hand to comprehend being. Rather, in the next chapter I follow Levinas's consideration of the *otherwise than being*. Even though this study quite consciously attempts to focus on irony *vis-à-vis* a Levinasian conception of otherness, one might invert this opposition and consider the implications of irony for an investigation of otherness. Such an investigation would then be an impossible, ironic one: to comprehend being would be to include and not include the other (of being); to comprehend the other would be *not* to comprehend it.

36 That is, it matters and is given force as a result of first being negative, indicating that it is the understanding *itself* which causes its own self-destruction.

- 37 Flay ends his consideration of Hegelian dialectic with a summary of the contemporary situation in philosophy, to which I would like to refer parenthetically only at this point. There are still many philosophies which are pre-Hegelian and of the understanding, "a remnant of the movement of modernity in the classical age, a remnant of the thinking that Hegel showed to be self-destructive" (1990: 168-169). But Flay says there are also other philosophies, which he characterises as ironic:

... there exists a set of thinkers who take up the theme and power of irony and other rhetorical frameworks, and who begin to articulate the ascendancy of rhetoric, not in the traditional way in which it is made either a handmaiden or enemy of philosophy, but as an important structure to be analysed and employed for itself. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and their twentieth-century progeny continue the work begun by Hegel in his engagement with philosophies of the understanding.

(1990: 169)

- 38 It may be interesting to note that Lang's distinction between 'irony' and 'humour', explicitly made as it is in terms of a further spatial distinction involving vertical and horizontal approaches to irony, is reminiscent of Dane's (1991: 149ff.) characterisation of Cleanth Brooks's New Critical approach to irony. Brooks similarly privileges a "horizontal tension" over a "vertical hierarchy" (Dane 1991: 149). Thus Lang's project may be closer than she would admit to that of the "Anglo-American" ironists she derides.

- 39 Lang is here referring to the Romantic ironist, whose brand of irony is rejected by Kierkegaard. Romantic irony is assigned "a value (albeit negative)" by Kierkegaard (1988: 35) and is thus defined teleologically (1988: 34) in its very refractoriness with regard to definition, resulting in what is a denial of verticality and confirmation of the horizontal in its (that is, that of Romantic irony) "assertion of an aberrant subjectivity" (1988: 34) which leads to "an exacerbated egoism" (1988: 49) as a result of its protest over the self-other dichotomy and, finally, to a "despairing self-knowledge" (1988: 52).

One might also note at this point that Lang's critique of false transcendence and religion is reminiscent of Levinas's critique of theology as an institution in *Otherwise than Being* (cf. Peperzak 1993: 224ff.). But Levinas's critique goes one step further: he is concerned with something *beyond* a relationship with the other, a true transcendence as opposed to transcendence domesticated by Western theology, a relationship which is not a relationship.

Chapter 3

Irony and Otherness: From the Other

3.1 Introduction

After having established, in the previous chapter, that there is, indeed, a link between irony and otherness, and that this link involves a problematic political relation, I want to turn in this chapter to a closer examination of one particular way of understanding the relation between irony and otherness – one informed by the thinking of, respectively, Emmanuel Levinas and Paul de Man. As intimated at the end of the previous chapter, bracketing the problem of the political nature of irony and focusing on an examination of the relation between irony and otherness in terms of Levinasian ethics, might lead to the future development of a more thorough understanding of the relation between irony and otherness in terms of politics conceived as *starting* with ethics.¹

My attempt at more clearly defining the relation between irony and otherness in this chapter will be informed, as I have made clear from the start of this thesis, by Emmanuel Levinas's thinking. I need to emphasise here that this thesis will limit itself quite severely to one particular perspective on otherness (one related to the work of Levinas) and one particular perspective on irony (informed by the work of de Man). This is, quite obviously, not to claim that other important versions of otherness or irony do not exist. Nor is it, willy-nilly, to ignore a host of other crucial work done on the topics of irony and otherness, as well as on the relation between them. On the contrary, it is a measure of the enormous range of these problems that I have chosen to focus the thesis in the way I have.

Nonetheless, I do believe that a Levinasian conception of otherness may be a highly potent vehicle for a critique of other, less adequate notions of otherness. Similarly, I believe that a de Manian conception of irony raises problems in terms of our understanding of irony which cannot be ignored.² And it is my contention that a Levinasian conception of otherness and a de Manian one of irony may have a great deal in common, or may, at least, offer enlightening perspectives on each other.

As far as otherness is concerned, I shall attempt to outline Levinas's ethics, in particular with respect to the double bind in which his description of the other is

caught. While Levinas engages in a description of the other, his work asserts that the other is beyond description. That is, his description of the other may be characterised by his recognition of the impossibility of adequately describing the other. I shall attempt to outline Levinas's ethics in terms of his non-conception of the other and his rejection of the possibility of representing the other.³ My discussion will proceed via Levinas's insistence on the radical pastness (or passedness – cf. Levinas 1981: 9) of the other as trace. The other, as irreducibly past and as always already having passed to an other place, cannot be made present, that is, represented. The other always exceeds the representations made of it. Representing otherness destroys otherness – the only adequate representation of the other, the only representation which respects the otherness of the other, is to be found in the acknowledgement that the other cannot be represented. Furthermore, representations of the other, because they totalise and enclose the other by thematising and conceptualising its otherness, must be interrupted and fragmented in order to show that they form part of the economy of the Same. This interruption of representation, as ontological Said, takes place in reducing the Said to an ethical Saying.⁴

This discussion of Levinas's philosophy will be followed by a consideration of irony in terms of Paul de Man's understanding of that concept. In brief, it will be my contention that the other as trace, when represented or embodied, is necessarily embodied and given a face by the representing subject. Thus, the trope of prosopopoeia is at work in any representation of otherness. But, if the other as trace of what is absent is not available to representation, then the other may be understood and represented – *given* a face-as-mask – only catachrestically. The catachresis, by means of which the other is prosopopeically represented, is interrupted in order to allow for a break in the adequating representation of the other. This interruption of the face given to the other may be understood as involving irony as permanent parabasis.

This attempt to read de Manian irony in terms of Levinasian ethics, as outlined above, should in no way be construed as entailing a levelling of differences. I shall not be suggesting fanciful relations between Levinas and de Man (be they conscious or otherwise). Instead, I shall argue that Levinas's perspective on otherness may provide a conceptual framework within which one could place de Man's understanding of irony, and that this understanding of irony, conversely, might serve

to illuminate aspects of Levinas's thought. The point needs to be stressed that this thesis is not primarily meant to be a comparative study of Levinas and de Man, but a study of *irony* in terms of the representation (for lack of a better term) of otherness. Different as these thinkers are, aspects of their respective systems of thought might be brought to bear on issues involving irony and otherness.⁵

3.2 *Otherness*

3.2.1 *Otherness, Ethics and the Face*

According to Simon Critchley, "Levinasian ethics bears a critical relation to the philosophical tradition. For Levinas, Western philosophy has most often been what he calls 'ontology', by which he means the attempt to comprehend the Being of what is, or beings (*das Sein des Seienden*)" (1992: 5; cf. Levinas 1969: 42ff.). As should be clear from this quotation, in order to understand Levinasian ethics it is important to note Levinas's philosophical context, in particular *vis-à-vis* phenomenology. I would like to consider briefly the link between Levinas on the one hand, and Husserl and Heidegger on the other.

Peperzak makes the point that, of twentieth-century philosophers, only Husserl and Heidegger "are almost constantly present" (1983: 113) in Levinas's thought:

Husserl started the revolution in philosophy called 'phenomenology'; Heidegger exploited hidden possibilities of Husserl's phenomenology and transformed it into a new ontology; Levinas developed and tried to overcome phenomenological ontology by a new sort of 'metaphysics', rehabilitating the existent (*das Seiende, l'étant* or *l'existant*) by a thought 'beyond Being' (*au-delà de l'être, jenseits des Seins*).

(Peperzak 1983: 113)

Peperzak considers only the very early stage of Levinas's career (1927-1950), but, as he points out (1983: 114), the central theme of *Totality and Infinity* is already clearly articulated in an early essay translated as "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1996). And, as Critchley points out, Levinas's work after *Totality and Infinity* (1969) may be viewed as a radicalisation of that work: whereas in *Totality and Infinity* otherness as "a point of exteriority is located in the face of the Other, but is still articulated in the language of ontology" (1992: 6), in his later *Otherwise than Being* (1981), Levinas is concerned with "the possibility of an ethical form of language, the Saying (*le Dire*),

which would be irreducible to the ontological language of the Said (*le Dit*)” (1992: 7). Put differently, while *Totality and Infinity*

powerfully articulates the non-ontological ‘experience’ of the face of the Other in the language of ontology . . . *Otherwise than Being* is a performative disruption of the language of ontology. . . . Whereas *Totality and Infinity* writes about ethics, *Otherwise than Being* is the performative enactment of ethical writing. . . .

(Critchley 1992: 8)

This is to say that the influence of Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology persists throughout the Levinasian *oeuvre*, which entails the necessity of briefly considering Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology.⁶ My discussion will focus on Husserlian phenomenology as the immediate basis of the work of both Heidegger and Levinas. Critchley (1992: 4) explains the Levinasian conception of ethics, that is, “the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness, or what Levinas, following Plato, calls the Same (*le même; to auton*)”, in terms of Husserlian phenomenology: “In Husserlian terms, the domain of the Same includes not only the intentional acts of consciousness (*noeses*), but also the intentional objects which give meaning to those acts and are constituted by consciousness (*noemata*)”.

As far as phenomenology is concerned, Peperzak (1983: 115) affirms that “intentionality is the key concept by which the relationships between consciousness and reality have to be understood”. As Husserl (1970: 23; his italics) puts it, “*True being . . . has significance only as a particular correlate of my own intentionality*”. For Husserl, only through the transcendental ego – which is reached through the reduction of “the natural human ego” by means of the phenomenological reduction or *epoché* (Husserl 1970: 10) – “*does the being of the world, and, for that matter, any being whatsoever, make sense to me and have possible validity*” (Husserl 1970: 10).⁷ The intending subject has access to the world beyond the self, which Husserl terms “*transcendent*” (1970: 10), through the *transcendental* ego and “the transcendental system of intentionality [through which] nature or the world exist [*sic*] invariably for the ego” (1970: 21-22).⁸ This leads Husserl to make the following crucial claim:

Transcendence is an immanent mode of being, that is, one that constitutes itself within the ego. Every conceivable meaning, every thinkable being –

regardless of whether it is immanent or transcendent – falls within the realm of transcendental subjectivity. The idea of something outside of this realm is a contradiction: transcendental subjectivity is the universal and absolute concretion.

(Husserl 1970: 32)

The realm of transcendental subjectivity encloses everything, that is, “Every conceivable meaning, every thinkable being”. But Levinas’s ethical claim is that, unthinkably, there ‘is’ something beyond being, something transcendent which does not “[fall] within the realm of transcendental subjectivity”. Within this realm, to which everything can and must be related, and which is therefore the realm of the Same, the other is violently reduced in order to be mastered, comprehended and represented by the subject: “As a result of its intentional, or directional, nature, consciousness reduces the other to its object and, in so doing, it achieves a full correspondence between its representations and external ‘reality’” (Marais 1997:1). It is in this sense that one may understand Peperzak’s (1983: 116) contention that “Levinas characterizes Husserl’s philosophy as a . . . *vorstellende*, and ‘objectifying’ or ‘representationist’ way of thought. . . .”⁹

The transcendental subject gains knowledge of the two fundamental modes of being – “the being of the objects of outer perception and the being of consciousness” (Peperzak 1983: 115) – on the basis of objectification which entails a process of making present (re-presentation): “. . . both modes of being converge insofar as they can be ‘defined’ as the *presence* of the object itself for consciousness or as the *presence* of consciousness to its objects” (Peperzak 1983: 115). Objects, including the consciousness of the transcendental subject itself (which can be objectified in reflection), are available, can be re-presented and grasped because of their *presence*. As Levinas (1996f: 152) puts it, “Presence as a letting-itself-be-taken, as the chance of understanding; knowledge remains linked to perception and to apprehension and to the grasp even in the *concept* or the *Begriff*”.¹⁰

This insistence on presence, and representation, forms a cornerstone of Levinas’s (as it does of Derrida’s) rejection of phenomenology and his characterisation of it as ontology.¹¹ The emphasis on presence results in a view of knowledge as resting “on things given in a world that is given, which Husserl will call the life-world, the famous *Lebenswelt*” (Levinas 1996f: 152). Within such knowledge “nothing remains absolutely other” (1996f: 153). The “intentional will” of thought

masters all otherness through “conceptual synopsis [which] is stronger than all the diversity and incompatibility of unassemblable terms, stronger than any diachrony which would want to be radical and irreducible” (1996f: 153).¹² Husserl insists “that ideal knowledge is *adequacy* (i.e., the exact ‘fitting’ of the world into consciousness)” (Peperzak 1983: 116; cf. 1993: 21), the correlation of being and intentionality: Levinas notes that “the structure of all thought . . . is correlation (1996c: 67) and that “consciousness is intentionality in Husserlian phenomenology: cogitation comes out of itself, but the cogitatum is present to cogitation, the *noema* equals the *noesis* and corresponds to its intention” (1996f: 153).

Such a model of full correspondence, correlation and comprehension means that, “At the most basic level . . . the relation between same and other is one of violent adequation” (Marais 1997: 1). This reduction of the other to the same, Levinas claims, characterises not only Husserlian but Western philosophy as such¹³ and is also apparent in Heidegger. Levinas takes the understanding of a being as the elision of the otherness of that being, and rhetorically asks how it would be possible for the relation with being to be anything but the *comprehension* of being:

The understanding of a being will thus consist in going beyond that being (*l'étant*) into the *openness* and in perceiving it *upon the horizon of being*. That is to say, comprehension, in Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy: to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond the particular. To comprehend is to be related to the particular that only exists through knowledge, which is always knowledge of the universal. . . . [One] is forced, it would seem, to subject relations between beings to structures of being, metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to the existential. How, moreover, can the *relation* with *being* be, from the outset, anything other than its *comprehension* as being (*étant*), the fact of freely letting it be inasmuch as it is being (*étant*)?

Unless it is the other (*Autrui*). Our relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension.

(Levinas 1996: 5-6)

That is, the other cannot be contained within comprehension, which is the comprehension of what is, of being. In terms of Husserlian phenomenology, “The other qua other cannot be accommodated in the noema of a noesis” (Levinas 1996f: 153). For the reason that “it is co-extensive with being, consciousness cannot meet with meaningless or irrational being. Its contact with reality is never a shock”

(Peperzak 1983: 119). Levinas (1996b: 48; cf. 1996a: 14; cf. also Peperzak 1993: 91; Critchley 1992: 109) thus likens Western philosophy as autonomy to the travels of Ulysses rather than Abraham: “The itinerary of philosophy remains that of Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native island – a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the Other”. No surprises are in store for the subject of such a philosophy (cf. 1996d: 80; Peperzak 1993:16): “The ‘act’ of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (1969: 125). In representation, the object is present to the subject and otherness is, unsurprisingly, elided: “. . . the structure of representation as a non-reciprocal determination of the other by the same is precisely for the same to be present and for the other to be present to the same. We call it ‘the same’ because in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object. . . .” (1969: 126; cf. 128).¹⁴

However, the other does *not* fit into philosophy as the coincidence of being and consciousness: “The signifier, he who emits the sign, *faces*, despite the interposition of the sign, without proposing himself as a theme” (Levinas 1969: 96). On the contrary, the other “exceeds conceptuality and cognitive categories” (Marais 1997: 62) because, as Levinas (1969: 196) insists, “The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face” of the other.¹⁵ And the relation between other and self is characterised by asymmetry to the degree that Levinas calls this relation an “‘unrelating relation’, which no one can encompass or thematize” (1969: 295), a relation which escapes comprehension and transcends conceptuality: “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content” (Levinas 1969: 194).

This is to say that, in phenomenological terms, the other falls outside the horizon of being.¹⁶ As Blanchot (1993: 52) recognises, this would mean that, in its infinitude and height, the face of the other is *invisible* because the other

comes from elsewhere and is always somewhere other than where we are, not belonging to our horizon and not inscribing himself upon any representable horizon whatsoever, so that his ‘place’ would be the invisible – on condition that we hear in this expression . . . what turns away from everything visible and invisible.

The face falls outside the “domain of visible things” (Blanchot 1993: 54). Blanchot’s important qualification here is that the face of the other ‘is’ not invisible: it “turns away” from conceptualisation as either visible or invisible. In the place of the transcendental subject who masters objects and is able to gain knowledge understood as representing (that is, making present) intentional objects of knowledge by means of intentional acts, we find in Levinas, as Blanchot explains, a self *disturbed* (cf. Levinas 1996b: 59) by the other: the self appears as no longer in control because “the other imposes itself upon me as exceeding me infinitely: a relation that relates me to what goes beyond me and escapes me to the very degree that, in this relation, I am and remain separated” (Blanchot 1993: 52).¹⁷

The face of the Levinasian face to face, for the reason that it does not appear but “always exceeds both the representation I might make of it and any form, any image, any view, any idea by which I might affirm it, arrest it, or simply let it be present” (Blanchot 1993: 54) must remain unknown and the Stranger (cf. 1993: 52).¹⁸ The Levinasian face is infinite and exceeds conceptuality: the face of the other, which exceeds the comprehension and definition of the self, cannot be represented.¹⁹ For this reason, the face of the other stands in a relation of absolute immediacy to the self. The relation between self and other is immediate and the other, in its otherness, stands outside the ambit of understanding, which mediates between the self and that which it is not:

The immediate is not an object of comprehension. An immediate given of consciousness is a contradiction in terms. . . . The relation with the face, speech, an event of collectivity, is a relation with beings as such, as pure beings. . . . To comprehension and signification grasped within a horizon, we oppose the signifyingness of the face.

(1996: 9-10)²⁰

The “signifyingness of the face” is beyond signification and comprehension: it is beyond phenomena, otherwise than being. As such, it disturbs the order of the same. Marais (1997: 60-61) puts this as follows: “Being unable to establish a relation of correlation with the other, the subject cannot foreclose on its otherness and, owing to its irreducibility, the other *surprises* the subject who finds itself in a relation to something which is nothing definable”. This surprised subject, out of its depth and no

longer in control, is confronted with an immediate otherness from which there is no escape and which cannot be dominated with the gaze of comprehension.²¹ The face of the other cannot be dominated and controlled because it escapes the purview of the self and, as such, disrupts the subject's world. The subject's freedom is grounded in its ability to dominate and objectify what is other to it: the phenomenal world and other humans. Indeed, Levinas (1987: 48; his italics) defines freedom and autonomy as "the *reduction of the other to the same*". In its resistance which does not resist, the other puts in question the subject and "refutes the subject's spontaneous freedom in unicity and thereby dispossesses it of what is required for the exercise of force and violence" (Marais 1997: 61). While it is possible to kill the other (cf. Levinas 1969: 198-199), it is the inability to comprehend and encompass the other – the infinity of the transcendence of the other beyond being – which, according to Levinas, resists without resisting the wish of the self to kill the other (to clear the way for the care of the self through the maintenance of its power and its freedom):

This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder'. The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance.

(Levinas 1969: 199)²²

Blanchot (1993: 54) comments as follows:

The visage – here is the essential, it seems to me – is that experience I have when, facing the face that offers itself to me without resistance, I see arise 'out of the depths of these defenseless eyes,' out of this weakness, this powerlessness, what puts itself radically in my power and at the same time refuses it absolutely, turning my highest power into im-possibility. In front of the visage, Lévinas emphasizes, *I am no longer able*. And the visage is that before which the impossibility of killing – the 'thou shalt not kill' – is decided on the very basis of what exposes itself completely to my power to bring death.

Thus Blanchot characterises Levinas's philosophy as metaphysics, that is, as first philosophy. Blanchot argues that metaphysics, as conceived by Levinas, is constituted not by "the care, the question, or the call of Being" (1993: 54), but by the

“transcendent relation with *autrui*”. That is, “first philosophy is not ontology . . . but ethics, the obligation toward *autrui*” (Blanchot 1993: 54). And Williams (1992: 298) glosses Levinas’s philosophy as the insistence that “ethics is prior to ontology and theory. . . . This means that ethical responsibility for the other precedes knowledge of the other”. Respect for the other as other, the commandment which proscribes killing the other (and thus reducing the otherness of the other), takes precedence over care for the self.

3.2.2 *The Other as Trace*

After this brief consideration of Levinasian ethics in terms of its phenomenological context, which led to a consideration of the face, it is now time to examine Levinas’s insistence that the other, who is not present to the gaze of the representing subject, is a trace. According to Levinas (1996b: 62), in the other as trace “has passed a past absolutely bygone”. This makes the other as trace in “an irreversible past” inaccessible to memory: “No memory can follow the traces of this past. It is an immemorial past. . . .” (1996b: 60). The other, in its infinity, cannot be recuperated or made present because of this immemorial pastness of the other as trace.

In order to elucidate this important point, I would like now to consider briefly Plato’s notion of *anamnesis* and Descartes’s of infinity. After this discussion, I shall return to a consideration of the other in terms of the implications for representation of the trace as belonging to “an immemorial past”.

3.2.2.1 *Anamnesis and Infinity*

Anamnesis implies a past which can be made present, as it involves making present truth which *has been here*, which prefigures the present. The idea of infinity, on the other hand, involves the destruction of the *noesis-noemata* structure, in that the ideatum exceeds its idea for the reason that it contains more than it is capable of containing (cf. Levinas 1987: 54ff.; 1969: 49; 1996f: 150). The idea of infinity, Levinas states, is an idea that is not a “concept” and “reminiscence” (1987: 54).

According to Levinas, “Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every other in the same, and proclaim the philosophical

birthright of autonomy” (1987: 48). Levinas relates the Cartesian *cogito*, “the soul conversing with itself” (1987: 49), to Plato’s notion that, “qua reminiscence, [the soul rediscovers] the teachings it receives” (1987: 49; cf. 1969: 126; Peperzak 1993: 94-95, 216), a conception which “thus promote[s] freedom” (1987: 49) or autonomy as opposed to the heteronomy implicit in the confrontation with otherness.²³ That is, according to Levinas, truth in Western philosophy has often been deemed to be immanent to the subject of truth, and has thus served to promote the supposed self-sufficiency of the subject. Thus, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes himself as a midwife who mediates between the self and the truth within that self. Socrates insists that his pupils have not learnt anything from him: “. . . they have themselves discovered many admirable things in themselves, and given birth to them. Still, for the delivery it’s God, and I myself, who are responsible” (Plato 1973: 14).

Socrates addresses Theaetetus and insists that “you’re pregnant with something inside you” (Plato 1973: 15). Even if this were to mean that Socrates is simply making a point about the production of philosophical theses – that he does not produce philosophical theses himself, but can elicit them from others and test their correctness (cf. McDowell 1973:116ff.) – Socrates’s words may nonetheless be related to the Platonic model of the discovery of truth as *anamnesis* or reminiscence.

This model may, in turn, be related to the Cartesian *cogito*’s discovery of itself as the only indubitable standard. Levinas makes this connection quite explicit in the essay “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” (1987). To Levinas, this identification in the Western philosophical tradition of truth with the freedom of the Same (which overcomes the transcendent other it finds outside itself in its quest for truth, and which it then transposes into an immanent “discovery” – an *anamnesis*) amounts to a denial of radical alterity.²⁴

The Platonic conception of truth in terms of the immanence and self-sufficiency of an I who is free, leads Levinas to his oft-repeated insistence, as noted above in the section on Levinasian ethics (3.2.1), that philosophy as autonomy (rather than as heteronomy) is not really an adventure because no surprises are in store to the subject of such a philosophy. But Descartes is also credited by Levinas for, alongside Plato, having insisted on a beyond of being. This Descartes does, according to Levinas, by invoking the idea of infinity in order to account for the existence of God.²⁵

In the Third of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, after having cast doubt on everything he had believed, and after having indicated that the one indubitable fact is the existence of the I that thinks, Descartes proceeds to attempt to prove the existence of God. The indubitable fact that “I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts” (1984: 24) entails establishing the duality between mind and body, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, and simultaneously putting in question the existence of the *res extensa*. However,

even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside of me, nonetheless the modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me – of that I am certain.

(1984: 24)

In other words, even if *objects (res extensa)* do not exist, nonetheless *modes of thinking (res cogitans)* of them do exist within the thinking, doubting subject (the *cogito*). That is, even if the subject cannot know *objects*, it can *know* that it does not know them – which provides it with certainty that *it* exists: “I am certain that I am a thinking thing” (1984: 24). But to know this much is not to know much at all. Sense certainty is unreliable, as Descartes argues. It is possible that there is a God – in particular, a deceiving God – who “could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident” (1984: 25), for instance, the certainty that the subject is lodged in finding itself thinking. Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God in order to remove the possibility that he may be deceived by a deceiving God. The way he does this is by making use of the idea of infinity, in the process drawing heavily on the scholastic distinction between formal and objective reality.

According to Descartes, thoughts can be classified into two kinds: first, ideas and, second, judgments and volitions. An idea is a thought which, as it were, is the image of a thing thought, which cannot in itself be true or false. On the other hand, thoughts which are judgments or volitions/emotions must be distinguished from ideas in that in such cases “my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing” (1984: 26). Only thoughts which are judgments can, strictly speaking, be true or false and therefore entail the possibility of mistakes. The reason for this lies in referentiality: Descartes cannot be mistaken about a judgment which is not linked to

something outside of him, but which is merely a mode of thought (and thus not a judgment as such). The basic kind of judgment, and the one most likely to cause error, “consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me” (1984: 26).

However, the moment judgment enters into the picture (for instance, the judgment that the idea resembles a thing outside of the subject), the possibility of error and deception also makes its appearance. Descartes’s problem is as follows: given that there are different kinds of ideas (1984: 26) – innate (derived “simply from my own nature”), adventitious (derived “from things which are located outside me”) and invented (like sirens or hippogriffs which “are my own invention”) – why do I take adventitious ideas to *resemble* things?

Descartes gives the example of the sun. Of the two ideas of the sun which the self has, the one “which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all” (1984: 27). That is, sense perception, upon which judgment is based, errs in its description of the object ‘the sun’ because it judges the sun as it appears, in other words, as being small. On the other hand, the idea of the sun innate to the subject, that it is many times larger than the earth, “is based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me” (1984: 27). Sense perception, based as it is on the judgment of ideas, is not trustworthy and cannot be used as a basis to prove the existence of anything outside the *cogito*. As Descartes puts it later, *vis-à-vis* the idea of the infinity of God, “my mental vision is blinded by the images of things perceived by the senses” (1984: 32). This leads Descartes to the conviction that, ultimately, even in the case of things – the ideas of which are clearly adventitious and could not have originated in the self – judgment is not dependable. This means that it is “merely some blind impulse that has made me believe up till now that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way” (1984: 27). The self, which knows that it exists because it thinks, still cannot bridge the apparent chasm between the knowledge it has of itself and the knowledge it has of extended things outside of it.

But there is another way, according to Descartes, of determining “whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me” (1984: 27). And this way is based on the necessity of the existence of God, proof for which is to be

obtained in the scholastic distinction between formal and objective reality, that is, the distinction between reality founded in the *object* itself and that founded in the *idea* of the object (cf. 1984: 28 note 1). This distinction entails that an object must have formal reality if it has objective reality, that is, that an object of which the self has an idea (objective, representational reality) must have an ideatum (formal reality) which, however, is not the *effect* as much as the *cause* of the idea: "For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas" (1984: 29). And even if it were so that one idea would merely lead to another, that chain of ideas must have started somewhere:

. . . eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea. So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like <pictures, or> images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect.

(1984: 29)

Thus Descartes will be able to prove that there are others, apart from himself, if there is but one idea with such a degree of objective reality that its reality cannot be lodged within himself, that it "could not have originated in myself" (1984: 31). And this is the idea of the infinity of God, an idea which exceeds itself. Except for this idea, it is possible to imagine all ideas to have originated in the self, to be merely things with attributes which derive from "various thoughts which I can count" and which are a factor of the self's perceiving "that I now exist, and remember[ing] that I have existed for some time" (1984: 30). The idea of the infinite, which Descartes discovers in himself, proves the existence of the infinite, which is an attribute of God, because "I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one" (1984: 31). The reason for this is that the infinite cannot be grasped, but the finite can. The infinite must exist because it contains the finite, which exists (and the finite does not contain the infinite). That is, just because a finite being, which exists, can have an idea of the infinite (within which it is, per definition, contained as a finite being) must mean that the infinite must exist for the reason that the finite implies the infinite: "It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite . . . for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself" (1984: 32). Infinity can,

quite literally, not be thought. Finite knowledge can always increase, which means it can never be infinite. The infinite, on the other hand, cannot increase just because it is infinite. Yet, despite the fact that it cannot increase, it can be approached without ever, however, being reached. Nonetheless, according to Descartes “It is clear enough that an infinite regress is impossible here” (1984:34) for the reason that “the ultimate cause is reached, and this will be God” (1984: 34), who not only creates but preserves and thus re-creates what he has created (cf. 1984: 33). God, as ultimate cause, must exist because he – unlike, for instance, one’s parents (cf. 1984: 35) – re-creates by preserving.

Descartes can thus assert that “it must be concluded that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists” (1984: 35). Descartes thus thinks God as an infinite being beyond being. God, as the infinite, is thought without being thought. Even though being thought, God is not encapsulated within the thought of being.

The idea of God is neither the result of sense perception nor of the invention of the self, but is innate in the self. God has “placed his idea in me to be, as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work” (1984: 35). That is, the self is the “image and likeness” (1984: 35) of God. At the same time, therefore, that God exists *because* he is thought without being grasped in his infinity, the idea of him entails that “I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another. . . . I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God – were it not the case that God really existed (1984: 35).

Even if God cannot but be thought in finite being, the thought of God is a thought which exceeds the being of the finite being thinking and exposes that being as incomplete. As Blanchot (1993: 53) puts it,

The finite self thinks the infinite. In this thought, thought thinks what goes infinitely beyond it and what it cannot account for on its own; it thinks therefore, more than it thinks. A unique experience. When I think the infinite, I think what *I am not able* to think (for if I had an adequate representation of it, if I comprehended it, assimilating it and making it equal to myself, it would be a question only of the finite).

The infinity of which Descartes speaks is a time beyond time, in the final instance a time immemorial. It is a time in which God is not present to finite being, but enables being in his infinity. For Descartes, God, as the ultimate and infinitely perfect cause, *precedes* the presence of the self and thus, according to Levinas, causes “the breakup of the *I think*”, “the breakup of consciousness” (1996e: 135, 136).

3.2.2.2 *The Irreducible Pastness of the Trace*

In contradistinction to a presence, or quasi-pastness (because it can be remembered, or represented) of the other with respect to the consciousness of the self-present same, Levinas insists on the irreducible pastness of the other. The other surpasses the self’s conception of him or her or it, just as the idea of infinity (or God) is surpassed by infinity (or God) itself. To cite Blanchot (1993: 53) again,

When I think the infinite, I think what *I am not able* to think. . . . I therefore have a thought that goes beyond my power; a thought that, to the very extent that it is a thought of mine, is the absolute exceeding of the self that thinks it – in other words: a relation with what is absolutely outside myself: the other.

The self cannot re-member, embody or re-present the other, because the other ‘is’ infinite. In this sense the other is ‘a-historical’. It does not “[go] off into the past” and can therefore not be “recalled or recovered by history” (Levinas 1996e: 134). In its infinity, the other is a past which is not “a modification of the present” (Levinas 1996e: 134) and is therefore refractory to reminiscence and consciousness. Because of its infinity, which surpasses the idea of the other, the other is always past. To re-present the other would be to re-member the other, and would mean that the other’s past is merely “a modification of the present”, that the pastness of the other was present earlier and can be re-presented. It would be to recover the otherness of the other and thus to destroy it.

Derrida, in relating his notion of *différance* to the trace, and to Levinas’s thinking, emphasises the irreducible pastness of the trace:

In order to describe traces, in order to read the traces of ‘unconscious’ traces (there are no ‘conscious’ traces), the language of presence and absence, the metaphysical discourse of phenomenology, is inadequate. . . . The alterity of the ‘unconscious’ makes us concerned not with horizons of modified – past or

future – presents, but with a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or a reproduction in the form of presence. Therefore the concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace – and therefore, *différance* – on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present.

A past that has never been present: this formula is the one that Emmanuel Levinas uses, although certainly in a nonpsychoanalytic way, to qualify the trace and enigma of absolute alterity: the Other. . . . Within these limits, and from this point of view at least, the thought of *différance* implies the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas.

(Derrida 1982: 21)²⁶

This passage is of central importance for the understanding of Levinas proffered in this thesis, tied as it is to an understanding of the trace as always already past: Derrida relates Levinas’s thought firmly to his own elaboration of *différance*. He does so by claiming it implies “the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas”, in particular of phenomenology. Husserlian phenomenology, positioning itself *vis-à-vis* “horizons of modified – past or future – presents”, employs retention and protention in order to re-present the present. However, alterity involves “a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be”, and will therefore fall outside the purview of phenomenology.²⁷ Derrida points out that Levinas uses the concept “trace” in terms of “A past that has never been present”.²⁸

This irreducible pastness of the trace of alterity means to imply that the otherness of the other cannot be recuperated. As always separated from the self, the other is not an object of perception which can be known by being reduced to consciousness. The past in which the other ‘is’, is a past which was never present, “an immemorial past” (Levinas 1996b: 60). Phenomenologically speaking, the other can therefore not be correlated with the self as an object can with a subject and, as such, cannot be represented:

A relationship that would not create simultaneity between its terms but would hollow out a depth from which the expression approaches would have to refer to an irreversible, immemorial, unrepresentable past.

But how refer to an irreversible past, that is, a past which this very reference would not bring back, like memory which retrieves the past, like signs which recapture the signified? What would be needed would be an indication that would reveal the withdrawal of the indicated, instead of a reference that rejoins it. Such is a trace, in its emptiness and desolation. . . . What is this original trace, this primordial desolation? It is the nakedness of a

face that faces, expressing itself, interrupting order. . . . [A] face is decomposed and naked.

(Levinas 1996c: 69)

In this passage Levinas links the irreducible pastness of the other with the trace as the “nakedness of a face that faces”. It is a face which disrupts order, the order of representation. Levinas explicitly introduces the concept ‘trace’ into his work in order to deal with the relation of the face to representation, as I shall attempt to explain now. In the essay “Meaning and Sense”, Levinas makes use of a set of startling images in order to contrast the enigmatic nature of the face with the phenomenon:

Whereas a phenomenon is already, in whatever respect, an image, a captive manifestation of its plastic and mute form, the epiphany of a face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form in which all *beings* (*étant*) when they enter into immanence, that is, when they are exposed as a theme, are already dissimulated.

The Other (*Autrui*) who manifests himself in a face as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like a being who opens the window on which its own visage was already taking form. His presence consists in divesting himself of the form which does already manifest him.

(Levinas 1996b: 53)

The face of the other is said to “undo(ing)” and “break through” the form of being as theme. It is as if the other is a phenomenon, the petrified (cf. Levinas 1996c: 69) mould or mask²⁹ of which is torn away, a reflection on a window which is opened to reveal the other within: “The manifestation of a face is the first disclosure. Speaking is before anything else this way of coming from behind one’s appearance, behind one’s form, an openness in the openness” (1996b: 53). The face *interrupts* phenomenality; it interrupts the manifestation of being as if this manifestation or appearance were a mask to be torn off, vestments from which the other “divest[s]” itself. However, Levinas complicates this scene of divestiture and revelation in the following way:

The signifyingness of a face in its abstractness is in the literal sense of the term extra-ordinary, outside of every order, every world. How is such a production possible? How can the coming of the Other, the visitation of a face, the absolute not be – in any way – converted into a revelation, not even a symbolism or a suggestion? How is a face not simply a *true representation* . . . in which the Other renounces his alterity?

(1996b: 53)

How is one to go about not falling into the trap of mistaking the face as the revelation, the representation of otherness? The face *cannot*, in spite of the scene of divestiture, be understood as being a representation of the other behind or within which the other appears, for such an understanding would return the other to the realm of the Same and thus reduce the otherness of the other. This is a crucial problem concerning methodology, the problem of how one is to speak of the other without betraying it by reducing its otherness in the act of representation: “A methodological problem arises here, whether the pre-original element of saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designate it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme (if an archeology is possible), and whether this betrayal can be reduced. . . .” (Levinas 1981: 7). This problem, “a problem that haunts every page of *Otherwise than Being*” (Critchley 1992: 7) must be faced not only by Levinas but by anyone writing about the other. Levinas addresses this problem by introducing the concept *trace* into his writing: “To answer, we will have to study the exceptional signifyingness of the trace. . . .” (1996b: 53-54).³⁰

In a radical qualification of what I have termed the scene of divestiture, Levinas (1996b: 60) asserts that “The face presents itself in its nudity; it is neither a form concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground nor a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays, a thing itself”. That is, behind the face *is* nothing. The face does not cover or conceal the other; it is not as if the face is a phenomenon which can be removed to reveal the thing itself behind it. The face indicates the absence of the other, not its presence. If it indicated the presence of the other, it would have been a mask behind which the real thing, the other, could be found. This is not the case: “Otherwise, the face would be one with a mask, but a mask presupposes a face. . . . The Other proceeds from the absolutely Absent, but his relationship with the *absolutely Absent* from which he comes *does not indicate, does not reveal, this Absent*; and yet the *Absent* has a meaning in the face” (1996b: 60).

The face is not a mask, for a mask presupposes a face. If the face concealed the other, it would indeed have been a mask – removing the face-as-mask would reveal or disclose the other. Behind this face, there *is* nothing. The face does not reveal what is absent, thus making it present; nor does it reveal that “absolutely Absent” in its absence. If it *were* to reveal anything, it would be the “*absolutely*

Absent. And, indeed, it is not possible to remove the face (or any literal face) as if it were a mask: the face does not reveal “this *Absent*; and yet the *Absent* has a meaning in the face”. This “meaning” of the *Absent* in the face is the trace of the other: “Such is the signifyingness of the trace. The beyond from which the face comes signifies as a trace” (1996b: 60).³¹

At this point I would like to return to my parenthetical remark above concerning the impossibility of removing the face (or any literal face). I paid no attention in my earlier discussion of this ‘concept’ to the status of Levinas’s term ‘face’ as literal or figurative. Clearly, Levinas does not use ‘face’ in a literal sense (initial evidence for this presents itself in the frequency with which he uses the indefinite article and refers to “*a* face”). The term does not refer to a real face. As Peperzak explains, “‘Face’ is the word Levinas chooses to indicate the alterity of the Other” (1993: 64), and again, “The word ‘face’ can be replaced by ‘expression’ or ‘word’ or ‘speech’” (1993: 142). Nor, however, for the reason that it does not substitute for a (more) proper term, is the term ‘face’ a figure. There is no more proper way of referring to the other than by means of this metaphor (or other metaphors). That is, the face, like the trace, is a catachresis of the other. That the trace of the other is a catachresis of the other, is asserted by Miller in terms of Levinas’s contention that the trace of the other ‘is’ in the face:

For Emmanuel Lévinas ‘the other’ is an absolute transcendence, ‘beyond being’, who leaves traces of itself or himself in the face of the other person. Lévinas says *traces*, not signs. A sign presupposes the existence and availability of its referent. A trace is a catachresis (though Lévinas does not use this word) for something or someone I can never confront directly. He or it belongs to ‘a past absolutely bygone’

(Miller 1994: 6)³²

Because of the irreducible pastness of the other as trace, the other can only be thought, represented and spoken catachrestically: the otherness of the other is not present to the representing subject, and any determination of the other (that is, any definition of what the otherness of the other consists in) is necessarily a catachresis. Indeed, not only is any *representation* of the other a figure for the other which cannot be made proper: already to *refer* to the other (for instance by means of the term ‘face’) is to invoke and *give* a face to the other. Not only would the term ‘face’, therefore, be a catachresis of the other (because ‘face’ is neither literal nor figurative, but a figure

which cannot be made proper); it would also be a *prosopopoeia*. But, as it is part of the structure of a catachresis to undo itself (as I shall argue below, this otherness is evident in catachresis because it is a trope functioning *as if it were* proper, that is, a trope which cannot be *made* proper because it does not substitute a proper meaning – it is a trace of otherness in that it signifies absence) this *prosopopoeia* is interrupted, precisely, in that it is a catachresis of the other. The *prosopopoeia* of the other, as catachresis, is interrupted by the other.

Before substantiating this claim by examining in more detail the important terms catachresis and *prosopopoeia*, and the relation between them – but this time in terms of irony – I would now like to turn to a consideration of Levinas's distinction between the Saying and the Said. The term 'face' might be said to constitute an example of the ontological Said in that it gives a face to the other and thus, willy-nilly, conceptualises the other; but the irreducible otherness within this term, as catachresis, is testimony to the 'presence' within it of an ethical Saying.

3.2.3 *The Saying and the Said*

As mentioned above (in the discussion of what I there termed the scene of divestiture), if the other, as irreducibly past, cannot be represented, then Levinasian ethics is caught in an inevitable double bind. This is so for the reason that it *deals* with the other, that is, with something which cannot, in a radical sense, be dealt with: in dealing with the other it defines and delimits what is infinite. It has as theme that which exceeds thematisation. In claiming that the other exceeds explanation, it already explains the other. In saying that the other exceeds representation, it already fixes the other in propositional discourse.

Levinas recognises that "The beyond being, showing itself in the said, always shows itself there enigmatically, is already betrayed" (1981: 19). When the other, as an enigma beyond being, is said, this amounts to the transfiguration of the other into an appearance. That is, when the other is said, it appears as a phenomenon, no longer as an enigma: its otherness is reduced and it is, as a result, betrayed in being said. When the other is said, it becomes part of the world of phenomena and, subsequently, like the world, can be conceptualised within the horizon of being: "The world is *said* and hence can be a theme, can be proposed" (1969: 98).

As a result of this thematising and conceptualising which occurs in the other being said, Levinas must engage in the difficult task of *unsaying* what is said about the other:

When stated in propositions, the unsayable (or the an-archival) espouses the forms of formal logic; . . . the beyond being is posited in doxic theses, and glimmers in the amphibology of *being* and *beings* – in which beings dissimulate being. The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*.

(1981: 7)

The other, as that which cannot be contained within the horizons of phenomenality, and which therefore exceeds the limits of being and (ontological) comprehension – the realm of appearance and dissimulation – is otherwise than being. The other signifies, but it signifies “*being otherwise*”. Nonetheless, when “the beyond being is posited in doxic theses” and is thus couched in propositional language, it “is already betrayed” (1981: 19). Peperzak confirms the double bind of Levinas’s thought in the following way:

The difficulty of Levinas’s enterprise lies in the task of showing – in the form of a thematic, and thereby necessarily gathering, discourse – that gathering, coherence, and unity do not constitute the ultimate horizon of such a discourse, and that otherness, separation, and transcendence are irreducible to any unity.

(1993: 135)³³

Marais, in terms highly germane to this thesis (as its main burden is to read *novels* in terms of the relation between irony and otherness), states this problem *vis-à-vis* the representational protocols of the novel-as-genre:

Of immediate concern . . . is the problem of constative representation that is raised by an ethics that is grounded in a relation of radical difference to an absolute alterity. How can that which is not an object, and therefore not present, be represented? If ethics is premised on respect for the other, how may the other be respected in a discourse that attempts to represent its otherness? The mere attempt to describe that which is radically exterior to the same in the language and discourse of the same is bound to reduce it to an object and thereby to violate it.

(Marais 1997: 2)³⁴

This reduction of the other to the same in the Said of propositional discourse must be unsaid, that is, interrupted. This interruption of the Said would amount to a reduction of the Said, “thereby letting the Saying reside as a residue, or interruption, within the Said” (Critchley 1992: 8), and the effort of the philosopher would consist, among other things, “in the reduction of the Said to the Saying” (Critchley 1992: 8), in an attempt to *reduce* the degree of betrayal of the other.³⁵

In a passage quoted earlier (in the course of the discussion of the trace), Levinas (1996c: 69) describes the irreducible pastness, inaccessible to representation, of the trace of the other in terms of the nakedness of a face. It is a face which interrupts the order of representation. It is important to note that the interruption of the Said by the Saying *follows* an anterior interruption: that of the order of representation by the other. The other, by virtue of its otherness, disturbs the freedom of the self, as was noted above (section 3.2.1). This disturbance of the other, which interrupts the coherence of being, however, is threatened with being incorporated into the propositional discourse of representation. That is, representation, in giving the other a face (in making ‘a face’ ‘the face’) forgets that “a face is decomposed and naked” (1996c: 69). A decomposed face is ‘restored’ into the face of the other by means of smoothing over the absence which is the face of the other. It is necessary to remind oneself that, behind the face of the other, *is* nothing, that the face of the other *reveals* nothing. As I have argued, following Levinas, if it were to be a revelation, it would be a sign and, as such, its referent would be available (cf. Miller 1994: 6) and present to the representing self. The other cannot be represented without reducing its alterity.

It is in this sense that it is necessary to interrupt the face of the other, that is, to decompose, deform or de-face the face. If the face of the other is not interrupted, the face becomes a mask of the other, as I have argued. The interruption of the face, as soon as it becomes lodged in representational discourse, must be interrupted itself. This is acknowledged by Levinas in the following important passage from *Otherwise than Being*, albeit not explicitly in terms of the face. Rather, Levinas uses an extended metaphor to describe the Said in terms of the text as fabric. I quote extensively:

The logos said has the last word dominating all meaning, the word of the end, the very possibility of the ultimate and the result. Nothing can interrupt it.

Every contestation and interruption of this power of discourse is at once related and invested by discourse. It thus recommences as soon as one interrupts it. . . . This discourse will affirm itself to be coherent and one. In relating the interruption of the discourse or my being ravished into discourse I connect its thread. . . . The approach, or saying, is a relationship with what is not understood in the together, the out-of-the-series. A subversion of essence, it overflows the theme it states, the 'all together', the 'everything included' of the said. . . . Does not the coherent discourse, wholly absorbed in the said, owe its coherence to the State, which, violently excludes subversive discourse? . . . Does not the discourse that suppresses the interruptions of discourse by relating them maintain the discontinuity under the knots with which the thread is tied again?

The interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity.

(Levinas 1981: 169-170)

Even though a number of important areas of concern are evident in this passage, I would like to focus on two only. In the first place, the passage deals with the necessity of interrupting interruption because the discourse of "the logos said" "recommences as soon as one interrupts it". Before considering this point more closely, it is necessary to point out that, in the second place, the passage associates interruption with Saying and with ethics. On the other hand, the suppression of interruption is identified with the Said and with politics. This involves an infinite, spiralling movement (cf. Critchley 1992: 123) from an ethical interruption of the political Said to the political suppression of all interruption, including the ethical. The implication is that ethics is less a fundament of politics than an interruption of it which inheres in it. This inherently ethical interruption of the political is, *of necessity*, for the sake of orderliness and society, suppressed by the political – while that interruption, the ethical residue, persists within and disturbs the very fabric of politics.

The translation of the passage as it appears in Derrida's essay "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am" (1991: 21), makes this point clearer: "The discourse which suppresses the interruptions of discourse in relating them together, does it not maintain the discontinuity behind the knots where the thread is retied?" One gets the sense more clearly here than in the translation of the passage quoted that, even though this discourse (that of "Western philosophy and the State" [Levinas 1981: 169]) ties again the broken thread of the logos, the knots with which continuity is restored are traces of the "discontinuity" which is "maintain[ed]" "behind the knots

where the thread is retied". Within the fabric of politics, ethical interruption persists. That is, politics turns out to be the necessary fiction of coherence, while ethics is the infinite and uncomfortable reminder that coherence is a fiction, that is, the reminder of an interrupting otherness *outside* of the totality of every society and State ("the 'all together,' the 'everything included'").³⁶ At this point I would like to return to a consideration of the passage in terms of the thematics of interruption.

Saying, as what "overflows the theme it states", is, in this passage, characterised as being an interruption, as being "the out-of-the-series": the Saying, as the approach of the other, interrupts totality (as it does politics) by its absence, by not being fitted into linearity. However, in the very act of "relating the interruption of the discourse . . . I connect its thread". Relating, that is, narrating, the interruption of discourse covers up the interruption, makes it part of the narration.³⁷

By means of the repetition of the words "thread" and "knots" in phrases such as "the knots with which the thread is tied again", that is, by means of the "metaphor of the retied thread" (Critchley 1992: 125) in the passage, a second, extended metaphor arises (mentioned above). The text is, by means of this extended metaphor, compared to a fabric being woven (etymologically the word 'text' is related to the Latin word *texere*, which means 'to weave'). The moment the logos is interrupted, when, as it were, the fabric of the text is interrupted and the woven thread is torn asunder, the logos is restored – as if the thread is knotted – because the interruption itself must occur narratively, that is, textually. The text which interrupts the text of the logos is itself a text.

What this implies is that the process of "rending and mending", as Critchley (1992: 125) calls it, is infinite. That is, the interruption of the Said, of the logos, of the representation of the other, must be interrupted, and that interruption must, in its turn, be interrupted, and so on. The fabric of the text, in being rended, is already mended, and must therefore be rended again. Even though the interruption of the Said by the Saying is said (this turn of phrase graphically illustrates how the interruption of the Said by the Saying turns into the Said in *being said!*) in the passage to be "the out-of-the-series", it is immediately incorporated into a new series: the series of rending and mending which, as Critchley (1992: 125) puts it, leads to "an unbound seriality of discourse". Critchley (1992: 128), following Derrida, calls this *sériature*: "This image of the text as a play of binding and unbinding, where the mended interruption

of essence is itself interrupted by a moment of irreducible ethical priority, is the way in which Levinas's work works. It is that which Levinas's writing enacts".

Despite the incorporating force of the logos, which results in infinite interruption of interruption, the rending moment does have priority over the mending one. Even though one could explain the infinite series of rending and mending in terms of an image "of a single thread with a series of knots running along its length", each of which represents *both* "the ethical interruption of essence" (Critchley 1992: 125) *and* the mending of that interruption, nonetheless "The fabric of discourse is not simply the play of rending and mending" (Critchley 1992: 127). This is so because each interruption, each knot, is, in its turn, interrupted. Perhaps a way of thinking this movement would be by imagining, within each knot along the thread, another tear which cannot be mended: "The picture that now emerges is one in which, within the knot of each ethical interruption that has been tied back into the ontological thread, there persists an irreducible supplement to the knot which is the very interruption of interruption" (1992: 127).

In the next section I shall argue that this irreducible interruption of the interruption of the conceptualisation of the other, which persists along the narrative line of the logos, may be explained in terms of irony. At least, this is the case if irony, following Paul de Man (1979a: 301; 1983: 220; 1996: 178), is understood as a "permanent parabasis", a perpetual interruption along the line of a narrative, that is, as the allegorisation of irony. I shall attempt to show that irony *understood* presupposes the *allegorisation of irony*, the perpetual and successive interruption of the narrative which explains irony. This allegorisation of irony – which enables the provisional control of irony and thus renders it understandable – may be compared with the narrative line of the logos.

As I showed above, the 'coherent' narrative text of the Said, which ties together the fractured fabric of the logos (and of society) by smoothing over the ethical interruption of the Saying, is, in Levinas's conception, politics. Irony would then appear as the infinite, *ethical*, interruption of the politics of allegory as narrativisation and coherence because of its reminder that the face given to the other and the systems constructed on the basis of the "comparison between incomparables" (Levinas 1981: 16) are, necessarily, fictive.

3.3 Irony

In this final section of the present chapter, I want to relate irony to otherness in the light of the discussion of otherness above in terms of Levinasian ethics, where *interruption* appeared as a crucial moment of Levinas's conception of otherness. This will entail, first, determining irony in terms of interruption and, second, determining the nature of the interruption effected by irony. Put differently, the following are the two questions being posed here: In which way can irony be characterised as interruption? And if it can be characterised as entailing interruption, what is it that is interrupted by irony?

I shall attempt to argue here that irony can, indeed, be characterised as entailing interruption and shall do so on the basis of an understanding of irony as permanent parabasis. And I shall attempt to argue that what is interrupted by irony as permanent parabasis, is conceptuality itself. That is, irony, as permanent parabasis, involves the interruption of the coherence of the concept. It disrupts the concept or face in recognising it as having been posited: the prosopopoeia is recognised as prosopopoeia, a fiction which lends a face to what has none. That is, the prosopopoeia is recognised to be a catachresis, a death mask signifying not presence but absence. Irony exposes the (absence of the) other 'within' or 'behind' the same. It intimates otherness by continually disrupting and interrupting the narrative of coherence. It, as it were, de-allegorises allegorisation (the latter understood as tending towards coherence).

In this respect, irony – as necessarily the allegorisation of itself, the putting successively of what is simultaneous – undoes itself. If irony is understood, it is undone: understanding irony involves conceptualising it, narrativising it, telling a story about it. But irony radically resists conceptualisation, narrativisation, and allegorisation. This means that irony interrupts the allegorisation of itself. Irony is interrupted by being understood, but that interruption (its understanding) is itself interrupted.

Here we find a number of ironies. It is ironic that understanding (in this case, of irony) should appear as a moment of interruption rather than of gathering, or, rather, that understanding irony – as the coherent gathering together of what disrupts coherence – should be disruptive of irony. Understanding irony, as the making

coherent of irony, means *not* understanding irony since irony is necessarily disruptive of coherence. A second irony consists of the fact that understanding irony, while destroying irony by allegorising it, should itself be ironic. Understanding irony appears as both profoundly *unironic* (irony allegorised) and irrevocably *ironic* (first, irony can only appear successively, if at all; second, understanding irony interrupts irony precisely by gathering it and is thus immediately ironised since irony gathered is itself open to the disruptive effects of irony). In this way, irony and its interruption by understanding are subject to a potentially infinite process of gathering and interruption. My understanding of irony, too, must itself be unironic because it thematises irony as that which is “resistant to theoretical formulation” (Newmark 1992: 914), and potentially ironic in being subject to the disruptive force of irony which would result in the ironising of my understanding of irony. Not only is irony allegorised in understanding it, but that allegorisation is in turn ironised.

In order to substantiate some of the apparently outrageous claims made above, it will be necessary to turn to a closer examination of irony as permanent parabasis. This examination will take into account de Man’s distinction between irony and allegory, and his association of the latter with conceptualisation (with otherness Said, to put it in Levinasian terms). As an initial aside, or parabasis, irony will be understood as being “constitutive, as well as disruptive, of the Romantic project” (Albert 1993: 847 note 24). Irony will be understood in terms of the ‘self-resistance’ (cf. Newmark 1992) and ‘unworking’ (cf. Critchley 1997) of this “Romantic project”, as this unworking is exemplified in the fragment as “a form that embodies interruption within itself” (Critchley 1997: 106). “That is to say”, as Critchley (1997: 106) puts it, “the fragment fails”, which is its success as project.

I shall then attempt to relate irony to prosopopoeia. Irony, as the permanent interruption of conceptuality, shows the face to be a fiction, that is, a prosopopoeia. Irony may be said, in terms of Levinasian ethics and a de Manian understanding of irony, as involving the recognition of the face of the other as being a death mask. It is a death mask for the reason that the face of the other is radically disrupted – de-faced – by the absence of the other to representation. The face of the other does not represent the other but indicates the other’s absence in the same way that a death mask cannot, strictly speaking, be a representation because what it signifies is absent. Crucially, a death mask signifies not presence but absence and therefore, as a

representation of death as such, is a *misrepresentation* (cf. Critchley 1997: 73-74).³⁸ In a similar way, the face of the other – to the extent that it is available to sight and understanding – signifies not the presence of that other, but its absolute absence. As always already belonging to a “past absolutely bygone” (Levinas 1996b: 62), the other is available to representation only catachrestically, as a scandalous impropriety.

3.3.1 *Parabasis*

Critchley (1997: 112), following de Man, argues that “the lack of synthesis and endlessness of romantic writing is a permanent *parabasis*”.³⁹ He does this in the context of a discussion of Jena Romanticism on the basis of its manifest, naïve failure (see Critchley 1997: 94ff.) which is both aesthetic (as evident in its inability, contrary to its declared intent, to produce the “total book” [Critchley 1997: 94]) and political (in that its radical beginning is eclipsed by its conservative end).

This thesis is not primarily concerned with Romanticism. Nonetheless, Critchley’s consideration of the failure of Romanticism and its vulnerability to external critique (cf. Critchley 1997: 95-96), and in particular his “presenting and defending another version of romanticism”, what he calls “an *unworked romanticism*” (Critchley 1997: 97), presents a useful starting point for a consideration of irony as permanent parabasis. As inheritors of “a *romantic modernity* . . . in which we are both unable to believe, but which we are unable to leave”, Critchley claims that Romanticism may lead us to “the thinking of finitude – of the finiteness of the finite” and thus to “an acceptance of finitude and an acknowledgement of the other” (1997: 97).

Romanticism is characterised by an essential ambiguity in that it is both “an aesthetic absolutism” and yet “the experience of failure and incompleteness” (Critchley 1997: 105). But what potentially redeems this incoherence is that Romanticism “is self-conscious of the possibility of its own failure” (1997: 106). That is, it is aware that its attempt at the literary absolute (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1988) is necessarily circumscribed by the impossibility and untenability of totality. To this extent, “The romantic model for the literary absolute, the genre par excellence for romantic expression, is the *fragment*” (Critchley 1997: 106). And, as Critchley points out in a passage already partially quoted above,

the specificity of the fragment, its uniqueness, is that it is a form that is both complete and incomplete, both a whole and a part. It is a form that embodies interruption within itself. That is to say, the fragment fails. Thus, the success of Jena Romanticism is the development and deployment of a genre that embodies failure within itself, whose completion is incompleteness, whose structure is essentially ambiguous.

(Critchley 1997: 106)⁴⁰

Critchley crucially relates this completion-as-incompletion of the fragment to the endlessness of Romantic writing and thus to irony as permanent parabasis. In short, he relates irony as interruption to the unworking of the work, the detotalising of totality evident in the form of the fragment, an ensemble of which “constitutes a field irreducible to unity” (Critchley 1997: 108). As Critchley (1997: 108-109) puts it, with reference to Friedrich Schlegel’s fragments,

The form of the fragments provides an image of an ideal romantic community, where collective expression and communal production would exist in a creative tension with singularity and individuality. . . . [A] perfected romantic society would be . . . a community worked and unworked, where the being-in-common of individuals is irreducible to fusion, unity or totality.

Like a collection of fragments, each of which is neither complete (because then it would no longer be a fragment) nor incomplete (because then it would already be fitted into a greater whole and thus recuperated and closed off) (see Frey 1996: 25ff.), society too consists of a collection of individuals who are not reducible to some greater totality. A collection of fragments, like society itself, “is continually referred back to the chaotic singularities that make it possible – republican speech, republican space” (Critchley 1997: 108).

This should not be taken to imply that Romanticism is averse to systematicity: on the contrary, Romanticism, like its form – that of the fragment – is both complete and incomplete, systematic and unsystematic, “and this constitutes its essential *ambiguity*” (Critchley 1997: 109). Fragments, since they are neither complete nor incomplete, but have an undecidable status *vis-à-vis* their completion, are always in the process of becoming. An ambiguity characterises them in as far as both their form and content are concerned: they are, simply, unfinished. Yet this statement already

serves to determine the status of the fragment and seeks to render it whole by mending its moment of simply breaking off.

The fragmentation of the fragment has the status of a *project* (cf. Newmark 1992: 926). But this project can have no end, for if it were to have such an end (whether it be a *telos* or a limit), the project would be at an end and the fragment would no longer be a fragment. The impossibility which would be a completed fragment – completed and yet simultaneously a fragment – “would be at once completely subjective and objective, it would be a project of individual freedom and genius and yet objectively realized in sensuous form” (Critchley 1997: 110). As Critchley notes, such an impossible fragment clearly “*does not exist*” (1997: 110): it can only ever become. Thus Critchley goes on to state that “*the romantic fragment or project, defined as the synthesis of form and content or subject and object is the self-consciousness of the perpetual lack of this final synthesis*” (1997: 111; Critchley’s italics). It is the essence of Romanticism that it does not exist: it *is* not, it *becomes*. Romanticism, understood in this way, is not a work tending towards totality and coherence, but a self-reflective awareness of the impossibility of such a total work. In this self-reflexivity, the work of Romanticism is continually interrupted and prevented from achieving the synthesis of form and content which would characterise the work of Romanticism and its ideal genre, the complete fragment.

Critchley puts this a little differently – and this is where the fragment, as was mentioned above, is linked to irony – by distinguishing, in Schlegelian terms, between wit and irony: “If wit is *synthetic*, the chemical mixing of disparate elements, then irony is *diaeretic*, the separation or division of those elements” (1997: 114).⁴¹ But while it is, according to Critchley, possible analytically to distinguish between wit and irony, it is nonetheless of crucial importance to show their interdependence, “the wit within irony and the irony within wit. The synthesizing chemistry of wit is counteracted by the dissolving diaeresis of irony” (Critchley 1997: 115). Critchley says this “oscillating movement, this alternation between *Witz* or *Wissen* and *Ironie* or *skepsis*, is *almost a dialectics*. That is to say, it is a dialectics without Hegelian reconciliation or *Aufhebung*” (1997: 115). Moreover, “The genre of the fragment enacts [this] quasi-dialectical oscillation between wit and irony, that is, between the creative desire for synthesis and the destructive scepticism of diaeresis” (1997: 115). Within the fragment as form, tending as it does towards an end or synthesis but never

achieving it, the urge for totality and closure uneasily coexists with the awareness of its status as incomplete and infinite. It is a project tending towards completion but continually interrupted. And this continuous interruption, which unworks Romanticism and the fragment as form in its “dissolving diaeresis”, is irony. This returns us to Critchley’s statement (quoted at the start of this section), following de Man, that “the lack of synthesis and endlessness of romantic writing is a permanent *parabasis*” (1997: 112).

De Man, in the essay to which Critchley refers, associates irony with “aphoristic, rapid, and brief texts (which are incompatible with the duration that is the basis of the novel)” (de Man 1983: 210-211), and the ironic process with “an unsettling speed” (1983: 215): in the theorisations of it by Schlegel and Baudelaire, “irony appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single moment” (1983: 225). In terms of de Man’s definition, following Schlegel, of irony as a permanent parabasis – “Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parabase” (Schlegel 1963: 85)⁴² – this unsettling speed of irony is a suspension or interruption of duration, or, as de Man puts it, “an interruption of the narrative line” (de Man 1996: 178).

It is characteristic of an interruption to be sudden and swift: it is “punctual” (Albert 1993: 847 note 24). But irony is said to be a *permanent* parabasis, which makes it the *permanent* interruption of the narrative line (of, for instance, the Greek drama within which it occurs). In an impossible gesture, irony is said to suspend permanently the line of action without allowing it to be resumed. This is an impossibility for the reason that the parabasis, per definition, has a temporary nature and always involves the resumption of what it has interrupted, namely the narrative. De Man (1996: 178-179) puts this important point as follows:

But parabasis is not enough, for Schlegel. Irony is not just an interruption; it is (and this is the definition which he gave of irony), he says, the “permanent parabasis”, . . . parabasis not just at one point but at all points . . . : irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted. Critics who have written about this have pointed out, rightly, that there is a radical contradiction here, because a parabasis can only happen at one specific point, and to say that there would be a permanent parabasis is saying something violently paradoxical.

A permanent parabasis would not merely be the interruption of narrative once, but repeatedly: it is “the constant interruption of the narrative illusion by intrusion” (de Man 1996: 178).

However, there is a cardinal difference between repetition and permanence. A permanent interruption can only be thought successively, as *entailing* repetition. This is to say that irony can only be conceptualised in conceptual terms, that is, narratively.⁴³ Irony can only be thought by conceptualising it. As I attempted to show above, it is impossible to think irony as permanent interruption: such interruption would consist of simultaneously suspending the narrative illusion punctually and, crucially, maintaining it in order to interrupt it. The narrative line would, impossibly, have to be interrupted and maintained at the same time; the loss of illusion would have to coexist with the maintenance of the illusion.

As Frey (1990a: 96) notes, in an important essay which considers de Man’s work in terms of his view of language, this begs the question of how irony is possible at all. His answer, in terms of a passage of de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in which irony is defined as “a consciousness of non-consciousness” (1983: 216), is “that consciousness and non-consciousness are taken apart and are placed opposite each other. Togetherness becomes after-each-otherness, simultaneity is transformed into succession. One can call this, in de Man’s terms, an allegorising of irony” (Frey 1990a: 96).⁴⁴

Narrative, allegory and conceptuality may be linked in terms of the tendency of language to work conceptually by constructing coherence and order. As Frey puts it, “language cannot but construct orders and postulate them as valid” (Frey 1990a: 97).⁴⁵ This statement is to be understood in terms of de Man’s association of allegory and narrativisation with the nature of language itself. With reference to one of Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, de Man (1983: 225) states that “The fundamental structure of allegory reappears here in the tendency of the language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject”. What is “simultaneous within the subject” here involves the “double structure of ironic language” (de Man 1983: 216), what Frey (1990a: 96) calls “This impossible distance [which] characterises the structure of irony”.⁴⁶ Frey makes the very important point that language *itself* is not posited.⁴⁷

The narrative line which is said to be interrupted permanently by irony – an interruption which can only be conceptualised in terms of repetition and successiveness: narratively – is the line of “*logos* (cause, reason, meaning, or end)” as Miller puts it (1982: 106). That is, what irony disrupts is conceptuality itself.⁴⁸ As Critchley puts it, the lack of synthesis characteristic of the Romantic fragment, consisting as it does of the oscillation of the synthesis of wit and the diaeresis of irony, leads to “an infinite reflection that is not completed in any intuition or in any coincidence of thought and object of thought, i.e. the Concept” (Critchley 1997: 115).

Now, for de Man, conceptuality is tropological.⁴⁹ In the course of a discussion of Schlegel’s conception of irony in terms of Fichteian dialectic, de Man relates “comparative judgments” to the possibility of experience (1996: 175).⁵⁰ He continues by noting that this (Fichteian) system of comparative judgments “is first of all a theory of trope” for the reason that “the circulation of the property (*Merkmal*) described in the act of judgment here is structured like a metaphor or a trope, is based on the substitution of properties” (de Man 1996: 176). Secondly, he characterises the system as performative because it involves “an original act of positing” (1996: 176) and claims “one can only call [this system] an allegory. . . . It is an allegory, the narrative of the interaction between trope on the one hand and performance as positing on the other hand” (1996: 176). The point which I would like to emphasise here is de Man’s identification of conceptuality – systematicity, coherence – with tropology, with a “tropological system”, a “narrative line”, a “tropological narrative” (1996: 177). According to de Man, parabasis undoes “the narrative structure resulting from the tropological system” (1996: 179). He continues by stating that “The allegory of tropes has its own narrative coherence, its own systematicity” and that “irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative” (1996: 179). This is to say that irony interrupts the totalising, narrativising, and allegorising tendency of language, the tendency to conceptualise and synthesise which results in the “coincidence of thought and object of thought” (Critchley 1997: 115).

The discussion above should serve to illuminate de Man’s difficult definition of irony, namely that “irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes” (1996: 179).⁵¹ This is a self-subverting definition, because in effect it claims that any definition of irony – that is, any explicating narrative of irony, any allegory of irony – is interrupted permanently by irony. At the same time, a self-subverting definition is

the only kind of definition which would do justice to irony as disruption, since a coherent definition of irony would ignore the disruptive nature of irony. It is for this reason that de Man claims "irony is not a concept" (1996: 163), and might be postulated as at least one ground for the difficulty of giving a definition of irony (cf. de Man 1996: 164ff.).

A crucial aspect of parabasis which I have not dealt with up to this point is its relation to *fiction*. A parabasis is an interruption, but this interruption must be characterised, on the basis of its historical reference to Greek drama, as the interruption of fiction or the illusion of fiction. As an interruption of the narrative line of the play, the parabasis interrupts the progression of the play by "*represent[ing]* itself as reality with respect to the play" (cf. Albert 1993: 842). However, this interruption of the play is itself part of the play, that is, fictive. Fiction is interrupted by fiction. This means that the parabasis, liminally, is simultaneously included and excluded from the play: it is excluded because it purports to be an interruption of the play as fiction, and yet it is included because it forms part of the script. The parabasis, as fictive interruption of fiction, is a fragment in that its status *vis-à-vis* completion is undecidable: in itself it is a complete entity, for *it* interrupts the play; but it, simultaneously, forms part of the very play which it interrupts and therefore cannot be complete in itself. Irony, as the permanent parabasis of fiction, turns out to be characterised by the undecidability of the fragmentary. In its unmasking of fiction as fiction, it blurs the very distinction between reality and fiction. Albert (1993: 843) puts this as follows:

The ironical spectator (or the ironist in general) is the one who realizes that he is always already a character in the play. Although he is obviously free to react as he wishes, his reactions (as reactions of a spectator who belongs to the play) belong in turn to the play and are a part of his role. Even his knowledge that he is part of the play is part of the play; even his self-reflection does not belong to him; even his irony is ironized.

It is for this reason that irony, as permanent parabasis, "In suspending the [narrative] line . . . suspends also itself" (Miller 1982: 105). Irony is subject to its own disruptive power because, as an example of interruption, it effaces interruption. This is a problem as far as fragmentation and interruption in general are concerned in that "the particular examples that must be given to illustrate the resulting fragmentation also

have a way of generalizing themselves into a systematic formulation, however aberrant such formal systems have just been shown to be” (Newmark 1992: 925). Irony, in interrupting the logos, turns into the logos, which is ironised and in its turn interrupted. In its requirement to be recognised *as* irony, irony undoes itself for the reason that what it does is, precisely, to interrupt understanding itself. Irony turned to logos must, in its turn, be ironised. Newmark (1992: 925) notes that this makes irony self-resisting, and characterises Schlegel’s definition of irony as a permanent parabasis as “that most self-resisting definition of irony he ever gave”.

Irony is thus potentially infinite in its disruptive power: not only does it expose fiction as fiction, but it exposes itself as part of that selfsame fiction. It is to the implications of this ironic double bind – similar to the Levinasian dilemma of the ethical Saying turning into an ontological Said and the infinite ethical movement of interruption required as a result – that I want to turn next, for irony may be characterised as interrupting also one particular kind of fiction: that of the face given to the other in the act of representing, defining and conceptualising it. Irony, as permanent parabasis, disrupts prosopopoeia by unmasking the face given as a mask. In interrupting the allegory of tropes, irony undoes the positing performance of tropology.

3.3.2 *Prosopopoeia and Catachresis*

It will be the task of this final section of the chapter to consider catachresis and prosopopoeia at greater length, and to indicate how these terms may assist in understanding the relation between irony and otherness. As pointed out earlier (in section 3.2.2.2), the trace of the other may be understood in terms of catachresis. That is, the face of the other, to the extent that it is given and available to representation, may be understood as involving prosopopoeia. This close link between catachresis, prosopopoeia and otherness is confirmed by Miller (1990), who approaches prosopopoeia in terms of the metamorphoses in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in particular with reference to the story of Pygmalion, which involves the coming to life of the statue Galatea:

If most of the metamorphoses in the *Metamorphoses* go from human to inhuman, life to death, animate to inanimate, the coming alive of Galatea goes

the other way. The name for the figure of speech of which this metamorphosis is the literalizing allegory is *prosopopoeia*. This trope ascribes a face, a name, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead.

(Miller 1990: 3-4)

Miller makes the link between *prosopopoeia* and otherness even more explicit by associating the former with the *elision* of the latter. According to him, it is the function of *prosopopoeia* as personification to reduce the “irreducible otherness” of the neighbour or the beloved. Thus, “*prosopopoeia* is a cover-up of death or of absence My neighbor is always somehow absent even in moments of the most intimate presence. Personification both covers over these blank places in the midst of life and, sooner or later, brings them into the open” (1990: 4).⁵² As is clear, however, *prosopopoeia* does not function only reductively. Not only does it “[cover] over blank places”, but it can also bring them “into the open”. The face given to the other, that is, appears not only to reduce otherness but may also reveal it. This revelation of otherness in the face given by *prosopopoeia* to the irreducibly other becomes evident not in the face as such, but in the recognition that behind the face *is* nothing. This is the recognition, in Levinasian terms, that the face given by *prosopopoeia* is a mask for what has no face (for what exceeds any face) – a death mask – which is to say that *prosopopoeia* is a catachresis of the other (cf. Critchley 1997: 74).

Miller calls *prosopopoeia* “the trope of mourning” (1990: 4) and associates the changes which occur in the *Metamorphoses* with personification: “They are etiological myths expressing our sense that an obscure human life is diffused throughout nature – in the sighing of branches, in the whispering of water in a fountain, in the dancing of a daffodil” (1990: 4). Of note here is the hallucinatory implication of *prosopopoeia*, a trait it shares with catachresis (and which will be considered at greater length below as it will be of some importance for the readings in the next chapters). *Prosopopoeia*, as personification, is linked to the pathetic fallacy (cf. Miller 1989). The specularity always involved in the act of *prosopopeically* ascribing a face, a name and a voice to that which has none, is emphasised by Miller in terms of the Pygmalion myth: “The story of Pygmalion shows *prosopopoeia* functioning not to hide the absolute absence of death but to give life to the inanimate in a dream come true. For Pygmalion, the other is not really other. Pygmalion has himself made Galatea. She is the mirror image of his desire” (1990: 4). Miller

continues by claiming “The entity I have personified is given the power to respond to the name I invoke, to speak in answer to my speech” (1990: 5). In this way prosopopoeia is, to Miller, also linked to catachresis:

. . . though prosopopoeia is a fact of language, a member of the family of tropes, this tends to be hidden because the trope is posited a priori. Many prosopopoeias are part of ordinary language and so exist prior to the distinction between figurative and literal speech – many prosopopoeias are also catachreses, neither literal nor figurative, like ‘headland’, ‘eye of a storm’, or ‘face of a mountain’.

(Miller 1990: 5)

This occultation of the tropological nature of catachresis indicates the close relation between prosopopoeia and catachresis, and implicates both in the tendency to forget the posited nature of language and the misrecognition of a linguistic order for a natural one:

A prosopopoeia is a human creation, a product of the capacity within language for tropological substitution. We can, for example, shift the name of a part of the human body to a feature of the landscape and speak of the face of a mountain. This operation is concealed when the anthropomorphism then becomes a part of ordinary language. We forget that we ourselves have artfully personified the mountain and are fooled into taking our own creation literally. . . . Pygmalion is so skilful an artist, skilled even in concealing his art from himself, that he is taken in by his own fabrication: it seems to him that Galatea must be a real girl.

(Miller 1990: 8-9)

De Man, too, links catachresis and prosopopoeia. He describes prosopopoeia, in terms of its etymology – “*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face” (1979c: 926) – as “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (1979c: 926). Elsewhere, de Man says “*prosopon-poiein* means to *give* a face and therefore implies that the original face can be missing or nonexistent” (1986: 44). He continues by relating prosopopoeia to catachresis in the following way:

The trope which coins a name for a still unnamed entity, which gives face to the faceless is, of course, catachresis. That a catachresis can be a prosopopeia, in the etymological sense of ‘giving face’, is clear from such ordinary

instances as the *face* of a mountain or the *eye* of a hurricane. But it is possible that, instead of prosopopeia being a subspecies of the generic type catachresis (or the reverse), the relationship between them is more disruptive than that between genus and species.

(de Man 1986: 44)

Frey elaborates on the nature of this relation between prosopopeia and catachresis by characterising prosopopeia, in an important formulation, as “the figure which gives a form, a face, to that which is not perceptible to the senses. It makes appear that which cannot appear” (1990a: 80).⁵³ This determination of prosopopeia occurs in the context of a consideration of understanding, and thus of reading, as the ability to distinguish between the literal and the figurative: “If reading as understanding presupposes clarity over the rhetorical status of what has been written, then a text in which it is not possible to draw the distinction between figurality and literality is no longer readable” (Frey 1990a: 78).⁵⁴ As an example of such a confusion between the literal and the figurative, which unsettles understanding and readability and, in fact, potentially leads to hallucination, Frey mentions catachresis.

In the case of catachresis, the relation between the figural and proper meaning is more complex than in other cases. As Frey explains (1990a: 79), a catachresis is a metaphor which has substituted a word which does not exist at all. That is, in the case of catachresis the figural meaning cannot be replaced by a proper meaning which would name an object. Frey elaborates by citing the example of a table. That on which a table stands is called a *leg*, which is a catachresis because it is a metaphor (since the inanimate table is determined in terms of an animate member) which, however, cannot be replaced by a non-figurative word for the reason that such a word does not exist. The figure ‘leg’ directly refers to an object and need not be translated into a proper term which would name that object. Convention determines that the figure refers to an object (a table) and that the term ‘leg’ must be taken to be figurative, not literal. That is, the figurality of the figure ‘leg’ is ignored:

catachresis functions in such a way that the ordinary relation between the figurative and the literal is reversed in that one no longer reaches the object by returning to the proper word via the figure, and from the former to the object, but in such a way that one ignores the figurality of the figure and reaches the object directly through it. In the case of catachresis, figurative meaning must be read referentially and literal meaning figuratively.

(Frey 1990a: 79)⁵⁵

This reversal of the figurative and the literal can be potentially confusing. In the absence of convention, or some other context, one could mistake the figurative for the literal and take the figurative legs of the table as referentially signifying *literal* legs: “But this soon leads to a hallucination in which the table is distorted [disfigured] into a four-legged monster” (1990a: 80).⁵⁶ In a passage which underscores the close relationship between prosopopoeia and catachresis, de Man states that catachresis is capable

of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language. . . . Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopeia, and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters.

(de Man 1996a: 41-42)

The table now appears, monstrously disfigured, as a personification: it has come to life through being, literally, disfigured: “The disfiguration [*Entstellung*] is a disfiguration [*Disfiguration*] also in a rhetorical sense, because it consists in the word *leg* no longer being taken as a figure, but being understood literally” (1990a: 80).⁵⁷ One could call such a monstrously disfiguring hallucination a *prosopopoeia*, because it makes appear that which cannot appear, to return to Frey’s formulation quoted above. Frey (1990a: 80) continues that determination of prosopopoeia in terms of catachresis in the following way:

In this way [by making appear that which cannot appear], prosopopoeia goes one step further than catachresis. The latter signifies figuratively that which has no proper name, but as a result of which is not put in question in its sensible presence. The first makes visible what is invisible. Catachresis is an irreducible figure which should be read referentially, while prosopopoeia is a fiction which does not correspond to any perceptible reality.⁵⁸

Prosopopoeia is thus the radicalisation of catachresis. As I indicated at the end of the previous section, it is possible to relate irony to prosopopoeia on the basis of the interruption of fiction by irony understood as permanent parabasis. Frey, on the basis of his distinction between prosopopoeia and catachresis (and the radicalisation of the first), does, indeed, proceed to relate prosopopoeia and irony in terms of the

interruption of the fictionality of prosopopoeia by irony through the unmasking of prosopopoeia as “a fiction which does not correspond to any perceptible reality”. He does this by indicating that the face given by prosopopoeia, in the context of its hallucinatory aspect, is shown by irony to be not a face, but a mask. Frey proceeds, in terms of de Man’s conception of irony and against the background of his conception of language as being *non-human*,⁵⁹ by considering the lack of ground underlying reality – reality, as linguistically mediated, is not founded on some or other natural order enabling solid positions:

If conventional order is the possibility of a position, of a point of view [*Standpunktes*], then the unmasking of order as fiction removes [*entzieht*] the ground of the position. . . . If normality, health, rationality is recognised [*durchschaut*] as fiction and mask, then the unmasking does not unmask a face behind the mask but only its absence. The insight in the fictivity of current orders does not lead to finding a truth on which a valid order could be erected, but is at the same time the insight in the impossibility of a foundational order.
(Frey 1990a: 95-96)⁶⁰

However, the insight that any foundational order is impossible, that any position is unfounded, is itself a position. It is the position (as well as the positing) of positionlessness, the insight into the impossibility of insight. The process of positing a position which is simultaneously de-positing in being recognised as unfounded, Frey calls *irony*.

The process of positing and de-positing [*Entsetzung*], which arises in this way, is infinite because there exists neither a tenable position nor an utterance which would not amount to taking a position, with the result that speech fluctuates unendingly between a position and its untenability. This infinite process of the break-up of each position, without it being possible ever finally to escape a position, is irony.

(Frey 1990a: 95)⁶¹

Frey thus links irony and the otherness of language (that language itself is not reducible to the human and the human not reducible to language) in terms of prosopopoeia. The face given by prosopopoeia to what lacks a face may be understood as being conceptuality itself. Conceptuality makes a thing into *something* by identifying it and by giving it identity, in other words, by *relating* it to and distinguishing it from other things. Conceptuality is the construction of a network of

relations (cf. Frey 1990a: 93) through the “suppression of the fragmentary” (Frey 1985: 133). This suppression of the fragmentary may be understood as resulting in “an order that understanding, writing and reading achieve” (Frey 1985: 133), an order which reduces otherness and the fragmentariness characteristic of irreducible otherness. It is the price of order, the “comparison of incomparables” characterised by Levinas as politics (1981: 16). Frey (1990a: 73) notes that the word *human* (Levinas might here say *other*) is fictive – which is not the same as claiming that there are no humans, but simply means that we do not know what it is that we call ‘human’. In short, the human escapes language because it escapes definition. And the humanness of the human is lost in being defined:

The general concept *human* exists only in language. *The* human exists only as word. The humanness of the human, that which is common to all humans and makes it possible to call them human, is only given in language and rests on the repression of the differences which exist among particular humans.
(Frey 1990a: 73-74)⁶²

Both politics and conceptualisation are founded on a network of relations, that is, a system of tropes which entails the comparison of the incomparable, the violent reduction of what is radically other to an object which can be mastered and controlled. In its interruption of conceptuality, irony serves as a reminder of the otherness inherent in what it is to be human: in society, politics, language. It interrupts the necessary illusion that people are all the same – the fiction which is necessary in order to guarantee order but which must be interrupted while it is maintained in order to prevent the tyranny of totality which results from the levelling of difference and elision of otherness – by insisting on their infinite separation, on “the unovercomable distance which must always prevail between the selves” (de Man 1983: 228; cf. Derrida 1992: 324ff.; 1992b: 431ff.). As Newmark argues, in terms of the possible implication of the Romantic project with National Socialism (cf. 1992: 914 ff.), irony as permanent interruption “forever disrupts the mythological unity of literature and philosophy” (1992: 927); that is, it disrupts the mythology which would constitute a kind of unity between literature and philosophy, form and content, rhetoric and truth (cf. 1992: 906) – “a universal philosophy of literature that would go hand in hand with a totalizing, and potentially totalitarian, national aestheticism” (1992: 926-927).

As noted above, Frey explicitly relates irony to prosopopoeia in terms of otherness, in this case, the otherness of language as the non-human. If it is not certain whether language *itself* is posited by humans, then the fact that there is language – that language occurs, that individual speech acts are posited – is anterior to humanity. If the construct of meaning must rest on the assumption that language is a given and exists, and if it is only possible to attribute meaning to the fact that language has taken place *after* it has taken place,⁶³ then the meaning of meaning itself is uncertain because it is impossible to relate the construct of meaning to something on which it could be founded, for instance an author. The attempt to trace speech back to a speaker or a text to an author must then be seen as an attempt to attribute the positing of language to an instance such as a speaker or an author and is exactly what happens when the author is taken as an instance *outside* of language who stands in for the text:

But to the degree that it is precisely not the speaker who posits [*setzt*] language, and, inversely, that it is language itself which is the precondition [*Voraussetzung*] for the occurrence at all of language, the author is a figure for a positing [*Setzung*] which is completely withdrawn from and inaccessible to him, while at the same time he is at the mercy of [*ausgesetzt*] that positing because he, in speaking, co-fulfils [*mitvollzieht*] it without being able to exert control over it [i.e., the positing of language]. The author, as retrospectively placed in a position anterior to/presupposed by [*vorausgestellte*] and [therefore] the precondition [*Voraussetzung*] of the construct of meaning [*Sinngefüge*], is the prosopopoeia of preconditionlessness [*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*], that is, of the abrupt positing [*Setzung*] of language. (Frey 1990a: 93)⁶⁴

The non-human aspect of language makes each ground of language, each position which would secure language – such as the author – fictive and, as such, the prosopopoeia of preconditionlessness and groundlessness. Each position is made uncertain and questionable. Frey thus characterises irony as the awareness of the questionable nature of all positions because of the recognition that they are unfounded and fictional. Each and every position can be exposed as being without basis and fictional. But one cannot *not* have a position: an impossible double consciousness is required which would indicate the inevitability of having to have a position which one knows cannot be valid while showing that the impossibility of having any position is in itself invalid because it too would amount to a position. Frey elsewhere puts this succinctly:

Irony is not the position of the person who refuses to have a position. The person who refuses a position falls into the trap of, in doing so, already having moved into a position negatively. The ironist does not refuse the position but takes it up without taking it seriously. . . . Irony is not a position, not because it denies positions, but because it sees through the ultimately unjustifiable nature of all positions. The ironist does not fall victim to the illusion that it is possible to manage without positions, but takes up positions in the consciousness of their unjustifiable nature.

(Frey 1990: 274)⁶⁵

It is for this reason that irony is not transcendence, and that the ironist cannot afford to be smugly superior. Social conventions are fictive, but this recognition in itself must also be open to irony; the position that one cannot have a position is also a position: "Irony can therefore never become a position in the sense of a defensible attitude" (Frey 1990a: 97).⁶⁶ But it goes without saying that just such an ironic position is inevitable while impossible. That ironic position would be the allegorisation of irony referred to above (3.3.1).

What this amounts to, finally, is that irony – as the interruption and fragmentation of the wholeness of the totalised concept by unmasking it as being baseless (because it is linguistic and conventional rather than natural) and therefore fictional, interrupts the fictionality of the concept. It exposes the concept as fitting into a totality constituted by tropes which have been posited within language. And it dis-figures and de-faces that tropological construct: "Irony is the figure of disfiguration" (Frey 1990a: 97).⁶⁷ However, irony cannot itself posit a new, proper, natural construct (that would just be to reconstruct the construct) in place of the construct it has exposed in its constructedness, because what irony indicates is *otherness*. "It sees through all orders as masks without a face, as prosopopoeias of its absence" (Frey 1990a: 97).⁶⁸ Irony does not lead to the real otherness behind the face – otherness is what escapes the conceptuality of language. As Miller (1994: 10) puts it,

[de Man's] radical concept of irony . . . presupposes the encounter with an otherness within language that involves a permanent suspension of meaning. In de Man's last essays this otherness is given the strange quasi-Marxist name 'materiality'. . . . It names a radical alterity that is not phenomenal, that is not the object of a representable intuition, that cannot be confronted or referentially, literally named.

Irony names the impossibility of naming otherness. Rather than enabling access to otherness, irony disables it. It is the recognition that any determination of otherness (whether it be an otherness in language or of the other person) is a reduction of that otherness through the act of conceptualising it, while accepting that it is impossible to give up that conceptualising act. Through irony one is faced with a radical *undecidability* which entails the impossibility of conceptualising otherness and the impossibility of giving up conceptuality – the face given to the other which figures otherness (after all, irony is itself a figure): “Irony is being-suspended between the discrediting of the figure and the impossibility of giving it up” (Frey 1990a: 97).⁶⁹ And this impossibility, which *requires* the conceptualisation of otherness (whether the otherness of language or of the other human) is the necessity of politics.

The price of the order of *politics* is the elision of otherness in the face given, that is, the misrecognition of the mask as face or of the fragmentary as the whole. The *ethical* demand would be to prevent politics from turning into tyranny through the ironic reminder that politics is a fiction, a fiction which elides the irreducible otherness of others, an otherness resulting from the “unovercomable distance which must always prevail between the selves” (de Man 1983: 228).

3.4 Notes

- 1 At this moment I need to introduce the caveat that the main focus of this thesis is not ethics as such (see also note 5, below). For this reason, and for the purposes of this thesis, I ignore the “powerful critique of Levinas” by Michel Haar (Critchley 1997: 189 note 53). Haar, as Critchley reports, wrote to him “I don’t see why there is ethics since there is alterity”. See also Critchley (1997: 80), where Critchley questions why it should be that alterity is necessarily good and ethical: “Why is it not rather evil or an-ethical or neutral?”.
- 2 As already cautioned in the previous chapter, it is not my purpose to play off against one another, or adjudicate, different theories. Names absent from this thesis should, therefore, not be taken to be unimportant. They are simply not relevant to a consideration of irony (as conceived by *de Man*) in terms of otherness (as conceived by *Levinas*).
- 3 It should be clear at this point already that a Levinasian conception of otherness is radically incompatible with much so-called post-colonial theory,

which tends to be concerned with 'embodying' specific instances of otherness. Compare in this regard Marais (1997: 62; 1997b: 179ff.).

- 4 In capitalising these terms of Levinas's, I follow the usage of Critchley (1992).
- 5 I further need to stress that, apart from not being a *comparative* study of Levinas and de Man, this thesis is *not primarily* concerned with either Levinas or de Man, and therefore does not constitute a study of either of these thinkers. Thus, I am not engaged here in an attempt to establish, say, a 'Levinasian aesthetic' (cf. Marais 1997) of irony, or a 'de Manian theory of ethics' (cf. Handwerk 1985). I shall attempt, at most, to consider aspects of each thinker's diverse and rich conceptual apparatus in order to work out an approach to the relation which might obtain between irony and otherness.
- 6 Levinas's relation to Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology is highly nuanced. While Levinas came to oppose Heidegger, and perhaps moved closer to Husserl (cf. Peperzak 1983: 114), he views them "either as inaugurators of a new way of philosophizing or as respected adversaries with whom he is in discussion" (Peperzak 1983: 113). My references to the philosophy of, respectively, Husserl and Heidegger, are necessarily curtailed, unnuanced, and biased towards Levinas's critique of them. Levinas's reading of various philosophers is open to criticism, among them Hegel (cf. Williams 1992: 297-301) and Husserl (cf. Peperzak 1983: 117). I do not for the purpose of this thesis take cognisance of such criticism: Levinas's relation with other philosophers is too complex and nuanced for in-depth study here.
- 7 On the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, see the lucid discussion by Peter Koestenbaum (1970: xixff.) Koestenbaum's introductory essay to Husserl's *Paris Lectures* provides a succinct introduction to his philosophy.
- 8 Husserl does not claim that the transcendental ego *creates* the world, but that the ego *constitutes* (cf. 1970: 24) it:

. . . the perception and its intentionally given object call to my attention, by virtue of the presumed horizon, an endless and open system of *possible* perceptions, perceptions which are not invented but which are motivated from within my intentional existence, and which can lose their presumed validity only when conflicting experience eliminates it.

(Husserl 1970: 23)

The intentional constitution of the world is subject to the rules of experience and evidence (cf. Peperzak 1983: 116), given that for the phenomenological establishing of "conceptual systems which determine the fundamental meaning of scientific constructions. . . there can be no paradoxes" (Husserl 1970: 37).

- 9 Levinas criticises the intellectualism in which such an understanding of knowledge as representation results. See Levinas (1996: 4-5). See also Peperzak (1993: 16).
- 10 According to Critchley's footnote at this point, "Levinas is playing on the analogous Latin and Germanic etymology of these terms where the activity of knowledge is linked to seizing, grasping, and gathering" (Levinas 1996f: 192 note 9).
- 11 It is also in this context that Levinas's insistence on the pastness of the trace, which will be considered in the next subsection, must be understood.
- 12 As we shall see in the next subsection, Levinas opposes the diachrony of the other, who is not present but past, with the synchrony of the same.
- 13 Williams points out that Levinas's view of "*philosophy itself* [as] an egology that reduces infinity to totality, the other to the same" (1992: 298) problematically reduces philosophy to a monolith, a gesture which, in fact, echoes the views of F. H. Jacobi in Hegel's day: "It is striking that Jacobi, like Levinas and others, portrays what he wishes to attack as a monolithic tradition" (1992: 305 note 51).
- 14 This lack of surprise which, for Levinas, characterises Western philosophy, may also be considered in terms of the Platonic idea of *anamnesis*. See the following subsection, as well as Marais (1997: 60) and Peperzak (1993: 18).
- 15 I shall devote more space to a discussion of the infinite *vis-à-vis* Levinas in the course of the next subsection, on the other as trace.
- 16 Williams (1992: 298) points out, in fact, that "Levinas's analysis of the face is phenomenology in an *antiphenomenological* mode, for the face is *not* an appearance or a theme". It is for the reason that the other does not *appear*, that it is not a phenomenon but an enigma, that Levinas designates the other a trace. I shall discuss this point at greater length in the next section.
- 17 It is of some importance to note at this point the complete dislocation of the other. The other is dislocated both *spatially* (Blanchot uses the word "elsewhere") and *temporally*. Blanchot, in the passage quoted above, says the other "comes from elsewhere" and does not belong "to our horizon". The other does not inscribe "himself upon any representable horizon whatsoever". Thus the other exceeds the horizon of being in that it is not present – that is, not here, not now. The trace of the other trace is a trace of both pastness and passedness (cf. Levinas 1981: 9).

The temporal dislocation of the other as trace will be considered at greater length in the next subsection, on the trace. But it needs to be stressed here that this dislocation of the other is *disturbing* to the self. My later discussion of irony and allegory hinges on this temporal dislocation. The consciousness of time of the self – which is sequential, consisting as it does of

an experience of the present *in terms of* its interplay with what precedes and follows, and therefore renders experience in narrative form – is disturbed by the impossible double structure of irony which consists of simultaneity made successive.

- 18 The other is a stranger because of the absolute separation between self and other. After initially being reluctant to use the term ‘neighbour’ to describe the other (cf. Levinas 1996a: 26-27), Levinas in his later work does resort to that term. Not only is the other infinitely separate from the self, and therefore a stranger to the self, but the other also stands in a relation of proximity to the self. To the extent that the self, in its responsibility for the other, must substitute itself for the other, “substitution as the *otherwise than being* [lies] at the basis of proximity” (Levinas 1981: 19).
- 19 To anticipate somewhat, as I shall claim later in this chapter (in the section on prosopopoeia), what *can* be represented is the face which the self *posits* for the other. That is, the represented face of the other is, in a radical sense, not a face (Blanchot agrees that Levinas’s term, ‘face’ (*visage*) “creates difficulties” [1993: 54]). The face of the other, to the extent that it can be seen, is not proper to the other but flows from the representation of the self. It is in this sense that I claim the face of the other must be de-faced: it must be recognised as a face which can be put on or taken off, that is, as a mask. However, crucially, this face-as-mask is a face behind which nothing *appears*, behind which is only absence. For if the face were to be the face of the other, it would already have been represented. And if, behind the face of the other would appear the other, then the other would be within the purview of representation. On the contrary, to Levinas the face *exceeds* representation in its infinity. The face of the other – which, as Blanchot puts it, is in a place neither visible nor invisible and, as such, is itself neither visible nor invisible – in escaping from and exceeding representation, also *interrupts* representation. See the section on the trace (3.2.2.2) for an elaboration of the status of the face as mask.
- 20 It is interesting to note the extent to which Levinas’s language, in this essay (“Is Ontology Fundamental?”) is still explicitly ontological. Levinas uses the term “being” to describe the other and mentions a “relation” with the face. The passage is couched in Husserlian and Heideggerian terms such as “horizon”, “let . . . be” and “to be given” (*es gibt*). As mentioned above, Levinas in his later work attempted to move away from this kind of ontological language (cf. Critchley 1992: 6ff.).
- 21 Levinas describes the other both in terms of an impossible immediacy which disrupts the objectifying, reflective intention of the subject (cf. Peperzak 1993: 142, 163), and, from a slightly different vantage point, as *outside* the purview of the other because of the infinite nature of the other’s face and the infinite nature of the separation between self and other. As we shall see, this infinite separation is understood by Levinas to entail the ‘irreducible pastness’ of the other; that is, the other can never be present to the representing subject.

- 22 Critchley (1992: 187 note 31) comments on the problematic nature of any speculation on the origin of language (in terms of this passage) by considering whether the first word – the interdiction against murder – might “not simply be expressed by the ethical resistance of the Other’s face”. For a discussion of the Husserlian distinction between indication and expression *vis-à-vis* Levinas and Derrida, see Critchley (1992: 169-180) and Marais (1997: 64; 1997a: 10ff.).
- 23 Levinas’s reading of Plato is carefully nuanced. On the one hand, he sees Plato as belonging to the tradition of autonomy, specifically *vis-à-vis anamnesis*; on the other hand, he celebrates Plato’s insistence on the transcendence of the Good as an instance of truth conceived in terms of heteronomy (cf. 1987: 47; 1969: 103; 1981: 19).
- 24 Foucault relates this movement of truth into depth – inwards into the inner being of the transcendental subject – to the disruption of what he calls the classical period by the modern (1970: 236ff; cf. Rajchman 1985:108ff.). It is important to stress that this *anamnesis*, as reminiscence of what has always already *been there*, of knowledge hidden in the depths of the Cartesian *cogito*, involves an essentialism: an essence or Being of the being. This essentialism amounts to forgetfulness: in turning inward the *cogito* forgets the world and *anamnesis* becomes amnesia. Williams (1992: 145) defines Hegelian consciousness as “embodied and situated in the world”, while “the Cartesian cogito is a pre-reality individual, an abstraction from the fundamental concrete ontological setting in life”. According to Williams, for Hegel “the other lies deeper than theoretical-reflective or explicitly thematic considerations. . . . [Hegel] expresses a pre-intentional world-openness and relatedness that has been long forgotten by the intellectual amnesia of the Cartesian cogito”.
- 25 See Peperzak (1993: 108-109) for a discussion of the question whether the translation of the term “l’Infini” should be rendered as “infinity” or “the infinite”.
- 26 The relation between Derrida’s work and that of Levinas is anything but uncomplicated. Each of these two thinkers has had an important influence on the other, with Derrida deserving “a good deal of the credit . . . for having called the attention of literary scholars to Levinas’s work” (Buell 1999: 9). See especially Derrida’s essays “Violence and Metaphysics” (1978), “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” (1991) and “Adieu” (1996), and Levinas’s essay “Wholly Otherwise” (1991). Scattered references to Levinas appear elsewhere in Derrida, and to Derrida in Levinas (in particular in *Otherwise than Being*).
See Critchley (1992) for a useful introduction to the relation between Derrida and Levinas.
- 27 Levinas argues that, because it has an irreducibly past, enigmatic nature, the other cannot be called a phenomenon. A phenomenon is, as Heidegger

explains at the beginning of *Being and Time* (1996: 25-28; 30-34), something which appears and comes to light out of its concealment.

- 28 Derrida also asserts that Levinas conceives of the trace “certainly in a nonpsychoanalytic way”. This point of Derrida’s should go some way in serving to justify my decision to exclude psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytically derived theories of subjectivity, from the ambit of this thesis. Nonetheless, this is not to claim that Levinas’s work is antipathetic to psychoanalysis, although Levinas himself makes the point that his work does not follow “the way of the unconscious” (1996d: 83). Indeed, the very concept ‘trace’ as deployed by both Levinas and Derrida (as well as *différance* itself) is closely related to the Freudian *Spur* (cf. Derrida 1982: 18). Furthermore, the language of the lengthy passage from the essay “Différance” which I have quoted above, of course, quite explicitly relates Derrida’s use of the concept ‘trace’ to psychoanalysis. Bennington, among others, has pointed out the close relationship between Derrida’s thinking and psychoanalysis (cf. Bennington 1993: 133ff.). A recent book-length study applies Levinas’s thinking to psychotherapy (Kunz 1998).
- 29 Later in the same essay, Levinas (1996b: 60) complicates the idea of the mould or mask *vis-à-vis* the face and, as I shall indicate below, radically qualifies this scene of divestiture.
- 30 Of course, the trace is precisely not a concept. As I shall attempt to show, the trace as a trace of otherness is a remnant of that which escapes conceptuality and thus disturbs and interrupts the order of conceptuality. In the next section (3.2.3) I shall consider a related answer to the quandary facing any writing or speaking about the other, namely Levinas’s “great innovation in *Otherwise than Being* . . . the model of the Saying and the Said as the way of explaining how the ethical signifies within ontological language” (Critchley 1992: 7).
- 31 It might be worth pausing briefly at this point to address the possible accusation that Levinas’s philosophy is solipsistic, in other words, that it fetishises otherness in its insistence on the radical separation between self and other, and the consequent inability to represent otherness without thereby reducing it. On the contrary, argues Blanchot (1993: 52), Levinas’s work “seems to . . . be the contrary of solipsism”. This is so for the reason that, while self and other are infinitely separate, it is precisely in this infinite separation “that the relation with the other imposes itself upon me as exceeding me infinitely: a relation that relates me to what goes beyond me and escapes me to the very degree that, in this relation, I am and remain separated”. As Levinas puts it in a passage from *Totality and Infinity* already quoted above, the other stands to the self in an “‘unrelating relation’, which no one can encompass or thematize” (1969: 295). Similarly, as noted above (note 18), this ‘unrelating relation’ between self and other is defined not only in terms of separation, but also in terms of proximity, the basis of substitution. To this extent, Levinas’s choice of ‘face’ as a marker of the other is testimony to the importance of proximity in the face to face. In addition, the *disturbance*

occasioned by the other in the order of the Same as a result of exceeding the self infinitely – and therefore not being subject to the conceptualising of the self – should be an indication that Levinas cannot be accused of solipsism.

- 32 This last phrase is an allusion to Levinas (1996b: 62): “In the trace has passed a past absolutely bygone”.
- 33 See Critchley’s discussion, in terms of Derrida’s essay for Levinas entitled “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” (1991), of the double bind as it appears with respect to the necessary *ingratitude* which has to characterise any text for (in homage of) Levinas: “The logical and ethical necessity that haunts Derrida’s essay is that by writing a text *for* Emmanuel Levinas . . . one would return the work to its author, thereby betraying the ethical structure that Levinas’s work tries to set to work” (Critchley 1992: 111; cf. 129).
- 34 Marais’s argument is that Coetzee’s answer, as evident in his novels, is not to represent but to *indicate* the other. Marais refers to “Coetzee’s anti-representational strategy” (1997a: 9) and suggests “that the meta-representational strategy which Coetzee uses in his fiction establishes an indicative relation with otherness (1997a: 10). In this argument, Marais draws on Husserl’s distinction between indicative and expressive signs (cf. also Marais 1997: 116ff.). See note 22, above.
- In this thesis the emphasis is less on (meta)representational strategies (on the question of how the other is to be *represented*), than on the restoration of the ethical Saying of otherness within the thematising Said of representation (on the question of how the representation of the other is to be *interrupted*).
- 35 The term ‘reduce’ (as well as ‘reduction’) may here be understood in the everyday sense in which I have just used it, that is, as being more or less equivalent to the word ‘diminish’. However, it is important to note the phenomenological provenance of the term, as it reaffirms the degree to which Levinas’s thinking appears in the wake of phenomenology. The ethical Saying is anterior to the ontological Said and, Levinas implies, may be reached through a reduction of that Said. See note 7, above, on the phenomenological reduction.
- 36 Ciaramelli (1995: 90) importantly distinguishes politics from tyranny in the following way: “Now, the specific operation of the political in human society is understood by Levinas as the institution of equality among separated and different individuals. . . . Politics – as distinct from totality, distinct from tyranny – is the institution of a society of equals”. As such, in order to ensure justice, politics is a necessary fiction, because the relation between self and other, as I have shown, is radically asymmetrical. But Critchley (1992: 240) adds that *democracy* consists in “the on-going interruption of politics by ethics, of totality by infinity, of the Said by the Saying”. That is, politics, if it is to be democracy, must be ethically interrupted if it is to be prevented from turning into tyranny (cf. also Critchley 1992: 229ff.).

37 It is important to note the nuance of the word 'relating', and its relation to the concept of narrative. In the passage quoted above, this nuance is strengthened by the identification of the discourse of the Said with narrative by means of the participle 'recounted': "The interruptions of the discourse found again and *recounted* in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again. . . ." (my emphasis). The discourse of the Said, which is compared to a woven fabric, a *text*, is identified with narrative.

38 See Goodwin and Bronfen (1993: 7) for an elaboration of the problem of representing death. As they note, extending the problem of representing death to representational discourse in general,

Representation presupposes an original presence, and in the case of death that is clearly paradoxical. In any representation of death, it is strikingly an absence that is at stake, so that the presentation is itself at a remove from what is figured. This is not just to claim that any representation of death in fact targets something else – the terms in which it chooses to make itself known – though no doubt some would argue just that. Any representational discourse implies the muteness, absence, nonbeing – in short, the death – of the object it seeks to designate.

To this extent, one might argue that representation, presupposing absence and death as it does, necessarily functions prosopopeically in giving a face or voice to what is, or may become, absent.

39 Critchley's reference to de Man is to his 1969 essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1983: 220). Critchley (1997: 112) glosses his use of the term parabasis in the following way: it is "a stepping forward, or stepping aside, originally designating the parts of ancient Greek comedy sung by the chorus". For further explanations of the parabasis in historical terms, see de Man (1983: 218-219; 1996: 178); Miller (1982: 105); and Albert (1993: 840-843).

40 For discussions of the undecidable status of the fragment, see Frey (1996: 25-29; see also 1985: 132-133; 1990a: 168ff; 187ff.). For an explicit consideration of the fragment in terms of Romanticism, see Frey (1994).

41 In thus associating irony with separation, division and dissolution, Critchley is explicitly following de Man's insistence that irony does not lead to any final *Aufhebung*, but "is disruption, disillusion" rather than "aesthetic recuperation" (de Man 1996: 182).

42 It is important to note that, quite in keeping with the notion of Romanticism as a project, Schlegel never managed to complete a final definition of irony. Instead, irony is defined again and again in many of Schlegel's fragments and other writings (cf. Schlegel 1967, 1973). I here refer only to one of these many, incomplete, fragmentary definitions: one which has proven particularly influential.

- 43 See Miller (1990: 13ff.) for a consideration of the relation between reading, narrative, otherness, conceptuality and ethics. While reading can be characterised as entailing a confrontation with otherness (cf. 1990: 20), Miller argues that reading also betrays otherness for the reason that all texts demand to be read (1990: 18).
- 44 “dass Bewusstsein und Unbewusstsein auseinandergenommen und einander gegenübergesetzt werden. Das Miteinander wird in ein Nacheinander, Simultaneität in Sukzession umgewandelt. Man kann das in de Mans Sinn eine Allegorisierung der Ironie nennen.”
Translations are by me unless otherwise indicated in the Bibliography.
- 45 “die Sprache [kann] nichts anders als Ordnungen zu errichten und sie als gültig zu postulieren”
In his recent book-length study of the novel, Brink characterises “language as, itself, a narrative activity” (1998: 4). He refers to “the storytelling properties of language” (1998: 7) and claims that “In some respects language may be regarded as a *form* of narrative. . . . [It] may be said that *language has a propensity for narrative*” (1998: 9).
- 46 “Dieser unmögliche Abstand kennzeichnet die Struktur der Ironie”
- 47 I consider this point at somewhat greater length below (see pp. 91ff.) in terms of the non-human aspect of language, that is, in terms of the anteriority of language to any particular human, something which implies that language *itself* could not be have been posited by the human. Of course, this has implications for any theory of the origins of language. See the “Metaphor” chapter in *Allegories of Reading* (1979b) and Frey’s discussion (1985: 128ff.; 1990a: 74ff.).
- 48 For this reason, too, the definition of irony as a conceptualisation of permanence in terms of repetition, as Albert recognises, is ironic (cf. 1993: 847 note 24). I elaborate on this point below (see pp. 107ff.).
- 49 This point is of some consequence for the argument of this thesis. As de Man (1979c: 922) puts it in “Autobiography as De-facement”, a “tropological structure . . . underlies all cognitions”. In the “Metaphor” chapter from *Allegories of Reading*, in an important passage which I would merely like to cite here in order to confirm de Man’s view that conceptualisation is, indeed, tropological, he puts this as follows: “[Conceptualization] is an intralinguistic process, the invention of a figural metalanguage that shapes and articulates the infinitely fragmented and amorphous language of pure denomination. To the extent that all language is conceptual, it always already speaks about language and not about things. . . . All language is language about denomination, that is, a conceptual, figural, metaphorical metalanguage” (1979b: 152-153).

- 50 The relation between Schlegel, Fichte and de Man would result in a discussion into which I cannot venture at this point, as it would take us far afield indeed (see Albert 1993: 843 note 2). See Gasché (1981:52ff.) for an in-depth discussion of Fichte as a source of Speech Act Theory within the context of an examination of de Man's relation to that theory.
- 51 See also de Man's following difficult definition, at the end of *Allegories of Reading*: "Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration" (1979a: 301).
- 52 On the relationship between prosopopoeia and personification, see Miller (1990: 4ff.).
- 53 "die Figur, die dem eine Gestalt, ein Gesicht gibt, was nicht sinnlich wahrnehmbar ist. Sie bringt zur Erscheinung, was nicht erscheinen kann."
This formulation is of importance for this thesis because it determines prosopopoeia in phenomenological terms which enable one to link prosopopoeia to otherness in Levinasian terms. In terms of the latter, as we saw above, what can appear is a *phenomenon* and what cannot is an *enigma*. What cannot appear is the *other*.
- 54 "Wenn Lesen als Verstehen Klarheit über den rhetorischen Status des Geschriebenen voraussetzt, so ist der Text, bei dem der Entscheid zwischen Figürlichkeit und Wörtlichkeit nicht getroffen werden kann, nicht länger lesbar."
- 55 "die Katachrese [funktioniert so], dass das gewohnte Verhältnis zwischen dem Figürlichen und dem Wörtlichen umgekehrt wird, indem man nicht mehr dadurch zur Sache kommt, dass man von der Figur auf das eigentliche Wort und von diesem auf die Sache zurückgeht, sondern so, dass man die Figürlichkeit der Figur ignoriert und von ihr aus direkt zur Sache kommt. Bei der Katachrese ist die figürliche Bedeutung referentiell und die wörtliche Bedeutung figürlich zu lesen."
- 56 "Das führt aber bald einmal zur Halluzination, in der der Tisch zum vierbeinigen Ungeheuer entstellt wird."
- 57 "Die Entstellung ist eine Disfiguration auch im rhetorischen Sinn, denn sie besteht darin, dass das Wort *Bein* nicht mehr als Figur, sondern wörtlich verstanden wird."
- 58 "Dadurch geht the Prosopopoiie einen Schritt weiter als the Katachrese. Diese bezeichnet figürlich, was keinen eigentlichen Namen hat, dadurch aber in seiner sinnlichen Präsenz nicht in Frage gestellt ist. Jene macht sichtbar, was unsichtbar ist. Die Katachrese ist eine unreduzierbare Figur, die referentiell zu

lesen ist, während die Prosopopöie eine Fiktion ist, der keine wahrnehmbare Wirklichkeit entspricht.”

- 59 See de Man’s paper on Benjamin (1986: 73; 105). Frey (1990a: 71ff.) discusses this paper at some length, in particular with regard to de Man’s interrogation of language in terms of the non-human, that is, the fact that language precedes and outlives particular, individual humans (see de Man 1986: 87). At the same time, as Frey (1990a: 73) puts it, such particular, individual humans exceed the limits of language: “It is neither possible to explain language through the human, nor the human through language. Language escapes the human and the human escapes language” [*Weder erklärt sich die Sprache durch den Menschen, noch der Mensch durch die Sprache. Die Sprache entgleitet dem Menschen, und der Mensch entgleitet der Sprache*]. The key question here, which unsettles any determination of language as *human*, is not how individual utterances are posited (they are, clearly, posited by particular humans), but how language *as such* is posited. As Frey (1990a: 94) points out, language has meaning, but *that* language exists may be meaningless. The possible meaninglessness of language, that is, underlies the meaning generated within language and makes impossible any final, delineated meaning. However, it is not part of Frey’s argument that meaning as such is impossible: on the contrary, it is *necessary* fiction. Meaning and the prohibitions and rules expressed in laws are only ever conventions, but they are necessary conventions — that *Gesetze* are *gesetzt*, that laws are posited (see Frey 1990a: 274).
- 60 “Wenn die konventionelle Ordnung die Möglichkeit der Position, des Standpunktes ist, so entzieht die Enthüllung der Ordnung als Fiktion der Position den Boden. . . . Wenn Normalität, Gesundheit, Vernünftigkeit als Fiktion und Maske durchschaut werden, so enthüllt doch die Entlarvung kein Gesicht hinter der Maske, sondern nur dessen Fehlen. Die Einsicht in die Fiktivität geltender Ordnungen führt nicht zur Findung einer Wahrheit, auf der sich eine gültige Ordnung errichten liesse, sondern ist gleichzeitig die Einsicht in die Unmöglichkeit einer fundierten Ordnung.”
- 61 “Der Prozess von Setzung und Entsetzung, der auf diese Weise in Gang kommt, ist endlos, weil es weder eine Position, die haltbar wäre, noch ein Reden gibt, das nicht das Einnehmen einer Position wäre, so dass das Reden unaufhörlich zwischen der Position und ihrer Unhaltbarkeit fluktuiert. Dieser endlose Prozess der Verrückung von jeglicher Position, ohne dass es doch ein endgültiges Loskommen von der Position gibt, ist die Ironie.”
- 62 “Den Allgemeinbegriff *Mensch* gibt es nur in der Sprache. *Den* Menschen gibt es nur als Wort. Das Menschliche des Menschen, das, was allen Menschen gemeinsam ist und macht, dass sie Menschen heißen können, ist nur durch die Sprache gegeben und beruht auf der Unterdrückung der Unterschiede, die zwischen den einzelnen Menschen bestehen.”

- 63 It is not possible to know what an utterance means *before* it takes place. The moment one *has read* or someone *has spoken*, it becomes possible to construct meaning, which, in any event is to draw relations [*Ziehen der Beziehungen*]. See Frey (1990a: 93).
- 64 “Aber in dem Masse, als es gerade nicht der Sprechende ist, der die Sprache setzt, und als diese umgekehrt die Voraussetzung dafür ist, dass Sprache überhaupt stattfindet, ist der Autor die Figur für eine Setzung, die ihm gänzlich entzogen und unzugänglich ist, und der er, indem er sie redend mitvollzieht, ausgesetzt ist, ohne darüber verfügen zu können. Der Autor als die nachträglich dem Sinngefüge vorausgestellte Voraussetzung ist die Prosopopoiie der Voraussetzungslosigkeit, das heisst der abrupten Setzung der Sprache.”
- 65 “Ironie is nicht der Standpunkt dessen, der sich weigert, einen Standpunkt zu haben. Wer den Standpunkt verweigert, geht in die Falle, dass er damit bereits verneinend Stellung bezogen hat. Der Ironiker verweigert den Standpunkt nicht, sondern er nimmt ihn ein, ohne ihn Ernst zu nehmen. . . . Die Ironie ist kein Standpunkt, nicht weil sie diesen verneint, sondern weil sie die letztliche Unvertretbarkeit aller Standpunkte durchschaut. Der Ironiker verfällt nicht der Illusion, ohne Standpunkte auskommen zu können, sondern er nimmt Standpunkte im Bewusstsein ihrer Unvertretbarkeit ein.”
- 66 “Ironie kann deshalb niemals zu einer Position im Sinne einer vertretbaren Haltung werden.”
- 67 “Ironie ist die Figur der Disfiguration.”
- 68 “Sie durchschaut alle Ordnungen als Masken ohne Gesicht, als Prosopopoiien ihres Fehlens.”
- 69 “Ironie ist Suspendierung zwischen der Diskreditierung der Figur und der Unmöglichkeit, auf sie zu verzichten.”

Chapter 4

Kikoejoe: Fragmentation, Prosopoeia and the Absolutely Other

4.1 Introduction¹

How to read? The reader of *Kikoejoe* is faced with a predicament. This is a novel which offers itself as fragmentary and which, self-reflexively, makes explicit that it does not offer understanding. *Kikoejoe* is a novel which advertises itself as untrustworthy in its concern with the refractory nature of what is past. The novel is interspersed with editorial interruptions which acknowledge the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of the very project being worked out in it. Thus, for instance, the adult Fabian muses:

That summer? A different one? Or do things repeat themselves, so that day and year don't matter, anyway? Isn't every story just a return to an earlier one, an addition, a supplementation – or even a process of betrayal?

This is the currency of memory: betrayal of the past and of those with whom you shared the past.

(140/133)²

How to write? The question posed in this passage concerns the avoidance of betrayal: it explicitly addresses the question of responsibility to the others with whom one shares history, a question which mounts in urgency if they have no voices, if they are dead (cf. 168, 269/159, 255). Moreover, the question is phrased explicitly in terms of the link between the past, memory and narrative. Narrative is described here as consisting of a network of narratives, a construct made up of narratives supplementing one another. This process of return, of elaboration and supplementation is associated with the betrayal both of the past and of those with whom one “shared the past”. Remembering the past amounts to reconfiguring it, but in doing so, we are told (and reminded), betrayal is inevitable. The work of narrative gathers what is separate and places in sequence what is random: it serves to make accessible and comprehensible that which is past, absent, and scattered (cf. Brink 1998: 95, 196).

This reminder is a timely one, particularly as reviewers of the novel, in general, have overlooked it (and thus betrayed it). Whereas the novel, in self-reflexive passages such as the one quoted above (cf. also 13, 146-147, 282-283/12-13, 139, 267-268), tends towards fragmentation by advertising its provisional status *vis-à-*

vis the past and acknowledging itself as an instrument of the betrayal of that past, reviewers have sought instead to gather together the various strands of the novel. Indeed, a common complaint in many reviews is the lack of unity in this novel. More than one reviewer of the novel seems to be of the opinion that the novel is flawed because of this alleged lack of unity.

In this respect, the response of Pakendorf (1997: 10) is representative. According to him, van Heerden is one of the most highly gifted Afrikaans writers, something evidenced by *Kikoejoe*. This novel is “masterful” in evoking the mood of a holiday farm populated by a whole host of eccentric characters. But Pakendorf finds it a pity that “the work *as a whole* is not satisfactory” (1997: 10; my emphasis).³ He speculates that the reason for this might lie in the novel containing too many diverse particulars, or possibly in van Heerden having been over-hasty, or in his editors not having taken sufficient care with the manuscript. Another possibility is, significantly, the following: “Perhaps an overarching concept to bind the excess of elements was absent from the start”.⁴ As a result,

the further the narrative develops the more it breaks open into loose fragments. Indeed, the last couple of chapters have no *momentum*, and the repetitions and attempts to fill up and close off and plug gaps leave the impression that the writer himself no longer quite knows how to conclude his narrative.⁵

What is evident here is Pakendorf’s dissatisfaction with the absence of a clearly specified narrative telos. The diversity of characters, episodes and themes he identifies is not unified in “some or other upheaval or climactic point – even if it were to be an anti-climax – towards which everything moves”⁶ and which the reader, according to Pakendorf, expects. Pakendorf labels this a “lack in thematic closure”⁷ and extends his attribution of this lack from plot to characterisation in the novel. His final verdict is that van Heerden should, perhaps, stick to short fiction as his attempts at the latter are better than his novel writing: “His latest book creates the impression that, for the greater vision of longer prose, he needs more discipline”.⁸

It is my contention that what is perceived here – and by other reviewers, such as Burger (1996) and Kannemeyer (1997)⁹ – to be an absence or a lack, may be understood precisely as indicative of a radical *incapacity* to thematise and enclose the events and characters narrated in the novel, even if one might argue that the attempt to do so is evident in the novel.¹⁰ It is fitting that this incapacity should manifest itself

in, among other things, the perceived inability of the author to control his subject matter properly, and consequently as an inability to lend his text the kind of coherence of sustained narrative embodied by the novel-as-genre.¹¹ Apart from the questionable organicist aesthetic evident from assertions such as those quoted above (among other things, Pakendorf seems to be attempting to explain and give meaning to the fragmentariness of the text as something offensive to his aesthetic and more broadly philosophical principles), what is not borne in mind by these reviewers is that it may not be *possible* to enclose this novel – that there are forces which *enforce* its fragmentary nature.

As we have seen, the subject's control over language, in particular the narrativisation of the past, is explicitly and self-reflexively questioned in *Kikoejoe*. Tant Geertruida's following description of her genealogical research as something over which she has no final control, may be said to be emblematic both of the text's genealogical concerns and of the lack of control over the text by the narrator, and, by extension the author (who, after all, like the narrator Fabian, is engaged with the project of dealing with the past [see Wasserman 1996; de Waal 1998]: if the novel is untrustworthy, this leaves the author no less unscathed than the narrator): "As I was saying, research is a strange business. Sometimes it leads you to places you don't want to go. But that, Fabian, is the whole excitement of research. One minute, you still believe that one equals one, then suddenly you have three in front of you" (34-35/32-33).¹² This is despite Ma's characterisation of genealogy in conventional terms – as consisting of painstakingly and precisely narrativising the past by constructing coherent accounts of people's descent – in order to explain Tant Geertruida's predilection for sequential action: "Tant Geertruida was fond of doing things in the same order. 'That's because she's a genealogist,' said Ma. 'It's precision research. . . .'" (4/3).¹³

Pakendorf's speculations as to possible reasons for the diffusiveness of the text (poor editors, undue haste, and the like) may thus be construed as attempts, as Frey (1985: 132; 1990: 168ff.) might argue, to control the fragment by ascribing to it extraneous (or internal) principles of explanation. The possibility is never considered by any of the reviewers cited that the text might be fragmentary just in its very fragmentariness. Instead, attempts are made to explain away and thus control its fragmentariness.¹⁴

4.2 Determining Kikoejoe

The attempt to enclose the text is evident also in a variety of critical speculations as to the nature of the enigmatic Kikoejoe. Various explanations of his significance have been proffered by reviewers (cf. Burger 1996: 10; 1997: 36ff.; HE 1998: 72). But the novel does not allow for such speculation to be finalised. Among the possibilities mooted in the novel itself to determine the Beast, it is suggested that Kikoejoe is time (cf. 51, 148, 168/48, 140, 159), God (cf. 129 & 149/122 & 141), the collective unconscious (cf. 147, 274/139, 260), the insanity which plagues the Latsky family (cf. 151/143), or a monstrous, marauding beast (cf. 193, 277/183-184, 263) which perhaps is a figment of Fabian's imagination (cf. 96-97/91-92).¹⁵

Burger (1997: 37) speculates that Kikoejoe might have escaped from Pa's LSD dreams,¹⁶ and subsequently identifies Kikoejoe with Fabian for the reason that each has only one eye. This identification of Kikoejoe with Fabian is suggested in the novel itself (cf. 274/260). In fact, it is strengthened in other passages as well, for instance where Fabian watches Tant Geertruida and then urinates against a tree (151-153 /143-145). Kikoejoe is later, during Charles Jacoby's concert, described in an identical pose, also watching and urinating (255-257/242-244). However, similarly, the Veteran is also identified with Kikoejoe in that each is said to have a *row* of eyes (in the case of the Veteran this refers to his medals) (cf. 49, 138, 262/46, 131, 248).

I claimed above, with respect to attempts by reviewers to determine Kikoejoe, that the novel does not allow for such speculation to be finalised. I would therefore now like to turn to a closer examination of descriptions of Kikoejoe in the novel itself, descriptions which nonetheless tend towards embodying the Beast. In the novel the Beast is initially identified as "half-human, half-orang" (21/20).¹⁷ We are given the following information:

Everyone knew about the Beast, but this was the first time we'd seen him. He was very furtive and never left complete tracks, but if you could read the veld, you saw the half-moons of strange palms, the heel-print of an alien foot, the knuckle-marks of a half-man. . . .

The hotel waiters called the Beast Kikuyu, because some mornings bites had been ripped out of the kikuyu lawn round the furthest rondavels. The kikuyu runners that had been torn loose and half eaten lay scattered under the trees.

(21-22/20)¹⁸

This passage suggests that the Beast Kikoejoe is a real if monstrous entity which is simultaneously both human and beast. For this reason already it is indefinable as it exceeds the categories 'human' and 'bestial': "[The vervet monkeys] couldn't tell whether they'd picked up the scent of a person or an animal" (96/91).¹⁹ But even if the Beast does soon take on a more mythical, less concrete character, descriptions of it in the novel more often than not embody it. Ma's frustrated desire (to be an actress as much as to enjoy love) and her consciousness of transience, of time passing, is described in terms which will come to signify Kikoejoe as a dark, indefinable presence or, perhaps, absence which is *disturbing*:

Time pressed down on her, trying to smother her, press her back against the bed. Sitting there, she was conscious of battling against a heavy body that panted over her, wanting to have its way with her. She just didn't know what it was. It pressed against her, this thing with no name. But it had a breath, rank against her cheek.

(51/48)²⁰

Even if the Beast is here identified with Time, and signifies something less concrete than an apeman – something indefinable – it is nonetheless described in terms which embody it. Time is personified as a Beast and what is supposed to be indefinable and supracorporeal is reduced in being embodied. Time is given a face in the prosopopoeia of the Beast. While this Thing is indefinable ("She just didn't know what it was"), it is nonetheless defined in being rendered concrete in the act of embodiment via prosopopoeia. As Ma yields to the Thing, it is significantly to commit adultery with the Veteran. It is as though she breaks free from Time ravaging her: "Then she was on the kikuyu and she was free" (52/49).²¹ Yet this freedom is radically qualified by means of the reference to kikuyu, which of course is associated precisely with the Thing from which she is escaping. Her freedom from Time is illusory and the Beast, albeit in its absence, is omnipresent. This is further suggested in the description of her short journey to the Veteran and their subsequent lovemaking. With the preponderance of prosopopoeia as well as catachresis evident here, this description is lent a certain hallucinatory quality (cf. 52-53/49-50).²² Yet, despite this unsettling of categories as a result of the employment of prosopopoeia and catachresis, they nonetheless *also* seem to result in a further embodiment of the Thing,

Kikoejoe. Thus, the Veteran is described in the following way: “. . . but once she was gone, his breath started rushing in and out over his tongue, as though it were a physical thing” (53/50).²³ The animal imagery evident in further prosopopeic descriptions of the Veteran embracing Ma also serves to associate him with the Beast, and thus to embody the latter: “She was surprised by his lean, sinewy body and the veins that *writhed* like *snakes* over his arms, his legs and his lower body. In the moonlight, they looked like black *worms feeding* on him. She shuddered when he raised his body and she saw the shiny head of the cock. . . .” (53/50; my emphasis).²⁴

This tendency to insist on the supracorporeal nature of the Beast, as well as to reduce it to something physical by embodying it, recurs in the novel. Thus a few pages after this passage, the following description occurs of Pa’s suffering from depression and hallucinations while under experimental psychiatric treatment with LSD. Dr Clark has ensconced himself in the Bitter Aloe rondavel on the farm, and Fabian imagines his father’s struggle:

Pa blinked and he was in a boat on the Mouille Point sea. The boat took him into currents and winds that we did not know. It jerked and bobbed and glided on stormy waves. Kelp tangled around the boat and Pa was not alone there. The body fell against him as the sea tossed and it was he or Pa. They wrestled and Pa felt dank hair brushing over his face, the strong, muscular body that pumped against him, the hairless stomach and the erect prick. The devil’s paws trod on Pa’s bare feet and he felt he was being overwhelmed. It was as though the breathing over him were drugging him. Consuming his breath.

(56/53)²⁵

The similarities evident in this description with that of Ma’s struggle with the Beast just prior to her flight into the arms of the Veteran, suggest that each passage is concerned with the same entity, or at least with different manifestations of that entity. In this regard one might compare the references to the entity wrestling, its bestial sexuality, its “breath” (“*asem*”) and, though this is lost in translation, the use of the same term (“*bedompig*”, rendered respectively as “*rank*” and “*dank*”) to describe it. Moreover, these descriptions prefigure later descriptions of Kikoejoe, such as that of the Beast in London, following Tant Geertruida as she visits the doctor who is to remove her breasts and womb (cf. 65-66/62), as well as of the Beast at the hospital in Mouille point (cf. 66-67/62-63). Even though the Thing *is* embodied as Beast,

Kikoejoe – in its transcendence of space and time – is nothing concrete and cannot be defined exclusively in sensory terms. Kikoejoe is radically different and strange, as the following description makes clear:

The Beast growled softly when [the dogs] came upon his rank odour on the branches of the river scrub, the *hair bristling on their backs before they ran yelping back* to the lawn between the big house and the rondavels. . . .

His urine smelled like nothing else on earth. It gave off steam and the stench drifted through the night, past the terrace with the upturned, sleeping chairs, past the moths fluttering round the stoep lights, past the city dogs *that crept in under the cars, whimpering.*

It drifted down to the river and the sleeping troop of vervet monkeys stirred *restlessly.* They began *chattering and jumping up and down and shaking the branches.* Some *lost their balance, tumbled* into the reeds and began *scrambling about in confusion, crashing* into one another in the dark, *tripping and scrambling out of the way.*

I *fled* from my bed. . . .

(66-67/62-63; my emphasis)²⁶

The smell of Kikoejoe's urine, as a trace of his radical otherness which is beyond presence and absence and exceeds conceptuality, *disturbs* order. The descriptions cited above suggest that Kikoejoe is neither a presence nor an absence, neither concrete nor abstract. Kikoejoe is neither sensory nor supersensory, but both and neither. In short, Kikoejoe is *other*. As such, even if it is embodied through prosopopoeia in the novel, all attempts *finally* to determine Kikoejoe must fail.

Apart from the possible determinations of Kikoejoe suggested in the novel itself (and listed above), a number of characters are associated explicitly with it (I have mentioned the identification of Kikoejoe with Fabian and the Veteran). Reuben is identified with Kikoejoe, when he illustrates the circumference of the Beast's prick by showing Fabian his elbow (288/273). Earlier he is identified with the Beast in the following way:

He gazed up at the stars, strewn like crumbs across the sky and twitched his nose. Was that the smell of rain? Was there *another* smell on the evening breeze, something *other* than the faint smell of manure from the cattle pens, the grass smell rising from the kikuyu as the first dew fell? Was it a smell *other* than that of the damp sandbanks at the river and the peach trees behind the huts?

At this time of the night the heavy, dank smell of soap and steam wafted on to the terrace from the ablution block, the smell of Jeyes Fluid and

shampoo and aftershave. But there was something *other* that Reuben couldn't place. It was a smell that was familiar and strange at the same time. He raised his arm and sniffed absent-mindedly at his armpit – Ma was very strict and made sure that every waiter got a Mum roll-on every month. No, it wasn't him, *although he recognised something of himself in the odour*.

(110/104-105; my emphasis)²⁷

In this passage, Reuben is confronted with something indefinable. This undefinable otherness may be linked to the otherness of the Beast Kikuyu (as perhaps suggested with the explicit reference to kikuyu grass). Otherness is intimated in odour. Even if it is not his smell, Reuben recognises in himself this *other* smell, this smell of otherness. At this point I am emphasising the diversity of possible associations suggested in the novel between Kikoejoe and various characters. But one should nevertheless note the emphasis on alterity already evident in this passage, especially *vis-à-vis* smells as traces of otherness.²⁸

Even Tant Geertruida (or her Luger), in the scene mentioned above, is identified with Kikoejoe as she aims the “poison eye” into the dark (153/145).²⁹ For Fabian's eye has been poisoned and burned away by the Beast's saliva (cf. 129, 149/122, 141), and the scars of Tant Geert's amputated breasts are described as eyes with Miss Bruwer's saliva on them (cf. 127, 133/120, 126).

Apart from suggestions of links and associations such as these in the novel itself, one could, with Burger (1997: 37), identify Kikoejoe with the unconscious:

The Beast hides in an inherited, unconscious part of the psyche – forces about which little can be known. . . . The attempt by the adult Fabian to recall history is an attempt to get to know that which has been hidden, the Beast. He experiences the urge to tame the Beast by telling his story, his history. Monsters may, on a psychological level, be viewed as very deep, basic forces which erupt, like a volcano, in a monstrous deed. In the case of *Kikoejoe*, this monstrous act is the rape of Tsitsi, Oom Boeta's young black domestic servant. The Beast is responsible for this, that Beast present in the unconscious of each person on the farm.³⁰

Leaving aside the questionable assertion that Kikoejoe is “that which has been hidden”,³¹ and the subsequent association of what has been repressed in history (the presence of the proverbial tarbrush in the Latsky family in the form of the slave woman Antjie Provee) with the repressive power of the unconscious (cf. also Smuts 1996: 27), it is significant that Burger does take note of the inherent paradox of

Kikoejoe: that little can be known of the powers embodied by the Beast, but that the compulsion to know that unknowable is an urge which cannot be denied. Burger's suggestion that the *raison d'être* of the novel is to know, contain and thus to tame the Beast is an important one.

I shall, for reasons given earlier in this thesis, not be following a psychoanalytic approach here.³² However, I would like to underscore Burger's perceptive acknowledgement that the Beast is diffuse – to a significant extent the suggestion in the novel (for instance in the descriptions quoted above [65ff./62]) that it is present in each character (whether in their unconscious or not) bears out my contention that *Kikoejoe is nowhere*. If it is everywhere and in each character, then *Kikoejoe* is nowhere in particular, and cannot be determined as this or that force or identified with this or that character. As such, the novel cannot but itself become diffuse and fragmentary, something which would go some way towards explaining the complaints by reviewers cited above concerning the apparently fragmentary nature of the text.

Possibly the most persuasive attempt to pin down *Kikoejoe's* identity is that of the Dutch reviewer HE (1998: 72), who claims that the novel must be understood on a mythical level: "The mythical level is reached, particularly, where the inhabitants of Soebatsfontein feel that there are powers larger than themselves which they cannot know. The powers are embodied in the legendary Beast who is called *Kikoejoe* or *Steppenwolf*. . .".³³ This assessment is particularly perceptive in its recognition that *Kikoejoe* – or what it represents – cannot be known. However, my argument is that *Kikoejoe*, precisely, does not *represent* anything. It is for this reason that it cannot be known and that one cannot really claim that *Kikoejoe* "embodies" anything. *Kikoejoe escapes* or *exceeds* signification and determination. All representations of *Kikoejoe*, including the determination that *Kikoejoe* cannot be determined, are inadequate.

Given the explicit refusal within the novel finally to determine *Kikoejoe*, it would be incorrect to try to pin its identity down. Such attempts, though, are understandable given that the novel (as well as van Heerden himself in interviews) does seem to feed attempts to reduce the otherness of *Kikoejoe* by, for instance, embodying it via prosopopoeia and suggesting mythological links with the landscape.³⁴ Even if these prosopopeic reductions are interrupted ironically in the

novel (as I claim is the case, given that the novel suggests such a plethora of possible determinations of Kikoejoe), this process does not seem to occur consistently.

One of the most troubling instances of the embodiment and concretising of otherness in *Kikoejoe* is related to the many references to the work of N. P. van Wyk Louw, in particular his epic poem *Raka* (1941). While it might initially appear that the references and allusions to *Raka* help make Kikoejoe less determinable (in operating in conjunction with other semantic fields in making the text more diffuse), the opposite would in fact seem to be the case. For this text not only has a central place in the canon of Afrikaans literature (and, in this sense, may be said to be overdetermined), but is problematic in the symbolism it suggests. This is to say that the reader of *Kikoejoe* would be steered into a highly particularised, embodied, understanding of Kikoejoe. Indeed, *Kikoejoe* is saturated with overt allusions to *Raka*, which quite explicitly associate Kikoejoe with Louw's mythological monster (at least to Afrikaans readers).³⁵

One of the most direct allusions to *Raka* is the following: "It was the women who noticed him first,' Ma said of the Veteran's parading". In Afrikaans this coincides almost exactly with the opening line of *Raka*: "The women noticed him first/in the languid afternoon" (189/180; Louw 1981a: 95).³⁶ The first reference to the Beast classifies it as "half-human, half-orang" (21/20),³⁷ while Louw's *Raka* is an "apeman" ("aap-mens"; Louw 1981a: 95; cf. 111). A later, possibly imaginary description by Fabian (cf. 96-97/92) of the Beast's brutal hunting, coincides with a similar description of *Raka* (cf. 102-103/97-98; Louw 1981a: 91). Moreover, the text resorts to direct reference to *Raka* (cf. 147/139).

Apart from such overt references and allusions, a number of further echoes of *Raka* occur in *Kikoejoe*. Once the link between these texts has been established, many motifs and word choices appear to be more-or-less conscious evocations of *Raka*. Thus the Beast is, like *Raka*, said to "cavort" ("buitel"; 66/62; cf. Louw 1981a: 97, 104). Reuben is throughout described in terms of a sentinel ("skildwag"; 44/41; cf. Louw 1981a: 98).³⁸ Like *Raka*, Fabian wanders around at night ("dwaal"; 82/77; 130/123; cf. Louw 1981a: 98). The many references in *Kikoejoe* to circular movement (of the tea leaves in Ma's cup, of the soldiers around Pa's chair, of Fabian's dreams) evoke *Raka*'s wandering around the kraal (cf. 173, 177, 182, 186/164, 168, 173, 177; cf. Louw 1981a: 95, 98).³⁹ *Kikoejoe* is said to produce a

“moaning call” (“steunroep”; 91/87; cf. Louw 1981a: 109). The link with Louw’s work is strengthened, as Kannemeyer (1997: 16) notes, with the explicit references to (virtual quotations from) the poem “Die Strandjutwolf” (cf. 282-283/268; Louw 1981: 136), which relate Kikoejoe to the beast in Louw’s poem. Finally, Smuts (1996: 27) also notes links with “Ballade van die Bose” (Louw 1981: 132-135).

This association of the Beast Kikoejoe with Raka (and other monsters in Louw’s work) is far from unproblematic. According to A. P. Grové (1966: 15), “the opposition Koki-Raka is . . . central in the work as a tense dramatic piece. It’s an opposition which controls the entire course of the narrative”.⁴⁰ This opposition between Koki and Raka is founded in the different nature of each: “Koki is the spiritual leader who is concerned with the potential loss of a valued possession. . . .”,⁴¹ while “Raka is pure brute corporeal strength” (1966: 15).⁴² This leads Grové (1966: 16) to define Raka as a “being of nature” (*natuurwese*) against Koki as a “cultured person” (*kultuurmens*).⁴³ Indeed, Grové in effect reads *Raka* as an allegory of the clash between nature and culture. This tension between nature and culture may be extended to the oppositions “body-spirit, desire-thought, instinct-reason, chaos-order” (1966: 27).⁴⁴ In each case the first element of these pairs threatens the second. And against the kind of force embodied by the carnal, instinctual, chaotic ‘being of nature’ Raka, there is only one defence:

Against such a force the cultural community can only remain standing if an awareness of and responsibility towards the culture (e.g. through the vigilance and action of the strict, spiritual aristocrat) can be kept alive in its midst. Basically we therefore have a tension between nature and culture, and the cultural community is – as we clearly see here – doomed to destruction the moment Raka’s kind of values, of a merely corporeal existence, start becoming acceptable to it.

(1966: 26)⁴⁵

It would be possible to extend this view of *Raka*, and to apply it allegorically to the position of the Afrikaner in Africa. In such an allegorical reading, Koki would stand for the vigilant spiritual aristocrat, the poet who is the bearer of the valued possession – the culture of the nation (cf. Grové 1966: 4, 25).⁴⁶ The tribe would stand for the Afrikaner nation whose culture is threatened by evil, carnal, irrational, chaotic forces outside the laager (the kraal). And Raka would become the representative of, specifically, the black person and, more generally, any outsider who might threaten

the cultures and values of the nation. Such a reading of the poem is given credence in Grové's (1966 : 25) citation of D. J. Opperman's report that W. E. G. Louw (Van Wyk Louw's brother) once brought to the fore two possible interpretations of *Raka*, "interpretations which he inferred from a conversation with the poet":⁴⁷

"He (viz. Van Wyk Louw) drew attention to the fact that a cultural group may run wild spiritually if it opens itself *too* readily to strange influences." As a second possibility: "the biological fact that the population growth of spiritualised man, who occupies a higher rung on the cultural ladder, is in general far slower than that of the less privileged, sometimes less intelligent, but mostly carnal man of nature, and that this process in the long run may result in a huge threat to the spiritual civilisation of Western man."⁴⁸

These xenophobic – and indeed racist – statements take us to the heart of a particular historical justification of apartheid by Afrikaner intellectuals, in the light of which one would be able to read *Raka* as an apology for the system of institutionalised racism that was to become apartheid: the Afrikaner intellectual has the duty to protect the nation from strange (or foreign) influences.⁴⁹ Such protection would appear especially urgent because the Afrikaner is presumably more spiritualised and therefore civilised ("occupies a higher rung on the cultural ladder") than people closer to nature ("man of nature"). These people are, sometimes, "less intelligent", yet are more "carnal", which in the long term may result in a threat to the "spiritual civilisation of Western man" for the reason that it is a "biological fact" that the population growth of spiritualised man in general is far slower than that of supposedly 'lower-order' people. Read alongside Grové's approach to *Raka* as constructed on a number of oppositions and tensions, this reference by W. E. G. Louw to "Western man" would suggest that it might be possible to take *Raka* as a vehicle for the defence of white (Afrikaner) supremacism. Van Heerden's quite explicit choice of *Raka* as intertext would thus be problematic, overdetermining as it does the figure of Kikoejoe. The link with *Raka* – as the other allegorised in terms of a being of nature threatening (Western) civilisation, in particular because of its carnal and corporeal qualities – *reduces* the otherness of Kikoejoe by embodying it in terms of *Raka* as the figure of carnal embodiment. The presence of *Raka* in *Kikoejoe* is highly troubling not only because it reduces the otherness of Kikoejoe, but in the way it does so.

The indebtedness of *Kikoejoe* to Louw's *Raka* is criticised by, among others, Kannemeyer (1997: 26) and Smuts (1996: 27). To Kannemeyer the use of the *Raka*

figure has an “obscuring effect”,⁵⁰ while Smuts is of the opinion that the use of *Raka* is “problematic” for the reason that “it is already historically an explained symbol”.⁵¹ Van Heerden is quite open about his indebtedness to Louw and, in fact, at the end of the novel includes him in a wide list of sources he consulted in writing *Kikoejoe* (315/295). This does make the novel, to a greater or lesser extent, permeable and underscores its fragmentary status in implicitly denying that it is somehow self-enclosed (cf. Frey 1994). I would therefore disagree with Kannemeyer’s assessment that the use of *Raka* ‘obscures’ the novel. Instead, one might argue, with Smuts, that the use of this text, rather than being co-constitutive of the openness and indeterminacy of this text, tends towards closing it off in, precisely, *clarifying* it. Van Heerden would seem to yield to and participate in the urge to name and rationalise the other in bringing *Raka* into the equation proffered in *Kikoejoe*: it is a work which is central in the canon of Afrikaans literature, and *Raka* is therefore “historically an explained symbol”. Moreover, the nature of this symbol is highly problematic in view of the history of apartheid and its intellectual justification in fascist terms, as I attempted to indicate at some length above.

Despite the diffuseness of *Kikoejoe*, then, this figure is nonetheless to an extent embodied, enclosed, and predetermined as a result of van Heerden’s decision to incorporate Louw’s work into *Kikoejoe*. But, while this is indeed a problematic aspect of the text, it should in my opinion not be overemphasised. For, as we have seen, the text does evince a proliferation of possibilities with regard to determining *Kikoejoe*’s identity.

4.3 *Names*

If *Kikoejoe* cannot finally be determined, identified, or named, then this means that it cannot be represented adequately. This excessive nature of *Kikoejoe*, as well as of the subject matter the novel attempts to deal with, is suggested by the striking prevalence of different names for the same phenomena in the novel. Thus, the Veteran Major’s identity is explicitly put in doubt by Tant Geert: “I’ll eat my hat if Heathcote MacKenzie is his real name” (294/278).⁵² That the man’s name is not “Heathcote MacKenzie” is already suggested much earlier in the text: “On his arrival at Soebatsfontein, the Veteran had *presented* himself as ‘Heathcote MacKenzie Esquire

OBE, Veteran El Alamein” (42/39-40; my emphasis).⁵³ But this is apparently a misrepresentation: “He glanced up at the sun, *reminding himself* that he was a veteran of the desert. . . . ‘Heathcote MacKenzie,’ he *practised* quietly. ‘Heathcote MacKenzie’” (43-44/41; my emphasis).⁵⁴ The man’s name, and possibly his entire self-representation as Veteran, is a persona, a mask. This is further suggested in his inconsistent bragging about his position during the Second World War (cf. 116/110, 131/124). Or rather, it is a mask offered as a face – a prosopopoeia – while the memory of the desert may be, catachrestically, a memory of what never was.

The Veteran, Major Heathcote MacKenzie, has many names and therefore no name. Similarly, the farm Soebatsfontein has many names:

Everyone had a different name for our place. The Veteran talked about the Guest Farm. . . . Ma called the place Hotel Halesowen. . . .

Miss Marge Bruwer, Tant Geertruida’s friend who worked in the town library, called our place a “vakansieplaas”. . . .

Tant Geertruida spoke of “The Farm” or “De Boerderij”, depending on which foreign city was freshest in her memory. . . .

Pa called the place Soebatsfontein or Moordenaarskaroo, or, when politics got him down, Kaffirland. If he’d just got to the end of one of Zane Grey’s cowboy books, he’d talk about Dodge City.

(9-10/8-9)⁵⁵

While there is a surfeit of names in some cases, black people in the novel, as Ampie Coetzee (1997: 22) notes, are, “with few exceptions, nameless”. One exception is Reuben, who is, however, often addressed by Fabian’s mother as “Jack” or “my Jack”. This, we are told, is in fact not a name particular to Reuben, or even a nickname, but a generic term for a black man: “Ma called out after Reuben. ‘Jack! Where are you off to now, my boy Jack!’ Jack was the name white people called black men. I don’t know why Ma decided to call Reuben Jack at this moment” (25/24).⁵⁶

Tsitsi, in the narrator Fabian’s attribution of thoughts to her, formulates names for Reuben and, in the process, associates him with Kikoejoe:

That hungry man, he with the teeth as white as the wood he splits, he can eat me. He can bite into me as though I were watermelon, right to the deepest sweetness. There where it’s reddest, there, yes there, he must eat me, the hungry man, the man with the tray, the kikuyu man, the . . .

She murmured names for him; her own words with which she caressed him.

(217/206; ellipsis in text)⁵⁷

Significantly, in terms of the prevalence in this novel of a *multiplicity* of names, this chain of names is presented as indeterminate and incomplete. Finally, Fabian is characterised in different terms by different characters. He is called, variously, “little pupil” (by Tant Geert; (cf. 75, 221ff./71, 210ff.),⁵⁸ “little corporal” (by the Veteran; cf. 22, 46, 76, 133, 180/21, 43, 71, 124, 171)⁵⁹ or “little soldier” (cf. 121, 131/115, 124),⁶⁰ “little disciple” (by the Pastor; cf. 71, 306/67, 290),⁶¹ “little ram” (by his father; cf. 157/149)⁶², “little racehorse” (by doctor Lyell 136/129)⁶³ and “cowboy” (by Charles Jacoby; cf. 306/290) while his mother, of course, is said to have had the “stage name” (“speelnaam”: ‘play name’) Joey Versluis (cf. 88/83).

This overt emphasis on names and the process of naming, in particular the slipperiness of names, may be related to the operation of prosopopoeia in the novel, that is, to the impossible attempt of the novel to recover the past by pinning down identity.⁶⁴ The inability to know the name, such as the inability to know the name of God suggested by God’s paronomastic answer “I am what I am” (Exodus 3:14), implies that the essential nature of the party which cannot be named (or cannot be named finally) cannot be known. This inability to name (for instance to name God) may be linked to the inability to see the face of God.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the indeterminacy of names may be linked to the attempt to impose order by means of narrative, seeing that it is the ability to determine ancestry by linking names which characterises Tant Geert’s genealogical research. And, as I have shown, a notable aspect of the makeup of the ‘Major’ is the mask of his name.

The name ‘Kikoejoe’ (as well as the many names for other entities in the novel) is, ultimately, a name for something which cannot be named.⁶⁶ The determinations of Kikoejoe, whether in the form of names or representations, constitute the face given to something which has no face and which radically escapes the conceptuality which would render it nameable and knowable. Kikoejoe, rather than being determined in the narrative, disrupts the narrative with a force which cannot be measured. As such, this novel, which itself attempts to impose order by relating identity, is subject to the disruptive power of the other.

Attempting to enclose the novel and determine the status of *Kikoejoe* (as some reviewers have sought to do, as I showed above) is to miss the point that no narrative closure nor final determination of *Kikoejoe* is possible and, further, that any tendency towards such closure and final understanding must be subverted in order to allow for a just representation. Seeing that representing the other, even though it is radically impossible, is nonetheless not only necessary but occurs every day, a just way has to be found to represent the other. Such a representation of the other, I suggest in this thesis, would be one which counteracts itself ironically in the process of prosopopeically lending the other a face. It would reveal itself as linguistic rather than natural and, in drawing attention to itself, would relativise itself in order to intimate that it, “as the invention of the other, encounters something unknowable, something, moreover, that is as much obscured as uncovered by being personified” (Miller 1990: 81).⁶⁷

But, of course, to say that this is the point of *Kikoejoe* is, again, to fall into the trap of attributing a telos to the novel, to gather together the fragments and attribute to them a cause. For this reason, my gathering here of *Kikoejoe* must also be interrupted and unworked, that is, ironised. A just reading of *Kikoejoe* must perform the paradoxical task of reading the text while not reading it: that is, it must read the text in its fragmentariness without trying to undo that fragmentariness in the process. Similarly, the figure *Kikoejoe* would have to be approached without letting it appear, without reducing its otherness.

4.4 *Prosopopoeia*

Kikoejoe is a novel which is explicitly concerned with the past. Van Heerden has confirmed the status of this novel as a document which attempts to come to terms with the past. In an interview with Wasserman (1996: 4), he cites the view that literature may function as a kind of Truth Commission, and relates this view to contemporary Afrikaans fiction as it attempts, often “through the eyes of a child”, to come to terms with the past.⁶⁸ As far as van Heerden is concerned, *Kikoejoe*, too, participates in this “kind of mining of the past” (Wasserman 1996: 4).⁶⁹ Indeed, not only is the novel concerned with “mining” the past (something with which Tant Geert is openly concerned in her genealogical research),⁷⁰ and thus with enclosing and controlling it,

but also with the reverse: the impossibility of controlling the past and its effects on the present.

At the heart of Pa's depression is his feeling of being subject to the past, to powers beyond his control. This lack of control over the past is exemplified by the family trust:

Shaking with bottled-up frustration, he took out Grandpa's will and Ma had to call Tant Geert to come and discuss family matters: the complicated trust, the family farm. . . . How, Pa asked Tant Geert, can we break the trust?

[Everyone] is part of the complicated game Grandpa is playing from his grave.

"But I want out!" Pa shouted. "I want to be free."

(120-121; cf. 158, 200/114; cf. 150, 190)⁷¹

The trust and the discovery of Antjie Provee in the genealogy of the Latsky family are only two examples of this effect of the past on the present. But just as Oupa speaks from the grave by means of the Trust, which thus serves as a prosopopoeia of Oupa and lends him a voice and the power to control to a significant extent the present, so too the novel *Kikoejoe* may be seen as a document which gives faces and voices to those who have none. *Kikoejoe* is, quite explicitly, a prosopopoeia. This is evident from the acknowledgement in the novel that *everybody* is dead. In a passage which associates the transience of things – the passage of time and the passing of people – with kikuyu (cf. (287/272),⁷² the adult Fabian relates that "Everyone is silent and gone, and I have no one who can check my facts. It's all swept away, past, as though it had never happened. The rondavels are ruins, overrun by kikuyu, destroyed by weather and time" (168/159).⁷³

Furthermore, the narrator exclaims as follows about the fate of the characters he describes in the novel: "I obviously feel obliged to bring most of my characters to their end!" (269/255).⁷⁴ Not only does this confirm the death of all the significant players in the action of the novel (and thus the urge towards closure and the narrator's awareness of this urge), but also the status of the text as a prosopopoeia. The narrator continues by relating the novel as prosopopoeia to the genre of autobiography itself:⁷⁵

And, as is the case with so many of the characters in my narrative, I would – in all fairness – also like to describe my own death. . . .

My own? Well, of course it is impossible to stage your own death in advance. That's why I have chosen the one sort of story where you aren't

obliged to do so – the autobiography. Because it is, after all, the genre in which the main character can walk out alive at the other end, if not exactly inviolate.

And even telling all this is also a way of dying, not so? To turn the hand against oneself?

(269/255)⁷⁶

And of course, as Paul de Man (1979c) has persuasively argued, prosopopoeia is the trope *par excellence* of autobiography. This is so for the reason that it makes coherent and encloses what is really disorderly and open, namely the life of its subject: “One tells one’s life, not because one has a face, but in order to give one to oneself, and to preserve rather than to lose it. In autobiography the self is not given in advance, but only emerges as what the biography outlines” (Frey 1985: 124; cf. also Frey 1990a: 155ff.; Miller 1989: 172).⁷⁷ The passage from the novel cited above comes close to self-destructing in making explicit its own status as fiction and, in this way, to ironically destroying its fictionality precisely by drawing attention to its illusionary and hallucinatory nature. As a document of the dead which is, moreover, an autobiography, the novel may be said to be a double prosopopoeia. And in presenting itself as a fictional autobiography it may be said to be a prosopopoeia which undoes itself, which reveals itself as a construction of faces. That is, the novel, in interrupting its positing of faces, reveals itself to be not only a prosopopoeia but an ironic one: a prosopopoeia of a prosopopoeia.⁷⁸

The important status of prosopopoeia in the novel is confirmed in the highly self-conscious way in which it occurs. It is surely notable that, in a text the avowed intent of which is to give a face to the faceless, a voice to the voiceless: to impose order on that which has none through narrative, there should appear so many instances of prosopopoeia. This preponderance of prosopopoeia, with the closely related trope catachresis, may be said to strengthen the hallucinatory effect of the novel already evident in, for instance, the recurring descriptions of Pa’s drug-induced hallucinations and dreams. This hallucinatory effect is of great importance in *Kikoejoe*, serving as it does to highlight the working of memory and its interplay with hallucinations, dreams, visions, fortune telling, predictions and prophesies as the past flows into the present and the present into the past through memory (cf. 13, 182/12-13, 173). This effect, and its link with time and repetition, is also evident in the preponderance of repetitive techniques, for instance the folding into each other of different characters.

The different figures and traits attributed to Kikoejoe may be said to have a hallucinatory effect, as does the eerie repetition of Dr Lyell in Oom Boeta (cf. 136, 249/129; 236) and of the past librarian Marge *Bruwer* in the name of the present one – Elsabé *Bouwer* (140/133). Of course, it is possible also to detect this hallucinatory effect in the repetition of the word “hallucination” (*hallusinatie*) in the name Hotel *Halesowen*. Given the many hallucinations and hallucinatory effects in the novel, it becomes not only possible but inevitable to read the many fairly ordinary instances of personification and catachresis as themselves monstrous hallucinations.

This is the case, for instance, in the description of many characters in bestial, or, more broadly, non-human terms. The Veteran is throughout the novel described as a crow (cf. 42-43, 47, 74, 78, 108, 188, 216, 306/40, 44, 69, 74, 103, 179, 205, 290) and as a bat (cf. 195/185).⁷⁹ Reuben, significantly (given the importance of prosopopoeia in the narcissistic Pygmalion myth), is described as a statue (cf. 97ff./92ff.). He is also described as a Roman soldier standing guard with his shield: “Reuben . . . came to stand at the edge of the terrace, like a sentinel with his shiny tray” (44/41⁸⁰; cf. 111, 122, 124, 161, 167, 235, 264, 294/ 117, 129, 131, 170, 176, 247, 278, 311). Fabian is described by Ma as “a praying mantis, rubbing his little paws together and keeping an eye on us all” (26/24)⁸¹ and as a snake (cf. 82, 149/77, 141).⁸²

This process also occurs in reverse, that is, with the attribution of human or animate qualities to what is non-human or inanimate. So, for instance, the locomotive of the train with which Charles Jacoby and his steed Valour arrive, blends into Valour when it seems to be described as a monstrous horse: “With a white mane streaming in the wind. With a tail flowing on the breeze. Head high up to the front. Neck chiselled in the course. Thick green turds bubbling from the hole [arse] when the train reached top speed beside the green, winding seam of the river” (99/95).⁸³ A little later, the train “quickly and angrily, with a frown on its hurried forehead . . . came snaking round Dynamite Krantz” (102/97).⁸⁴

The landscape, too, comes alive prosopopeically by means of catachresis: Tant Geert says “Amsterdam has so many faces” (3/3).⁸⁵ Of the Karoo, when water is available, it is said that “The hungry earth drank” (68/64).⁸⁶ With the arrival of the Veteran at Halesowen station, the landscape appears to be a body: “Together they stood looking at the brown plains *shivering* in the heat, the mirage puddles floating in

the hollows, and the train's *tracks* pressing into a single shiny *eye* in the distance"(42/40; my emphasis).⁸⁷ The description of the landscape which "shivers" in the heat and appears to have an "eye" (the tracks on the horizon) is explicitly linked to hallucination with the reference to "mirage", suggesting the hallucinatory effect of prosopopoeia as much as the prosopopeic effect of hallucination. During Mr Jacoby and Valour's train journey, "the backs of hills . . . flew with him [Valour] like the brown haunches of mares" (100/96)⁸⁸ and the tracks "stretched past the forbidding scowl of Dynamite Krantz" 100/96).⁸⁹ In a hallucinatory image, the skies are compared to the neck or throat of the universe: "Everyone was waiting for the first cool breath of the evening breeze, waiting for the Milky Way to appear on the black throat of the night like a sparkling necklace" (194/184).⁹⁰ The human and the non-human melt into each other: "'Kaffirs melt into the landscape,' Ma always said" (287/272),⁹¹ which is qualified by the Biblical assertion that "man is grass" (287/272).⁹² The activities of Poqo on the trains are described in a striking image: "He'd tell her about the trains that moved like zippers over the black chest of the land" (212/202).⁹³

The descriptions of the land by Pa continuously state the problematic nature of his relationship to it. This is evident, for instance, in the regular recurrence of chains of negative names (noted above) by means of which he addresses the farm: "'Soebatsfontein,' grumbled Pa. 'God-se-oog. Verneukpan. Putsonderwater. Genadeloosrant. Pynlikheid. Perdevreklaagte'" (136/129).⁹⁴ It is as if the land comes alive in its exemplification of these dreary names, while the very fact that the land is *addressed* serves to lend it a face as interlocutor. Pa's problematic relationship with the land is also described in terms of his hallucinations: "Around them stretched the endless Karoo night, . . . the horizon that still beckoned as Pa dripped off the end of it and became landscape and stood spinning on the bedroom floor, stammering to explain: 'I melt off the edge of the Camdeboo, I drip, I drip . . .'" (112-113/107; last ellipsis in text).⁹⁵ Elsewhere, Pa pertinently personifies the land in hallucinatory terms: "'Lying dams,' Pa called the mirages *dancing* around us. '*God's eye*,' he said and pointed at the sun. 'The *devil's fist*,' he pointed to a rocky hill with a knobbed boulder on top" (75/70; my emphasis).⁹⁶ Here the land is personified and given a face as something which engages in deceit and lies, significantly as a result of the hallucinatory effect of the mirages, something described by means of catachresis as

engaged in “dancing”. In addition, the sun is metaphorised as God’s eye and a hill is identified with the fist of the devil. These two examples are ominous in their suggestions of the supernatural qualities of what is an apparently ordinary landscape. In short, this passage, like so many others in *Kikoejoe*, presents the land in hallucinatory terms, principally through the use of catachresis and prosopopoeia to personify it. Additionally, it might be noted that this tendency to personify the land not only renders it representable by bringing it into the purview of the known, but also makes it strange through a radical defamiliarisation. The hallucinatory designation of the land may be related to the many names of the farm as an entity which forever changes and escapes signification while remaining the same.

Later, in terms of the Beast-hunting expeditions of Fabian and the Veteran, the inadequacy of the many names of the farm are related to the inability to *name* evil (they are also related to the inability to name the unknown future, specifically with respect to the altercation between Ma and Tant Geert about the Veteran). These expeditions to investigate evil are playful and serious at the same time, and cannot be defined in conventional terms:

And I stood behind her, unseen where I had paused on my way to the Veteran so we could commence our expedition to Dynamite Krantz. I stood there like a child peering down into a borehole who saw black water and frogs stirring in the depths, and who’d move out into the sun restlessly with the Veteran, somewhere in me the consciousness that this was a game, but also not a game – that we were going into a strange land, one that couldn’t be baptised with one of Pa’s names: Noupoot, Bitterfontein, Godverlaat, Bloedson, Kwelkaroo
...

(294-295/279; ellipsis in text)⁹⁷

One might note, with regard to the hallucinatory terms by means of which the land is described, that the land is also described as having bad breath and is identified with a corpse: “‘The land is dying’, said Pa to Ma. . . . Later Ma said: ‘It’s hard to believe the land has developed such bad breath’” (161/152-153).⁹⁸ This is the smell of trouble (165/156) and of death – “death’s bad breath, everywhere” (175/166)⁹⁹ – which is identified first implicitly (175/166) and then directly with the smell of Windpomp burning.¹⁰⁰

Tant Geert’s Borgward has a shiny nose (10/9-10)¹⁰¹ and a taxi a black snout (66/62). The furniture seems alive, with talking doors – the doors are said to emit a

sighing “aai” sound (cf. 9/9)¹⁰² –, sleeping chairs (67/63) as well as a divan (78/73) and a table (98/93) with legs.¹⁰³ A balloon becomes a penis, while another has a “bum” (98/93); a pistol has an eye (cf. 152/144); later the balloons are said to “shiver” (102);¹⁰⁴ the copper rings of the curtains in the bedroom sing (cf. 105, 110, 111/100, 104, 106) as Pa opens them.¹⁰⁵ The Pastor’s electric guitar is said “growlingly” to “grumble” (91/87).¹⁰⁶ The electricity generator cuts out: “Then the Lister *gargled* as it did when it was taking its last *gulp* of diesel” (91/87; my emphasis).¹⁰⁷

The gigantic geyser is called “the donkey” (14/14). Reuben baptises the donkey ‘Antjie Provee’, after the Malay ancestor discovered by Tant Geert, thus lending it a face (cf. 37/35). The pipes of this contraption are said to “hum” (cf. 14/14), “complain” (cf. 203) and emit a “faint gurgle” (110/104).¹⁰⁸ Pa says Reuben, whose responsibility this contraption is, “has trained the donkey to his hand” (15/14).¹⁰⁹ Reuben chops wood, described as if it had a body, with which he feeds the donkey: “[Reuben] split the white *flesh* of the thorn wood with his axe” (16/16; cf. 213/203; my emphasis).¹¹⁰ The thorn wood is said to be eaten by the donkey, which becomes a giant monstrous being: “Behind him the red *throat devoured* the thorn stump in a wink. The big tank *shuddered* and the pipes *running* down the wall *trilled* and *groaned*. Steam filtered out of the *joints* of the pipes’ *elbows* at the corners of the house” (215/204; my emphasis).¹¹¹ Reuben has to stoke the donkey, something which becomes suggestive of sexual intercourse as a result of the identification of the geyser with a woman: “‘I’m stoking Antjie Provee until she moans tonight!’ laughed Reuben” (215/204).¹¹² Reuben’s desire for Tsitsi is described by means of a comparison between him and the donkey (215/204). The donkey itself becomes a gigantic, ejaculating penis in the following description: “The steaming water spluttered from the outlet pipe, spewed in an arch and took a handful of wind like a white-hot hand” (214/203).¹¹³ This description is similar to that of the Thing’s ejaculation as imagined by Fabian: “The Thing rolled on to his back, in the same moment that the crying ape had rolled away, found her feet and began running. The white seed spurted from his prick, jerking in long *arches* over his belly hair, to the warm river sand” (96/92; my emphasis).¹¹⁴ It is further reminiscent of Willempie’s ejaculation: “. . . Willempie won, his shining seed spurting in an *arc* right into the evening waters of the Fish” (194/185; my emphasis).¹¹⁵

A variety of body parts are described in hallucinatory terms by means of catachreses and personifications. Thus Willempie and Fabian become little cyborgs, as their penises are implied to be wires: they are said to be “pulling wire” (194/185),¹¹⁶ and masturbation would consist of pulling one’s wire. And the adult Fabian describes his memory as a telescope with which he is looking back at what happened, implying a kind of cyborgian dependence on a prosthesis to aid one’s view of the past.

Tant Geert describes the legs and heads of Karoo folk in terms of “lizards” (7/7); the Pastor’s fingers are “spiders’ legs” (90/85), as are the fingers of the man the adult Fabian meets in Florence (64/60)¹¹⁷. These figures are particularly significant as they are linked to Pa’s hallucination (112/106) and recur in the following description (also related as it is to hallucination in terms of personification, as well as to the phenomenon of a mirage) of two railway workers: “Two men stood pumping the cocopan. They came riding along like an insect out of the mirage. The bobbing figures of the men looked like the legs of an approaching insect” (198/188).¹¹⁸ The Veteran’s “black eyes creep like beetles over Ma’s bare shoulders”.¹¹⁹ Tant Geert’s body is, prosopopeically, throughout described in animal terms: her “erect young nipples stared at him like a rabbit’s eyes”(4/4),¹²⁰ while her breasts are described as “rabbits [pressing] their snouts against her bra” (5/4)¹²¹ and her womb as a “hedgehog” (5/5; cf. 11-12, 150/11, 142).¹²² The male sex organ is called not only “pizzle”, “penis”, or “prick”,¹²³ but also significantly “cock” or “cock head” (cf. 50, 145, 185/53, 153, 195).¹²⁴

But what we didn’t see was the Veteran among the river trees, where he stood motionless in his black uniform among the reeds.

Tall and black he stood there, a *bat* on its *hind legs*, *moaning* with pleasure while watching us holding our little *cocks* in our hands. He stared at us *dumbly* and *lifted his nose*, smelling something of our *heat*. He had to suppress the *grunting* sigh in his throat when his veined *cock* started *kicking and kicking* in his hand and his *seed* pumped out, on to the sand at his feet.
(195/185; my emphasis)¹²⁵

The preponderance of catachrestic animal imagery here serves to transmogrify the Veteran into a monstrous bat with a cock spurting seed. Body parts become bodies themselves, independent beings which take on a life of their own. The figure of the bat is a recurrent one in *Kikoejoe*. It becomes a sign for the in-between state

characteristic of Kikoejoe, neither ape nor human, neither bird nor mouse: “. . . that hybrid animal, abandoned by evolution somewhere between bird [*voël*] and mouse [*muis*]” (63/60).¹²⁶ This description is, in the Afrikaans text, linked to the passage quoted above. For the Afrikaans word for ‘bat’ is ‘vlermuis’, flying mouse. And the word ‘voël’ may refer not only to ‘bird’ but to the male member (‘cock’). The figure of the bat is thus not only related to Kikoejoe and the other (as the in-between, indefinable) but also to male sexuality.

Prosopopoeia appears explicitly in most of the poems quoted in the text: in the Tennyson (cf. 141, 175, 196/134, 166, 186); in the Psalm (cf. 86); and in the Nijhoff (84),¹²⁷ and in later passages where the land is transmogrified into a body of water. It might, finally, be noted that these instances of catachresis, metaphor and personification, all of which in some way or another lead to prosopopoeia, may be linked directly to conceptualisation and narrative coherence. Thus Dr Clark says “The wound is a talking mouth” (153/145).¹²⁸ Earlier, in terms of Dr Clarke’s view of the therapeutic power of narrative as the talking cure (149/141), we are told that he and Tant Geert “played the pretentious little games all intellectuals are so fond of – alluding to texts, establishing relations, digging around in the mind [*geheue*]” (148/140-141).¹²⁹ Self-reflexively, we are told here that reading, interpreting, and understanding are *tropological* activities. This is because these activities serve conceptualisation as a result of their tendency to draw relations and to function by means of substitution. But if they are tropological in general, then they are prosopopeic in particular: they allow the wound to talk. Yet, while serving to conceptualise, they also lend a monstrous, hallucinatory character to the novel, as tables and chairs come alive, penises become birds, fingers spiders, taxis animals, people crows or bats, the land a huge corpse or sea.

The hallucinatory character lent to the novel by the instances of prosopopoeia cited above (and by the many others I do not have space to cite), may be said to fulfil a dual, mutually exclusive, ironic function in the novel. On the one hand the prevalence of this trope serves to further characterisation in the novel. Indeed, in the most literal sense, characterisation in its use of prosopopoeia lends faces and voices to characters by relating them to what they are not. On the other hand, the novel’s status as realistic fiction engaged in the ‘mining’ of the past is subverted in that the tentative nature of its project is underscored in the dreamlike and hallucinatory ambience which

results from the tropes of prosopopoeia and catachresis. These tropes, and in particular prosopopoeia, thus enable an approach to *Kikoejoe* as a novel which self-consciously constructs faces and, for this reason, at the same time interrupts them. Prosopopoeia, in other words, in this novel appears at one and the same time as a conceptualising trope and as the interruption of that conceptualisation.

In giving faces to characters, or the land, or inanimate things, prosopopoeia makes them accessible to representation and reduces their alterity. But it also underscores precisely that alterity: it serves to alienate the self from the others, who in appearing appear as *surprisingly* other. The representation of the other – a representation by means of prosopopoeia – appears, that is, as inadequate: instead of *clarifying* the other it *complicates* that other. The representation of the Veteran as a crow or bat, to cite this example again, might be said to make him appear. But it makes him appear *strange* and monstrous and thus intimates his radical unknowability. This prosopopeic representation, indeed, is ironically interrupted *as* it is posited in that, in the words of Miller quoted above, it “encounters something unknowable, something, moreover, that is as much obscured as uncovered by being personified” (1990: 81).

The reason for this is that the novel is subject to a radical incapacity – something which it self-reflexively acknowledges, as was noted above – to recover the past adequately. As a result, one finds the refusal to represent and lend faces to what is, nonetheless, described. For *Kikoejoe* is, paradoxically, a novel the *raison d'être* of which is to lend the past a face. It is an attempt to come to grips with the past, an attempt at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as evident from van Heerden's remark cited above pertaining to “literature as Truth Commission” (cf. also Francken 1998: 587, 588). Additionally, the novel is quasi-autobiographical, as was noted above. In short, this is a novel which attempts to deal with the past and which, simultaneously, claims that this is an impossible project. Or, perhaps, this is a novel which claims that one can deal with the past only by acknowledging that such a project is an impossible project, which is to say *the only possible project* (if a project is understood as something which never ends and always becomes). In terms of the discussion of the romantic fragment with reference to the romantic project (in the final section of the previous chapter), this means that the project of recovering the past must necessarily always be, self-consciously, fragmentary. *Kikoejoe* thus becomes a prosopopoeia of

the past which undoes that prosopopoeia *as* prosopopoeia by interrupting continuously – ironically, in other words – the conceptualisations it effects. This is evidenced in the novel by the incapacity already noted to unify the narrative in terms of an end, as well as by the incapacity – despite attempts (whether conscious or otherwise) – to determine Kikoejoe.

4.5 *Windpomp: The Other in the Burning Bush*

In this last section of this chapter, I consider one further example of the ironic procedure of *Kikoejoe*: that of the refusal – or inability – to represent the death of Windpomp, with his subsequent survival as trace of otherness. If Kikoejoe is, willy-nilly, embodied in the novel and thus reduced, as I have indicated, then Windpomp is one character who does not appear at all and who may be said not to be represented in the novel. Amid all the attribution of faces and names noted above, this one character is radically faceless, even nameless, and remains beyond conceptualisation.

The name ‘Windpomp’ may, indeed, serve to conceptualise him to an extent in terms of the implied comparison to a windmill. However, such a conceptualisation must remain utterly indefinite – there is no evidence at all in the novel that it is possible to infer from this name anything about Windpomp’s ‘essence’, his nature or physique. If any link may be drawn, then it is with the landscape and, perhaps, unsurprisingly, with hallucination: the word “windmills” (“windpompe”) is used to describe Pa’s eyes and to suggest his disturbed condition (40/38)¹³⁰ and, later, to emphasise the close and problematic relation he has with the land (247/234). Moreover, the name ‘Windpomp’ seems more like a nickname than a real name, and thus emphasises the lack of specificity of this character in a way similar to the Pastor or the Veteran, each of whom remains finally indefinable not least because they are, quite literally, nameless.¹³¹ Windpomp remains as faceless as the faceless train drivers in Fabian’s dream (149/142).

Yet, despite this facelessness and the resemblance of his name to a nickname, Windpomp plays a central role in the narrative. Admittedly, as was noted above, there are other characters – in particular, black characters – in the novel who remain nameless and, one might add, faceless. These waiters, nannies and other servants become ghostly presences in the novel, presences who must be there (and whose

existence is, indeed, mentioned) but who are largely absent (in not being represented at length, if at all).¹³² They are essential for the running of Hotel Halesowen even if they do not fulfil a central role in this narrative. Or perhaps this should be rephrased: the army of servants on the margins of discourse do play a central role in the running of Hotel Halesowen, on the holiday farm, and in the narrative. But they do not become as directly involved in narrative events as I hope to indicate Windpomp does. To this extent Windpomp, as one among many faceless and nameless workers and servants, may be said to become emblematic of the faceless, the nameless and the voiceless. Indeed, it is the very *absence* of this figure – the fact that this figure is not figured *except as absent* – which lends Windpomp his central narratological role in *Kikoejoe*.

As prosopopoeia, the novel *Kikoejoe* attempts, as I indicated above, to gather the past by giving it a face (and thus betrays it). But this novel also evidences the attempt to reduce this betrayal ironically. Neither of the two violent attacks which figure in the novel is described in detail. I refer here, respectively, to the rape of Tsitsi and the murder of Windpomp. This is, however, not to equate either the two events or the figures of Tsitsi and Windpomp. While Windpomp, as I continue to argue below, is radically absent from the novel, the same cannot be said about Tsitsi. Neither Windpomp's speech nor his thought is represented, while Tsitsi's continually is. While Windpomp is not represented *at all* in the novel, the quite elaborate way in which Tsitsi is interiorised by an avowedly first-person narrator, who seems not to interrupt that process consistently, is disquieting.¹³³ Moreover, she is subject to the same kind of lurid phantasy as that involving the Thing. Fabian, in a passage to which I have already referred, seems in highly graphic terms to imagine the Thing raping a female monkey (96-97/92). Similarly, he imagines Tsitsi engaged in private acts, which he describes in great detail (the important point being that he, as *non-omniscient* narrator has no access to these acts). Thus he imagines her squatting and urinating: "She *would* squat in the night and think about Rhodesia. The evening breeze *would* touch her buttocks coolly. It was nice when the warm urine flowed and steamed warmly into the cleft of her buttocks. The grass *would* tickle her thighs and long after she'd pinched off the last drop, she'd squat there in her own steam" (226/215; my emphasis).¹³⁴ As is evident from these citations, Knox's translation, with its usage of markers indicating free indirect discourse, might in fact be said to

attenuate the reduction of Tsitsi's alterity evident in the Afrikaans text. For in the Afrikaans text (unlike the translation) there is no indication that Tsitsi *habitually* urinates in the grass before going to bed in the Cadillac, except for the simple word "saans", rendered as "every night" (226/215). Consequently, in the Afrikaans text there is little if any marker indicating that Fabian is imagining Tsitsi's nocturnal rituals. The Afrikaans text, instead, gives the impression of direct witness: it is as if Fabian is, disquietingly, not imagining Tsitsi as much as watching her and attributing to her various thoughts and pleasurable sensations. Of course, the markers of free indirect discourse in the translation serve to relativise the representation of Tsitsi's act.

Immediately prior to the rape of Tsitsi, Fabian imagines (or, less likely, watches) the Beast watching all the guests and servants who have congregated to witness Charles Jacoby's concert (255-257/242-244). At this point it becomes unclear who is imagining and watching what: the figures of the Beast Kikoejoe and of Fabian, each watching and waiting, blend into each other:

And far away under the thorn trees where the darkness of night was gathering in pools, a paw pushed the branches back quietly. He saw Ma throw her head back and laugh, the shiny things on her ears. He saw Marge Bruwer bend and pick a red geranium which she put, unobtrusively, *without even my noticing*, next to Tant Geert's hand on the table.

(255/242; my emphasis)¹³⁵

It is my contention that asides such as that in the passage above ("without even my noticing") serve to interrupt the representation and, indeed, the authority of the narrator. Such asides may be understood as parabases, interrupting the narrative conceptualisations effected in the novel.¹³⁶ But the question needs to be asked whether this interruption suffices to relativise – indeed, ironise – sufficiently the representation of alterity in the novel. Disquietingly, as Fabian (presumably) imagines the Beast playing with his pizzle, he imagines the Beast watching Tsitsi onanistically fondling herself (or sees her doing this, or he sees the Beast seeing her; cf. 256/243). However, while Fabian imagines the marauding Beast in the act of rape, imagines (or sees) Tsitsi (as well as the Veteran) masturbating, the rape of Tsitsi is not represented at length. The reader is provided with unsettling impressions of violence

rather than an explicit representation of the act itself. If the act is not imagined in detail, it *is* nonetheless imagined (or observed):

Tsitsi struck on the inner thigh. First the shiny black skin with a whitish layer of fat beneath it. Then muscles, sinews, blood. Over the kikuyu, as she was dragged, her pelvis forced wide open, her eyes turned back, white in terror. Only Shona on her tongue now, moaning, white flecks of salt at the corners of her mouth.

The door of the Cadillac was lying wide open and a city cur licked her blood from the gravel. First one dog and then eventually all of them – the spaniels and the fox terriers, the collies and the pavement specials, the boerbulls and the mongrels. They licked and nibbled at the grass and then went to vomit under the bluegums.

Tsitsi, raped.

(257-258/244)¹³⁷

One might speculate as to reasons why the rape of Tsitsi is dealt with in this incidental way. The rape of Tsitsi is never solved, the rapist never apprehended. After the rape, there are few references to Tsitsi and her fate (she commits suicide: 268/254). Instead, the narrator introduces into the narrative his attempts to sell his manuscript in New York (266/252), and intersperses into this account what seems to be a particularly gratuitous and unmotivated set of descriptions of his lover's suicide (cf. 281, 283-284/267, 268-269). Indeed, in thus downplaying the rape the narrator seems to enact the general indifference of white people towards it (cf. 276/262), something noted by at least one reviewer:

What does confuse me a bit about *Kikoejoe* is the way in which the horrific rape is underplayed. Does the writer not take it seriously, or is it symptomatic of the time in which the events occur that this matter passes so lightly (because whites would view such an act as less serious if it concerned a black woman)? Perhaps it is related to the feeling I got with regard to a climax for which the reader is prepared, yet which never really comes to pass. Or perhaps the most terrible thing which occurs (in the eyes of the white people on Soebatsfontein), ironically and ludicrously, is the fact that Charles Jacoby's lovely white horse nearly becomes the victim of an absurd monster hunt!

(Rossouw 1997: 8)¹³⁸

One might argue that the rape is not dealt with (nor described) in detail, and consequently does not figure prominently, for the reason that it *cannot* be described adequately. The presence of the rape in its absence in the novel would be a sign, not

of the author's *lack* of seriousness with respect to this event, but, on the contrary, of the vast importance of the event. In this case, the rape would, as it were, leave the narrator without words because in its otherness it exceeds any representation. It is significant that the reviewer cited above mentions the absence of a climax (something discussed at some length above *vis-à-vis* narrative teleology): the rape would then be a climax which is anti-climactic, that is, a climax which might be said to be interrupted and therefore incomplete and unenclosed. Ironically, the anti-climactic climax would be an indication of the seriousness of the event and the seriousness of the responsibility with regard to representation that it demands. The rape would then be present in this novel precisely through its absence. However, in view of the continual representation of Tsitsi's interiority (as noted above), the relative absence of the rape from the novel appears suspect. It is possible, as J. M. Coetzee has indicated in *White Writing*, that the rape is one of those moments of otherness which do not surface in narrative because they have never been conceptualised in the Afrikaner (or white South African) psyche.¹³⁹

In contrast to the *modus operandi* in evidence in the (non-)representation of the rape of Tsitsi, Windpomp's death is presented as a moment of absolute alterity. It radically unsettles narrative closure in the impossibility of the representation of otherness which he exemplifies as a figure which lies beyond representation. That Windpomp is one of the most enigmatic figures in *Kikoejoe* should be clear from the fact that he does not appear in the novel and therefore remains unknown. This is the case even before his death. But subsequent to his death, he is radically absent and entirely inaccessible. It is as if Windpomp never *was*. He cannot be described and cannot be represented. He is *nowhere*. And yet the trace of Windpomp, in the perpetual smell of the burning haystack mingled with the smell of burning flesh, is everywhere and permeates everything. Windpomp never speaks, he is never described and we know almost nothing of him except that he is the cook Boe's partner and Fabian's friend Willempie's father.

During and after the visit of Verwoerd to Cradock, a number of acts of protest and sabotage occur in the district (cf. 175, 178-179/165, 169-170). One of these involves the opening of farm gates, resulting in cattle entering into and grazing on dangerously green lucerne lands. The security forces arrive at Soebatsfontein in order to contain this situation (179, 184/170, 175), and commence menacing the people on

the farm (184, 185, 186/175, 176, 177).¹⁴⁰ Under the assumption that Windpomp is responsible for this act of sabotage, the monstrous commandant Reitz sets fire to the haystack in which Windpomp is hiding (185-186/176-177). From this point onward, as well as retrospectively, Windpomp may be said to function as a trace of otherness in the novel.

There is one description of Windpomp in the novel, but this description – brief as it is – is a description of a dream. The summer of 1960, and the events surrounding Windpomp’s death in particular, “was a dreamed time, and will always remain so for me. Not because the domain of dreams is more beautiful and more easily digestible – but, perhaps, more likely because the dream again and again interpreted reality better than I could do consciously as a mere youngster” (183/174).¹⁴¹ Despite the assertion of the narrator that his dream could interpret reality better than he as child could, any suggestion that the world of dreams is somehow to be privileged over another, more real world is, simultaneously, dispelled (the passage claims at once that the dream could interpret reality better and that the domain of dreams is not more digestible than reality). After all, as indicated earlier, *Kikoejoe* is a novel of dreams and hallucinations. If Windpomp appears, it is in a dream:

My troops wore gumboots – heavy was the tread of the workers’ army! – and with our eventual victory, the writer woman [Olive Schreiner] rose again and so did Windpomp, Boe’s husband, glowing, laughing from the red incinerator of the haystack; brushing glowing straw from his garments, stepping through wisps of red hot hay he strode, with hands full of wheat that dripped, melting through his fingers.

(183/174)¹⁴²

This dream is, in the novel, explicitly related to Pa’s hallucinations – “I melt from the edge of the Camdeboo, I drip, I drip . . .” (113/107)¹⁴³ – and with Fabian’s frightful hallucination at the time when Reitz is setting the haystack alight – “Reitz’s hands were molten scarlet on the pitchfork and his body began to melt and he flowed into his glowing boots . . .” (186/177).¹⁴⁴ This is the only time in the novel that the reader comes, as it were, face-to-face with Windpomp (though Reitz also identifies him as “The one with the missing finger” [185/176]).¹⁴⁵ For the remainder of the novel, Windpomp is neither present (because he is dead and gone) nor absent (because his burning smell pervades everything).

Fabian knows that a haystack can burn for many months: “. . . if hay was properly stacked, as ours was, it could smoulder for six months, charred on the outside, but if you scraped away the crust, it was molten red inside. . . .” (186/177).¹⁴⁶ The smell, as well as the seemingly indefinite burning of the haystack, is emphasised throughout the remainder of the novel (and smells as such, as indicated above, are very much part of the texture of this novel) (cf. 236, 241, 245-246, 290, 291-292, 294/224, 229, 233, 275, 277, 279). The haystack keeps on burning: Fabian imagines Boe waking up at night “and the smell of the burning haystack was everywhere in her blankets, her clothes, in her dreams; she couldn’t shake it off” (236/224).¹⁴⁷ The adult Fabian associates this smell with the refusal to articulate certain things, such as his mother’s relationship with the Veteran and Windpomp’s death in the haystack: “Let it be, surrounding us like the smell of the burning haystack which was always with us those days, everywhere, on the tennis courts, in the swimming pool, in the sitting room and the rondavels, the smell of the things that remained unsaid, of that which was kept silent” (245-246/233).¹⁴⁸

Later, the deep-seated emptiness of Ma’s life, that nothingness which she seeks to deny and on which she attempts to impose order by keeping records and making lists (cf. 93/89), is described as the rending of a cloth which fragments the fictionalised sense constructed in her life, especially when Tant Geert proceeds to disabuse her rather exalted view of the Veteran. In the wake of the use of the metaphor of the rended cloth, the unspeakable nothing is said to appear like the smell of the haystack:

She’d already lost so much, loss and longing had exhausted her, and the Season – the one that was going to mark Hotel Halesowen’s peak of success – was threatening to unravel.

And now she stood there, too tired to fight against the loss of her last stronghold: her major. . . .

Ma stood there, feeling everything around her coming unstitched, in tatters. She gazed deeply into the fortune cup of that summer and everything she had wanted to deny, that she had tried to drown in Oude Meester, that she had tried to pass off with her jokiness, everything went sour and threatening and like the smell of that smouldering lucerne stack, sharp, smoky, with somewhere deep inside it, the stink of a body turning to red ashes.

(294/279)¹⁴⁹

As Ma's attempt to construct sense, her textualising weaving of a cloth, comes apart, it is as if things are not only rent asunder but also take on the smell of the body in the haystack. Ma's entire self-conceptualisation, her prosopopoeia of herself, appears not only as a torn, fabricated mask, but is in its destruction equated with the absolute alterity in the burning bush. The nothingness behind Ma's face-as-mask appears in the nothingness of Windpomp's absence.¹⁵⁰

Windpomp's radical absence is reminiscent of the absolute alterity of God intimated in the theophany of the burning bush described in Exodus, something briefly discussed by Levinas (1996c: 72) in terms of the trace.¹⁵¹ Significantly, the bush in which God appears to Moses without *appearing*, is not consumed and does not burn out (Exodus 3: 2-3) in a way which is reminiscent of the burning haystack in *Kikoejoe*. It is important to note that this theophany in the burning bush has a profoundly *disturbing* effect. The voice from the burning bush promises deliverance (Exodus 3:8) and commands Moses to "bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). But Moses is unwilling to yield to the command from the burning bush, claiming he would not know what to say, that he would not be believed and, finally, that he is not eloquent. As a result, "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses" (Exodus 4:14). God assures Moses that he will speak through Moses and Aaron (Exodus 4:12, 15). But this disturbance – because it is effected by a transcendent entity which is absolutely other, something in a bush which burns without end and without being consumed – disturbs *without* disturbing and, because it is a transcendent experience, cannot be said to have been properly experienced. Levinas (1996c: 72) says, enigmatically, that "The great 'experiences' of our life have properly speaking never been lived". These "great 'experiences'" cannot be lived precisely because they are transcendent in their absolute alterity. God's face remains invisible (or rather: beyond the visible and the invisible), hidden in the burning bush which burns without burning. "The theophany at the bush is the radical incognito of transcendence. Precisely because it *is* an experience of transcendence, it is missed; the experience is not one" (Robbins 1995: 181).

It is for this reason that Windpomp never appears in the novel, that the experience of his death – transcendent, radically other and unspeakably evil as it is – is absent from the text.¹⁵² And it is for this reason that Windpomp remains in the text, a constant presence in its absence, a reminder of the unsayable. As such, Windpomp

exemplifies absolute alterity in *Kikoejoe*, while this novel becomes the work of memory of absolute alterity – a work, moreover, which is necessarily unworked in the face of that absolute alterity. Windpomp's radical absence from the novel – an absence I have claimed is beyond presence and absence – serves as a trace of otherness, just like the burning of a bush which is not burning or the smells emitted from a haystack burning endlessly. This absolute absence evident in the smell of burning flesh *cannot* be ignored and enclosed, and must also disrupt my reading of the novel at this point.

In respect of the fact that Windpomp never appears, one might associate him with the one other 'character' in the novel who never appears, is never made present, and remains an unknown enigma: Kikoejoe itself. Kikoejoe is, indeed, described in the novel. However, as I have indicated, even though he is – quite problematically – associated with Raka, he does remain indeterminable. If doubts remain as to the radical alterity of Kikoejoe, the enigmatic status of Windpomp allows for an allegorical reading of *Kikoejoe* as a novel which stages the problems of representing otherness. The refusal – or, rather, inability – to represent Windpomp makes him emblematic of otherness, and marks the novel as a self-reflexive attempt responsibly to represent otherness. Even when specific others (whether they be human or not) *are* represented, these representations are qualified continually and are, as it were, placed under erasure in being posited in the strangeness of the prosopopoeia employed.

What this implies is that in *Kikoejoe*, as an allegory of the impossibility of representing otherness, not only is a refusal to represent otherness evident, but that refusal is itself interrupted. At the same time that the representation of otherness (as well as its refusal) is interrupted self-consciously, the novel must continue. And the continuation of the novel in the face of the impossibility of its project – the adequate recuperation of the past; the representation of the absent beyond absence – amounts to an interruption of the self-reflexive recognition of its own inadequacy.

In the very act of allegorising the refusal to narrativise and thus represent otherness, that allegory must be untied and rended for the reason that such a refusal (or inability thematised) would amount to a characterisation and thematisation of the other as uncharacterisable and unthematisable. At the same time, simply refusing representation and its concomitant narrativising, presents no option for dealing with the quandary of otherness. Not only would such an outright refusal undo the text

entirely (for then there would be no point in proceeding), but otherness calls for representation, even if this representation consists in the refusal to represent. Not only must the representation of otherness be interrupted, but this representation must be interrupted *continuously*, for which reason the representation must continue. This is to say that the representation of otherness, subject both to a radical impossibility (which may be characterised as ethical) and an urgent demand (which calls for justice and may be said to be political), is caught in the double bind of irony. It is my contention that, in *Kikoejoe*, it is possible to find this double bind enacted.

4.6 Notes

- 1 My reading in this chapter is of the Afrikaans text *Kikoejoe* (van Heerden 1996). However, for the reader's convenience quotations are taken from the English translation by Catherine Knox (van Heerden 1998). Page numbers in brackets without dates in each case refer first to this version of the text and then to the Afrikaans original. The Afrikaans text is provided in endnotes. In cases where comparisons between the Afrikaans text of *Kikoejoe* and other texts (such as Louw's *Raka*) seem important, or where a particular Afrikaans word or phrase seems to have lost a particular effect in Knox's translation, I have in some cases resorted to quoting the Afrikaans and English texts in the body of the text, without making use of endnotes.

The problem of translation is not my main concern here. Nevertheless, because this particular translation does present problems – specifically *vis-à-vis* my reading of *Kikoejoe* – a number of remarks are made in the notes with respect to what I perceive to be inadequacies in the translation. Quite major, substantial differences between the original Afrikaans text and the English translation are apparent. Apart from the problematic rendering of certain terms (which in some instances affect the reading I propose here: I point these out as they arise), a number of excisions have been effected. Thus, much of the Dutch poetry and many of the Afrikaans hymns have been left out in Knox's translation. In chapter 31 the translation merely mentions a Nijhoff poem where it is, nonetheless, cited in the Afrikaans text. But the poem is of importance, at least partly because Pa wants Tant Geert to repeat it (89/84) (it deals with loneliness and the rush of time); 'Halleluja' songs and a stanza from a Psalm have been left out of chapter 32 (91/86) (each is concerned to a greater or lesser extent with the insignificance of the human in the face of the non-human); little of chapter 60 remains after the excision of a whole poem and another stanza (176/167) (these are concerned with the effect of the father on the son, the uncanny repetition of the one in the other: each is striking in its unusual, hallucinatory imagery); in chapter 91 one Dutch stanza from a Nijhoff poem has been translated (264/250) and another excised (266/252) (each deals with the desire for escape, for otherness in travel). The excision of these citations from the translation is problematic because of the preponderance of prosopopoeia in them.

2 Translation modified.

Daardie somer? 'n Ander een? Of herhaal dinge hulself in ieder geval en maak dag en jaartal dus nie eintlik saak nie? Is elke verhaal nie maar 'n terugkeer na 'n vorige nie, 'n voortbouing, 'n aanvulling – of selfs 'n proses van verraad nie?

Dit is tog waarin die geheue uitmunt: verraad teenoor die verlede en hulle met wie jy die verlede gedeel het.

- 3 “meesterlik”; “die werk *as geheel* nie bevredig nie.” All translations are by me unless otherwise indicated in the Bibliography.
- 4 “Dalk was daar vanuit die staanspoor nie 'n oorkoepelende konsep wat die oordad aan elemente moes bind nie.”
- 5 “hoe verder die verhaal ontwikkel, hoe meer breek dit oop in los brokkies. Trouens, die laaste aantal hoofstukke bewéég nie, en die herhalings en las- en stopwerk laat die indruk dat die skrywer self nie meer mooi weet hoe om sy verhaal af te sluit nie.”
- 6 “die een of ander opskudding of klimaktiese punt – al is dit dan 'n anti-klimaks – waarnatoe alles beweeg”
- 7 “gebrek aan tematiese afronding”
- 8 “Sy jongste boek wek die vermoede dat hy vir die groter visie van die langer prosa meer dissipline nodig het.”
- 9 Like Pakendorf, Kannemeyer (1997: 16) also expresses his disapproval with regard to the novel as whole. Interestingly, like Pakendorf he does so explicitly in terms of teleology: “. . . the novel is constructed of tableaux without underlying motifs binding the events and steering them into a particular direction” [die roman word opgebou uit tablo's sonder dat onderliggende motiewe die gebeure verbind en in 'n bepaalde koers stuur]. And Burger (1996: 10) complains that “Unfortunately it sometimes feels as if the comical incidents have been added merely for the sake of effect, while other passages leave the reader with the feeling that they have been included to lend the novel substance” [Ongelukkig voel dit soms asof die komiese insidente bloot ter wille van effek bygevoeg is, terwyl ander gedeeltes die leser met die gevoel laat dat dit ingesluit is om die roman bietjie lyf te gee]. The Afrikaans word used by Burger and rendered here as “substance” (“lyf te gee”), it may be noted, is telling: literally, it means “to give body”. The point I am making is that such criticism of the perceived fragmentariness of *Kikoejoe* misses the point for the reason that the fragmentariness, precisely, desubstantialises the novel and its content. *Kikoejoe* renders problematic the very notion that otherness can be ‘embodied’.

- 10 This attempt to gather the fragmentary and thematise it is also evident in my chapter on *Kikoejoe*, as graphically illustrated by the numerous lists it contains. These lists (of instances of prosopopoeia or catachresis, of names for Fabian, of self-reflexive passages etc.), like the lists made by Ma (cf. 93/89) are futile attempts at imposing order onto the text of this novel.
- 11 For a discussion of the novel as characterised by this kind of sustained narrative and its tendency towards the coherence of conceptuality, see Brink (1998: 14, 18). See also Marais (1996) for a discussion of the protocols of the novel and its implication in both the Enlightenment and Imperialist projects.
- 12 “Soos ek gesê het, navorsing is ’n vreemde ding. Dit lei jou partykeer waar jy nie gelei wil wees nie. Maar dit, Fabian, is die opwinding van navorsing. Jy dink nog een oomblik dat een gelyk is aan een, en skielik staan daar drie voor jou.”
- 13 “Tant Geertruida is lief om dinge altyd in dieselfde volgorde te doen. ‘Dis omdat sy genealoog is,’ sê Ma. ‘Dis presisie-navorsing . . .’”
- 14 Of course, my hypothesis that the text ‘just is’ fragmentary already gives it sense, interrupts its fragmentation by making it whole. This determination of the text as fragmentary must itself be interrupted permanently while being posited. As such, this note is an attempt to interrupt the argument of this chapter. Even though I wish to respect the sheer fragmentariness of this text, I cannot but (attempt to) explain it.
 Another problem I face in this chapter is that I attribute – and thus explain – the fragmentariness of the text in terms of the absolutely other (*Kikoejoe*, *Windpomp*), thus reducing its otherness by claiming it to be a fundamental, guiding principle in the structure of the novel. The essentially fragmentary (the absolutely other) is used to construct a wholeness out of the text. This reduces the otherness both of the text and of the absolutely other. But my argument is that such reduction is inevitable and must be interrupted continually, that is, ironically – even as it occurs. See Chapter 3 (3.2.3) for a discussion of this point in terms of Levinas’s distinction between the Saying and the Said.
- 15 This is not meant to be a full list of possible determinations of *Kikoejoe* in the novel itself. Other references in the novel to *Kikoejoe* (or the Beast, the Thing) could be found and listed. However, it is part of my purpose *not* to provide such an exhaustive list. For such a list would merely strengthen the illusion that it is possible to determine and thus to know *Kikoejoe*. I wish here merely to insist on the diffuseness of *Kikoejoe*.
- 16 In this Burger presumably follows a remark made by the Veteran (22/21).

- 17 “half-mens, half orang”. An important precursor of *Kikoejoe* might be Nadine Gordimer’s novella *Something Out There* (1984: 117-203). In this text, white suburbia is (or imagines being) terrorised by a creature “of the ape family” (1984: 119). The creature, which turns out to have been a runaway baboon rather than a hominid (cf.199-200), comes to stand for the collective fear of Africa of white people, especially as the acts of the marauding animal are juxtaposed with the carefully executed sabotage by a band of guerrillas of a power station.
- 18 Almal weet van die Dier, maar dit was die eerste keer dat ons hom gesien het. Hy is baie skaam, laat nooit volle spore nie, maar as jy die veld kan lees, sien jy die halfmane van vreemde palms, die hakskeenrand van ’n onbekende poot, die kneukelmerke van ’n halfmens
Die hotelkelners noem die Dier Kikoejoe, want sommige oggende is daar rondom die verste rondawels happe uit die grasperk geruk. Die kikoejoeranke lê losgeskeur en halfgevreet onder die bome verstrooi.
- 19 “[Die blouape] weet nie of hulle mens of dier ruik nie”.
- 20 “Tyd kom druk teen haar aan, wil haar versmoor, haar teen die bed terugdruk. Sy voel hoe sy, sittende, stoei teen ’n swaar liggaam wat oor haar hyg en iets met haar wil doen. Sy weet net nie wat nie. Dit druk teen haar en het geen naam nie. Dit het ’n asem, bedompig oor haar wang.”
- 21 “Dan is sy op die kikoejoe en sy is vry.”
- 22 I discuss the role of catachresis and prosopopoeia in the novel in greater detail below (4.4).
- 23 “. . . maar toe sy weg is, begin sy asem in en uit oor sy tong gly, asof dit ’n fisieke ding is”
- 24 Translation modified. “Sy is verras oor sy maer, seningrige lyf en die are wat soos *slange* oor sy arms, bene en onderlyf kartel. Dit lyk, in die maanlig, soos swart *wurms* wat aan hom *vreet*. Sy gril toe hy sy lyf lig en sy die blink voëlkop sien. . . .”
- 25 Translation modified.
Pa knip sy oë en hy is in ’n boot op Mouillepunt se see. Die boot neem hom strome en winde in wat ons nie ken nie. Dit ruk en dobber en gly op onstuimige branders. Seebamboese bondel om die boot en Pa is nie alleen in die boot nie. Die lyf val teen hom aan soos die see die bootjie rondruk en dis hy of Pa. Hulle stoei en Pa voel bedompige hare teen sy gesig skuur, die sterk spierlyf wat teen hom pomp en hy voel die haarlose pensvel en die erekte piel. Die duiwelspote trap oor Pa se kaal

voete en hy voel hy word oorweldig. Dit is asof die asem oor hom kom en hom bedwelm. Sy lug opvreet.

The word 'prick' is probably a more adequate rendition of 'piel', which seems coarser than the rather clinical 'penis'. Knox herself elsewhere uses 'prick' to render 'piel'. The Afrikaans "Só dik is sy piel" (273) becomes "That's how thick his prick is" (288).

26 Translation modified.

Die Dier grom liggies as die honde sy geil reuk teen die rivierbosse se takke teëkom, hul *hare op hul rûe orent staan*, en hulle *tjankend terughol* na die grasperke tussen die groothuis en die rondawels. . . .

Sy pie ruik soos niks anders op aarde nie. Dit gee stoom af en die geur dryf deur die nag, verby die terras met die omgekeerde, slapende stoele, verby die motte wat om die stoepligte dwarrel, verby die stadshonde *wat onder die motors inkruip en saggies tjank*.

Dit dryf af rivier toe en die slapende trop blouape in die doringbome roer *onrustig*. Hulle begin *skellend op en af spring* en aan *die takke ruk*. Sommige *verloor hul balans, val* op die fluitjiesriet en begin *verward* in die donker *heen en weer* hol, teen mekaar *bots, neerval* en *skarrelend padgee*.

Ek *vlug* uit my bed. . . .

27 Translation modified. Where the Afrikaans passage quite strongly suggests a *sense* of otherness, this is attenuated in the translation by Knox.

Hy kyk op na die sterre wat soos krummels oor die uitspannel uitgestrooi lê en hy lig sy neus. Is daar reën te ruik? Is daar 'n *ander* geur op die aandluggie, iets *anders* as die vae reuk van mis van die krale af, die grasgeur uit die kikoejoe wat opstyg soos die eerste dou uitsif? Is daar 'n *ander* reuk as dié van die nat sandbanke van die rivier en die perskebome agter die rondawels?

Hierdie tyd van die aand kom die dik, klam geur van seep en stoom van die ablusieblokke na die terras opgewaai, die geur van Jeyes Fluid en sjampoe en naskeermiddel. Maar daar is iets *anders* wat Reuben nie kan plaas nie. Dit is 'n geur wat terseldertyd vreemd én bekend is. Hy lig sy arm en ruik ingedagte aan sy oksel – Ma is baie streng en sorg dat al die kelners maandeliks 'n rolletjie Mum kry. Nee, dit is nie hy nie, *alhoewel hy iets van homself in die geur herken*.

28 At least one critic (de Waal 1998: 31) has noted the prevalence of "the vivid smells that pervade" this novel. Smells, indeed, are emphasised throughout the novel and come to be a marker of otherness in the all-pervasive smell of Windpomp's burning corpse (see note 100).

29 "gif-oog"

Dit is in 'n oorgeërfde, onbewuste deel van die psige wat die Dier skuil – kragte waarvan min te ken is. . . . Die geskiedenis wat die volwasse Fabian probeer oproep, is 'n poging om dit wat weggesteek is, die Dier, te leer ken. Hy het die dwang op hom om die Dier te tem, deur sy storie, sy geskiedenis, te vertel.

Monsters word op sielkundige vlak beskou as baie diep, basiese kragte wat soos 'n vulkaan tot uitbarsting kom in 'n monsteragtige daad. In die geval van *Kikoejoe* is die monsteragtige daad die verkragting van die [*sic*] Tsitsi, oom Boeta se jong, swart huishulp. Die Dier is verantwoordelik hiervoor, dié Dier wat in die onbewuste van elkeen op die plaas is.

It is noteworthy that Burger mentions the monstrous rape of Tsitsi but ignores the killing of Windpomp. In fact, most reviewers do not refer to Windpomp's plight at all. This is strange as this event is surely, with the rape of Tsitsi, the central calamity 'in' the novel. As far as I have been able to determine, apart from Ampie Coetzee (1997: 22), who describes the circumstances of what happens to Windpomp in some detail, only two other reviewers go as far as even *mentioning* Windpomp (HE 1998: 72; Francken 1998: 587).

- 31 This is a questionable assertion for the reason that it makes Kikoejoe subject to the human, whether the human is defined in terms of the unconscious or not. Instead, it is my argument that Kikoejoe is radically *exterior* and, as such, disturbs the order of the human same. Burger's statement quoted above that the Beast is "present in the unconscious of each person on the farm" also involves an interiorisation of Kikoejoe which I would like to avoid. While it is, indeed, possible (even plausible) that Kikoejoe is present in the unconscious of each person on the farm, something which might be suggested in the novel itself (though, as I have indicated, the novel also in some passages suggests that the Beast is a very concrete apeman, while in others it would seem it is something non-human or super-human, such as God or time, and so forth), this would be to determine and thus *contain* Kikoejoe. But this is, precisely, impossible, as I am arguing.

- 32 For this reason I shall not be elaborating on the validity or otherwise of such an approach to this particular text. Nonetheless, the novel itself does present a psychoanalytic dimension (and a rather jaundiced one) in the shape of Dr Clark, the psychiatrist treating Pa for depression. Dr Clark quite explicitly relates story-telling to the talking cure of therapy (149/141). Van Heerden himself makes this link in an interview (de Waal 1998: 31). Burger's (1997: 38) later introduction in psychoanalytic terms of the problematic relationship between the patriarch and his son on the one hand, and the patriarch and his land on the other, seems a potentially highly fecund way of dealing with the text, in particular *vis-à-vis* the farm novel or *plaasroman* (cf. also Coetzee 1997: 22; Francken 1998: 587). I do not focus on the relation between *Kikoejoe* and the farm novel, even though that relation is suggested in the novel (for instance in the passages dealing with Olive Schreiner and her *The*

Story of an African Farm). Van Heerden (de Waal 1998: 31) pertinently links the passages dealing with Schreiner to his mythologising of landscape: he and Schreiner share the Karoo, and “the resurrection of Olive” as “the resurrection of the imagination” is therefore ineluctably an aspect of the mythologising of the Karoo and its landscape (see also note 33; for a more detailed consideration of the relationship with the land, see my discussion of Matlou’s *Life at Home* in terms of the farm novel). This, in turn, van Heerden relates to his fictional *modus operandi*: “. . . I left the Karoo when I was 14 and it’s mythologised in my mind. Maybe that’s part of my way of mythologising characters. . . . [Good literature] creates myths, it’s a way of mythologising our existence”. One might argue that this mythologising of the land and of characters is problematic, in particular because van Heerden appears in this way to feed attempts to name and represent the other.

- 33 “Het mythische niveau is vooral daar bereikt waar de bewoners van Soebatsfontein voelen dat er krachten zijn die groter zijn dan zichzelf en die zij niet vermogen te kennen. Die krachten zijn geïncarneerd in het legendarische Dier dat Kikoejoe of Steppewolf . . . wordt genoemd.”

As I noted above (note 32), the importance of the mythological is emphasised by van Heerden in an interview (de Waal 1998: 31). The mythological is overtly related by van Heerden to the Karoo landscape which forms the setting of so much of his work. Of course, the Thing is towards the end of the novel related to the mythologising, and consequently to the memorising, of evil in the form of the dragon (292/277). Any attempt finally to determine Kikoejoe must fail in the face of the refractoriness of evil, just like the hunting expeditions of the Veteran and Fabian are doomed to failure: “I should have withdrawn myself, yes, because after all evil cannot be known” (292/277 [Translation modified. “Ek moes my onttrek het, ja, want die boosheid is tog nie te ken nie”]). This last statement of Fabian’s is problematic in that it serves to suggest quite explicitly that what defines evil is that it cannot be known, which is to say that evil is that which cannot be known. Paradoxically, the narrator of *Kikoejoe* here claims that evil can be known in not being known.

- 34 See notes 32 and 33.

- 35 It should be noted that few if any of the English or Dutch reviews of *Kikoejoe* that I have come across make the link with *Raka*.

- 36 “‘Dit is die vroue wat hom eerste gewaar het,’ sê Ma oor die Veteraan se geparadeerdery”; “Die vroue het hom die eerste gewaar/in die loom namiddag”.

- 37 “half-mens, half-orang”

- 38 I discuss this and provide more extensive references below, in my consideration of prosopopoeia in *Kikoejoe*.

- 39 Apart from the importance of the circular motif in *Raka*, circularity itself has been shown to be an important structural principle of the poem. Grové (1966: 29) argues that “the question is whether this victory [of Raka over Koki] should not be seen as part of a larger law: that of a neverending process of cultural flowering and destruction” (“die vraag is of hierdie oorwinning nie gesien moet word as onderdeel van ’n groter wetmatigheid nie: dié van ’n nimmereindigende proses van kultuurbloei en -ondergang”). This circularity might, in fact, according to Burger (1997: 36) explain the title of *Kikoejoe*, as “The reference to a kind of grass which grows in summer and is dead in winter, might symbolically indicate the continual, cyclical return of the monster, generation after generation, just as that summer season also keeps turning ‘round and round’ Fabian’s memory” (“Die verwysing na ’n grassoort wat in die somer groei en in die winter dood is, kan simbolies dui op die voortdurende, sikliese terugkeer van die monster, geslag na geslag, soos daardie somerseisoen ook ‘al om en om’ in Fabian se geheue bly draai”). This would link *Kikoejoe* and *Raka* even more closely.
- 40 “Sentraal in die werk as dramatiese spanningstuk staan . . . die teenstelling Koki-Raka. Dis ’n teenstelling wat die hele gang van die verhaal beheers.”
- 41 “Koki is die geestelike leier wat begaan is oor die moontlike verlore gaan van ’n kosbare besit. . . .”
- 42 “Raka is die ene brute liggaamlike krag”
- 43 “Teenoor die natuurwese Raka is Koki die kultuurmens. . . .”
- 44 “liggaam-gees, drif-denke, instink-rede, chaos-orde”
- 45 “Teen so ’n mag is die kultuurgemeenskap alleen bestand as ’n kultuurbesef (bv. deur die waaksaamheid en optrede van die streng geestelike aristokaat) in sy midde lewend gehou kan word.
“Basies het ons hier dus ’n spanning tussen natuur en kultuur, en die kultuurgemeenskap is – soos ons hier duidelik sien – tot ondergang gedoem sodra Raka-waardes van ’n bloot liggaamlike bestaan vir hom aanneemlik begin word.”
- 46 See Olivier (1992: 184-218) for a consideration of Louw’s view of the role of the intellectual as spiritual aristocrat. See also Steyn (1998: 1044) for Louw’s view (expressed in 1968) of the Afrikaner nation in terms of “the French nobility, the entire European nobility” (“die Franse adel, die hele Europese adel”). In the same way as the nobility in Europe was “swallowed by the peasant population” (“opgegaan het in die landsbevolking”), the Afrikaner nation is in danger of being swallowed by “the great mass of black people” (“die groot massa swart mense”). This would enable one to link the ‘noble’ Koki also to the ‘noble’ Afrikaner nation as such.
- 47 “vertolking wat hy uit ’n gesprek met die digter afgelei het”

- 48 “‘Hy (nl. Van Wyk Louw) het gewys op die geestelike verwildering van ’n kultuurgroep wat hom *te* geredelik oopstel vir vreemde invloede.’ As tweede verklaring: ‘die biologiese feit dat die vergeestelike mens wat op ’n hoër kultuurtrap staan, in die algemeen veel stadiger aanwas as die minder bevoorregte, soms minder intelligente, maar meesal sinnelike natuurmens, en dat hierdie proses op die lange duur ’n groot bedreiging vir die geestelike beskawing van die Westerse mens kan beteken.’” See also Steyn (1998: 323).
- 49 In this regard Olivier (cf. 1992: 45ff.) notes N. P. van Wyk Louw’s anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sympathies in the 1930s (the years just prior to the publication of *Raka* in 1941). See also Steyn (1998: 126-129, 250-251). Steyn defends Louw by emphasising that Louw’s anti-Jewish remarks were made in private letters.
- 50 “vertroebelend werk”
- 51 “problematies”; “dit [is] reeds histories ’n verklaarde simbool”
- 52 “Ek eet my hoed op as Heathcote MacKenzie sy regte naam is.”
- 53 Translation modified. “Die Veteraan het met sy aankoms op Soebatsfontein homself *voorgestel* as ‘Heathcote MacKenzie Esquire OBE, Veteraan El Alamein.’ The translation necessarily loses the ambivalence of the Afrikaans word “voorgestel”, which could mean either “introduced” or “(re)presented”, the latter suggesting a degree of falsehood lacking in the former.
- 54 “Hy het na die son opgekyk en *homself daaraan herinner* dat hy ’n veteraan van die woestyn is. . . . ‘Heathcote MacKenzie,’ het hy saggies *geoefen*. ‘Heathcote MacKenzie.’”
- 55 Elkeen het ’n ander naam vir ons plek. Die Veteraan praat van die Guest Farm. . . . Ma noem die plek Hotel Halesowen. . . .
 Juffrou Marge Bruwer, tant Geertruida se vriendin wat in die biblioteek werk, noem ons plek ’n ‘vakansieplaas’. . . .
 Tant Geertruida praat van ‘The Farm’ of ‘De Boerderij’, afhangend van watter stad vars in haar geheue is. . . .
 Pa noem die plek Soebatsfontein, of Moordenaarskaroo, of, as die politiek hom terneergedruk maak: Kafferland. As hy pas een van Zane Grey se cowboyboekies verslind het, praat hy van Dodge City.
- 56 “Ma roep agter Reuben aan. ‘Jack! Waarnatoe loop jy nou, my jong? Jack!’ Jack is die naam wat witmense vir swart mans gebruik. Waarom Ma nou besluit het om vir Reuben Jack te noem, weet ek nie.”
- 57 Daardie honger man, hy met die tande so wit soos die doringhout wat hy kloof, kan my eet. Hy kan in my byt asof ek waatlemoen is, tot in die binneste soet. Daar waar dit die rooiste is,

daar, ja daar, moet hy my eet, die honger man, die skinkbordman, die kikoejoeman, die . . .

Sy prewel name vir hom; haar eie woorde waarmee sy hom liefkoos.

This passage is striking in its use of prosopopoeia: names are given to an absent one, Reuben, who is absent on different levels. Apart from being absent to the reader, the 'separation of the selves' is enacted in that Tsitsi and Reuben have no means of access to each other because of Tant Retha and Oom Boeta, who jealously guard Tsitsi (cf. 238/226). It might be noted parenthetically that it would be possible, though I have not done so here, to read this separation in terms of the interplay of allegory and irony, strikingly reminiscent as it is of the distance between the lovers in Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme* which, to de Man, thematises allegorically "The myth ... of the unovercomable distance which must always prevail between the selves" (1983: 228).

The names given in this passage, moreover, operate in terms of catachresis. Not only is Reuben linked to the Beast ("the kikuyu man"), but sexual intercourse is described in terms of the body as fruit. If Reuben is "a hungry man", then his hunger will be sated in eating the watermelon which is Tsitsi. The intimate nature of the link between catachresis and prosopopoeia, discussed in Chapter 3 (3.3.2), is apparent here.

A problematic aspect of this particular passage – also in evidence throughout *Kikoejoe* (see notes 125 and 134-137 for further examples) – is that the narrator, as I put it above, *attributes* thoughts to Tsitsi. He imagines her imagining Reuben's desire for her, and later goes so far as extensively to imagine Reuben's imagining his and Tsitsi's passionate intercourse (cf. 234ff./222ff.). As we saw at the start of this chapter, the narrator explicitly casts doubt on the veracity of his memories, thus implicitly questioning and relativising his ability to penetrate the thoughts of others (rather than claiming to be able to do so): this is an avowedly *non*-omniscient narrator. Yet the narrator presumes to enter the thoughts of 'his' characters in the way omniscient narrators have traditionally done, using free indirect discourse. And as J. M. Coetzee (1988b: 123) has pointed out, "The key characteristic of free indirect speech is that the presence of a narrating intelligence is not asserted: the narrator slips behind or into the intelligence of the character". Clearly, within the ambit of *Kikoejoe*, as a text asserting its own lack of dependability *vis-à-vis* the past – and the others of the past – such a move would seem to counteract the scepticism of the novel with regard to itself, and might subvert its self-subvertive claims. Alternatively, one might argue that the narrator attempts to relativise his attribution of thought as well as speech in *Kikoejoe* by self-reflexively drawing attention to it, as well as by explicitly and continuously ironising it with reference to the avowed inadequacy of his narrative to encapsulate the past: after all, the entire novel is an attribution of speech and thought to others. It is difficult to see how fiction could be produced without such attribution. My point in this chapter is precisely that, while this attribution – indeed, *embodiment* – does occur, and while the novel is thus a prosopopoeia which gives face/s to what has none (*Kikoejoe*;

individual characters, the past), such prosopopoeia is ironised in being interrupted continuously (for instance, by means of the kind of editorial interjections noted at the start of this chapter), if perhaps not consistently and at all levels (see note 125). See in particular Cosser (1992, 1993) for a consideration of free indirect discourse (including free indirect thought and speech) within the South African context.

- 58 Knox leaves the Afrikaans word untranslated: “pupiltjie”.
- 59 This is rendered as “corporal” (cf. 22, 76) or “corporaltjie” (cf. 46, 76) in Knox’s translation. The Afrikaans is “korporaaltjie” (cf. 21, 43, 71). On at least one occasion the Veteran does call Fabian “corporal” (131/124), “korporaal” in Afrikaans. The Afrikaans “Werda, korporaaltjie!” (171) is rendered only as “Who goes there?” (180).
- 60 This is rendered as “soldier” (121) and “corporal” (131) in Knox’s translation. The Afrikaans is “soldaatjie” (115, 124).
- 61 This is rendered as “discipeltjie” (cf. 71) by Knox.
- 62 This is rendered as “big boy” in Knox’s translation (157). The Afrikaans is “rammetjie” (149).
- 63 This is rendered as “little champ” in Knox’s translation (136). The Afrikaans is “resiesperdjie” (129).
- 64 Prosopopoeia may further be linked to the proper name as that which survives death or, at least, outlives that to which it refers, thus enabling it to survive. As Derrida (1992: 425, 432) puts it,

The name calls beyond presence, phenomenon, light, beyond the day, beyond the theater. It keeps . . . what is no longer present, the invisible: what from now on will no longer see the light of day. . . . I am not my name. One might as well say that I should be able to survive it. But firstly it is destined to survive me. In this way it announces my death.

I discuss the importance of prosopopoeia in *Kikoejoe* in more detail in the next section (4.4).

- 65 See the discussion by Robbins (1995: 179-182) in the context of the theophany of the burning bush. I elaborate on this encounter *vis-à-vis* the encounter with otherness in *Kikoejoe*, specifically as exemplified by the figure of Windpomp, at the end of this chapter (4.5).
- 66 One might note that ‘Kikoejoe’ is, strictly speaking, not a proper name at all. This is evident from the fact that it is translated by Knox as ‘Kikuyu’. The word Kikoejoe might thus be said *not* to name: it possibly constitutes an

attempt on the part of the narrator (and author) not to determine whatever it is that Kikoejoe signifies. I use the word 'Kikoejoe' to preserve a degree of its otherness in an English discussion of an Afrikaans text, although it should be noted that such otherness would of course not be visible in the Afrikaans text: there the otherness of the designation 'Kikoejoe' would lie in the fact that it is a name which is not a name (as confirmed by the translator's decision to translate it). See Derrida (1985) for a consideration of the untranslatability of the name. See also note 131.

- 67 The phrase 'invention of the other' is Derrida's (cf. 1992: 335, 341ff.).
- 68 "deur die oë van 'n kind". Van Heerden refers, among other novels, to Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995) which makes use of the same basic narrative technique: that of a child's narrative interspersed with that of the child as adult.
- 69 "tipe ontginning van die verlede". See van Heerden (1992) for an elaboration of his view of the writer as historiographer.
- 70 See note 13, above.
- 71 Translation modified.

. . . hy begin bewe van ingehoue frustrasie en kry Oupa se testament uit, en Ma moet vir tant Geert roep om familiesake te kom bespreek, die ingewikkelde trust en die familieplaas. . . . Hoe, vra Pa vir tant Geert, gaan ons die trust tot niet kry?

[Almal] is deel van die ingewikkelde spel wat Oupa vanuit die graf met sy afstammeling speel.

'Maar ek wil uit!' roep Pa. 'Ek wil vry wees!'

- 72 On this association, see further notes 39 and 92.
- 73 "Almal is weg en stil, en ek het niemand by wie ek my feite kan kontroleer nie. Dit is alles weggeveeg, verby, asof dit nooit bestaan het nie. Die rondawels is murasies, verniel deur kikoejoeranke, die weer en die tyd."
- 74 "Ek voel klaarblyklik 'n verpligting om die meeste van my karakters tot aan hul einde te bring!"
- 75 That this novel is quasi-autobiographical is something noted by more than one reviewer (cf. Kannemeyer 1997: 16; Smuts 1996: 27), and by van Heerden himself (de Waal 1998: 31): "The novel's fibre is autobiographical but its details are not".
- 76 Translation modified.

En soos die geval is by so baie van die karakters in my verhaal, sou ek – in alle regverdigheid – graag ook my eie dood wou beskryf. . . .

My eie? Nou ja, dit is tog onmoontlik om jou eie dood vooraf op te voer, daarom het ek die een soort verhaal gekies waar jy nie onder die verpligting is om dit te doen nie – die outobiografie. Want dit is immers die genre waarin die hoofkarakter lewend anderkant kan uitstap, sy dit dan nie ongeskonde nie.

En om só te vertel, is tog ook 'n manier van sterf, nie waar nie? Die hand aan sigself slaan.

- 77 I am, of course, aware of the so-called 'de Man controversy': the revelations that de Man wrote for anti-Semitic Belgian newspapers during the Second World War, and the subsequent suggestions that de Man's critical *modus operandi* was some or other subliminal attempt to exculpate himself (or make it impossible to attribute guilt). This is not the place to enter into a detailed consideration of these issues (see Hamacher *et. al.* 1989). But, within the South African context, Ngwenya's (1989) dismissal of de Man's approach to autobiography must be mentioned. This dismissal seems to be based on a misreading of de Man: he never claims that autobiography is impossible or that it is somehow indistinguishable from fiction, "that the writer of autobiography has no control over the material which constitutes his life", as Ngwenya claims he does (1989: 67). Nowhere does de Man assert that autobiographers conceive of themselves "as the passive agents of language" or as being "wholly created by language" (1989: 68). On this point, see also Miller (1987: 9-10; 41-59). See also Chapter 1, note 6.
- 78 The next pages might seem rather long-winded to some readers, as I spend the remainder of the section citing instances of prosopopoeia in *Kikoejoe* in order to confirm the preponderance of this trope in the novel, as well as to emphasise its hallucinatory effect. The main points are summarised in the last two pages of the section. Readers who find themselves in agreement with these points are advised to proceed to this summary (pp. 130-132).
- 79 "Lank en swart staan hy daar, 'n vlermuis op sy agterpote . . ." (185). Knox renders this as "Tall and black he stood there, an upright bat" (195), which does not quite as strongly suggest the hallucinatory nature of the Afrikaans description of "a bat on its hindlegs".
- 80 Translation modified. "Reuben [het] met sy blink skinkbord soos 'n skildwag op die rand van die terras kom staan . . ."
- 81 "Partykeer lyk jy vir my soos 'n hotnotsgot wat sy pootjies vryf en almal dophou."
- 82 This is lost in Knox's translation. She renders the Afrikaans "seil" (77) (which may be used to describe the movement of a snake) as "crawled" and "slid" (82) and as "slither" and "gliding" (149). But Fabian is explicitly related

to a snake (149/141). A more adequate rendition of 'seil' would therefore be the verb 'snake' (or possibly 'glide').

- 83 Translation modified. "Met maanhare wit in die wind. Met 'n stert wat vloei op die bries. Kop hoog vorentoe. Nek gebeitel in vaart. Dik groen drolle borrelend uit die hol wanneer die trein volspoed bereik teen die groen kronkelsoom van die rivier." Knox's translation clearly relates this description to Valour (for instance in rendering "hol" as "arse"), while the Afrikaans passage is rather more ambiguous and may arguably be related to both the horse and the train. Perhaps inevitably, in Knox's translation many catachreses (with their prosopopeic effects) are lost.
- 84 Translation modified. "Dan vinnig, met 'n vies gesig en 'n frons op sy haastige voorkop, kom die trein om die Dinamietkrans geseil"
- 85 "Amsterdam het soveel gesigte"
- 86 "Die honger aarde suip."
- 87 Translation modified. "Hulle het saam gestaan en kyk na die bruin vlakke wat in die hitte bibber, die plasse lugspieëling wat in die laagtes dryf, en die trein se spore wat noutrek tot 'n enkele blink oog in die verte." Apart from the landscape being described by means of prosopopoeia in this passage, the train too comes alive. Rather than the more usual 'treinspore' (railway tracks), the phrase 'trein se spore' (train's tracks) is used, suggesting that the train is an animal with tracks.
- 88 "die rûe van heuwels [vlieg] soos die bruin boude van merries saam met hom [Valour]"
- 89 "strek tot by die nors frons van die Dinamietkrans verby"
- 90 Translation modified. "Almal wag op die eerste koel stote van die aandwind, wag dat die Melkweg aanstons helder soos 'n halssnoer oor die swart hals van die nag sal kom lê." The Afrikaans "hals" is ambiguous (meaning either 'throat' or 'neck'). Knox uses "breath" to render "stote", which intensifies the degree of prosopopoeia in the description of the night. However, seeing that this description is followed by Willempie and Fabian 'pulling their wires' ("draadtrek" [185] – masturbating), the sexual connotation of 'stoot' (Afrikaans slang for sexual intercourse) is lost. She also renders "swart" as "dark", which might be more adequately rendered as black (especially given the prominence of the discourses of racism and apartheid in the novel).
- 91 "Kaffers smelt in die landskap in, 'sê Ma altyd"
- 92 "die mens is gras". Knox renders this as "man was made of dust", but it may be important to maintain the reference to grass, not only because of the

Biblical phrasing but because kikuyu is a type of grass. This would serve to strengthen the suggestion that the Beast Kikuyu is time itself.

93 Translation modified. “Van die treine wat soos ritssluiters oor die swart bors van die land beweeg, sal hy haar vertel.”

94 Translation modified. “Soebatsfontein,’ brom Pa. ‘God-se-oog. Verneukpan. Putsonderwater. Genadeloosrant. Pynlikheid. Perdevreklaagte”. The English translation inserts the following clause which does not occur in *Kikoejoe*: “and then rattled off more of his favourite place-names”.

This is one arbitrary example among many of Pa’s addressing the land in this way. See Knox’s useful list of literal translations of Afrikaans place names (313).

95 Translation modified. “Om hulle strek die Karoonag eindeloos . . . , die horison wat steeds wyk, die einder waarvan Pa afdrup soos hy landskap word en tollend op die kamervloer staan en stamelend verduidelik: ‘Ek smelt van die Kamdeboo se rand af, ek drup, ek drup’”

96 Translation modified. “‘Liegdamme,’ noem Pa die mirages wat om ons *dans*. ‘God-oog,’ sê hy en wys op na die son. ‘Die *duiwel* se *vuis*,’ wys hy na ’n klipkoppie met ’n knoets klip bo-op”.

97 Translation modified.

En ek staan agter haar, ongesiens, op pad om uit te glip na die Veteraan sodat ons die tog Dinamietkrans toe kan begin. Ek staan daar soos ’n kind wat afloer in die oog van ’n boorgat en diep daar onder swart water en paddas sien roer, en ongerus in die son sal uittrek saam met die Veteraan, met iewers in my ’n bewusheid dat dit spel is, maar ook nie spel nie – dat ons ’n vreemde land instap, een wat nie gedoop kan word met een van Pa se name nie: Noupoort, Bitterfontein, Godverlaat, Bloedson, Kwelkaroo . . .

98 Translation modified. “‘Die land is aan die doodgaan,’ sê Pa aan Ma. . . . Later sê Ma: ‘n Mens sal nie dink die land het so ’n slegte asem gekry nie’”.

99 Translation modified. “die dood se slegte asem, oral”

100 It is as if all these various smells are concentrated into that “other smell” (“ander geur”) (142/135; translation modified) which accompanies the arrival of Verwoerd and the devastating consequences of that arrival. See note 28.

101 Knox translates “die blink neus” (9-10) as “the shiny bonnet” (10) of the Borgward. This rendition loses the prosopopeic effect of the Afrikaans.

- 102 This is rendered as “creaking” by Knox, which loses not only the catachrestic suggestion that the doors are somehow alive, but also a certain onomatopoeic effect.
- 103 Knox correctly renders “tafelpote” as “table legs”. Nonetheless, this translation does not connote bestiality (as the Afrikaans does).
- 104 Knox renders the Afrikaans “bibber” as “bobbed”. This refers to the movement of the balloons, as the Afrikaans also does. But the prosopopeic suggestion that the balloons are alive and are experiencing cold (or heat) is lost in translation (cf. 42/40).
- 105 The Afrikaans “sing” is rendered as “tinkled” by Knox (105). The prosopopeia is lost in her translation.
- 106 “grommend . . . brom”. The latter word is not rendered by Knox.
- 107 “Toe *roggel* die Lister soos hy maak die oomblik voordat hy sy laaste *sluk* diesel vat.”
- 108 “sing”, “kla”, “vae geroggel”. Knox renders “dreun” – which describes the sound emitted by the geyser without suggesting that it is alive – by “groaned” (213/203) which most certainly enhances the prosopopeic effect.
- 109 “[het] die donkie na sy hand geleer”
- 110 “met sy byl [kloof Reuben] die wit *vleis* van die doringhout”. The second instance cited refers to the “white flesh of the thorn wood” (“die witvleis van die doringhout”), rendered as “white thorn-wood” by Knox.
- 111 Translation modified. “Agter hom *vreet* die rooi *keel* die doringstompie in ’n oogwink op. Die groot tenk *sidder* en die pype wat teen die mure *afloop*, tril en *kreun*. Deur die *litte* van die *pypelmoë* om die mure se hoeke syfer stoomwater.”
- 112 Translation modified. “‘Ek stook vir Antjie Provee dat sy steun vanaand!’ lag Reuben.”
- 113 “Die stoomwater spat uit die aflatpyp, dit spuit in ’n boog en vat soos ’n witwarm hand ’n handvol wind.”
- 114 “Die Ding het op sy rug omgerol, en op dieselfde oomblik dat die huilende wyfie-aap wegrol, haar voete vind en begin hardloop, het die wit saad uit sy piel gespuit, ruk-ruk in lang *boogstrale* oor sy penshare en die warm riviersand.”
- 115 “Willempie wen: sy blink saad spu met ’n *boog* tot in die Vis se aandwater.”

- 116 “draadtrek”. This is rendered by Knox as “masturbating”.
- 117 “akkedis”, “spinnepobene”
- 118 “Twee mans staan en pomp die koekepan. Hulle kom soos ’n gogga uit die lugspieëling aangery. Die knikkende mansfigure lyk soos die pote van ’n knopende gogga.” One might note that the word ‘pomp’ (like stoot – see note 90) is Afrikaans slang for sexual intercourse, something suggested in the novel in Fabian’s imagined description of Reuben’s imagined description of intercourse with Tsitsi (212/202) and of Willempie’s and Fabian’s masturbation (194/185): “We both pumped busily. . . .” (“Bedrywig pomp ons” [translation modified]).
- 119 Translation modified. “sy swart oë kruip soos torre oor Ma se kaal skouers”
- 120 “regop tepels [staar] na hom . . . soos die rooi oë van konyne”
- 121 “sagte hase wat met hul snoete teen haar bra pyn”
- 122 “krimpvarkie”
- 123 “peester”, “penis”, “piel”
- 124 “voëlkop”, “voël”. These words are rendered as “penis head”, “willy” and “penis” by Knox, thus losing the catachresis in translation. Literally translated, ‘voël’ means ‘bird’. ‘Cock’ would therefore be a more adequate rendition.
- 125 Translation modified.

Maar wat ons nie sien nie, is die Veteraan onder die rivierbome, waar hy stil tussen die riete in sy swart uniform staan.

Lank en swart staan hy daar, ’n *vlermuis* op sy *agterpote*, *steunend* van genot terwyl hy ons dophou waar ons ons klein *voële* in ons hande hou. Hy staar *stom* na ons, en *hy lig sy neus*, hy ruik iets van ons *drif*, hy moet sy *snorksug* in sy keel onderdruk toe sy beaarde *voël* in sy hand begin *skop-skop* en die *saad* uitpomp op die sand aan sy voete.

This passage is problematic in its impossible reporting of an event to which the narrator claims he had no access (see note 57). However, in this case the narrator explicitly interrupts his conceptualisation of the event represented by means of the aside “But what we didn’t see was the Veteran among the river trees”. This aside (and there are other examples in the novel: cf. note 135) may be understood, with the numerous other editorial interjections in the novel, as an example of parabasis. The function of the parabasis would be to interrupt and thus relativise the representation proffered here. It is my contention that this interruption is ironic, and that irony tends towards the

undoing of the allegory of otherness in *Kikoejoe*. But this is not to claim that this interruption is constant, or that it functions on all levels of the novel. I consider problematic instances of conceptualisation which do not seem to be interrupted clearly *vis-à-vis* the novel's allusions to Van Wyk Louw's *Raka* (see above, 4.2) as well as the representation (or otherwise) of the rape of Tsitsi (see below, 4.5).

- 126 "... daardie hibriede dier deur evolusie gelaat tussen voël en muis"
- 127 These last two references are to the Afrikaans text only for the reason that the relevant stanza of the Psalm and the entire poem by Nijhoff have been excised from the English translation.
- 128 "Die wond is 'n mond wat praat."
- 129 Translation modified. "speel die pretensieuse speletjies wat alle intellektuele speel – hulle verwys na tekste, lê verbande, tas in die geheue rond."
- 130 The English translation, perhaps inevitably, loses this association as a result of the choice of not translating Windpomp's name. Of course, the description of Pa's eyes as windmills further strengthens the hallucinatory effect of prosopopoeia in the novel.
- 131 The same applies, of course, to Kikoejoe/Kikuyu, whose 'name' is translated and therefore to an extent loses its status as proper name. In *Kikuyu*, 'Tant', 'Ma' and 'Pa' are not translated, thus lending these words the status of names. But, as I suggested above (note 66), the decision not to translate these 'names' seems to be a sound one to the extent that they have a 'foreignising', othering effect on the translation. On 'foreignising' translation, see Venuti (1986; 1991) as well as my discussion in Chapter 5 (5.3.1).
- 132 J. M. Coetzee, in his collection of essays *White Writing*, has identified such absences as being characteristic of the farm novel as genre (cf. 1988: 71-72; see my note 139, below). To the extent that *Kikoejoe* follows in the wake of the farm novel (cf. Coetzee 1997: 22) – even if van Heerden sees it as a 'hotel novel' (cf. Wasserman 1996: 4) – one might argue that the text all too easily slots into the conventions of that genre. I do not in this chapter focus on *Kikoejoe* in terms of the farm novel (see note 32), though this could no doubt have been a useful and interesting exercise. See Chapter 5 (5.5) for a closer consideration of the absence of the black other from the farm novel and *plaasroman*.
- 133 I indicated one of the many instances above (see note 57).
- 134 "Op haar hurke sit sy in die nag en dink aan Rhodesië. Die aandluggie vat koud oor haar boude. Dit is lekker as die warm urine uitkom en in haar boudgleuf opstoom. Die grassies kielie haar dye en lank nadat sy die laaste druppel afgeknyp het, sit sy so gehurk in haar eie stoom."

135 “Daar ver onder die doringbome, waar die nagdonkerte al poele maak, druk die poot die takkies saggies weg. Hy sien Ma haar kop agteroor gooi en lag, die blink goed aan haar ore, hy sien hoe Marge Bruwer terugbuk en ’n rooi malvablom pluk en dit onopsigtelik, *sonder dat selfs ek dit opmerk*, langs tant Geert se hand op die tafel neersit . . .”

136 See note 125.

137 Translation modified.

Tsitsi met ’n haal oor die binneboud. Eers die blinkswart vel met daaronder ’n witterige vetlaag. Dan spiere, sening: bloed. Oor die kikoejoe, soos sy gesleep is, haar heupe wyd oopgebeur, haar oë witgedop van skrik. Net Sjona nou op haar tong, prewelend, wit korsies sout in haar mondhoeke.

Die Cadillac se deur lê wyd oop en ’n stadsbrak kom lek haar bloed van die gruisklippers af. Mettertyd is hulle almal daar: die spaniels en die foksterriërs, die langlaagtes, die kollies en die pavement specials, die boerboele en die basters. Hulle lek en vreet die gras en gaan braak naderhand onder die bloekombome.

Tsitsi verkrag.

138 Wat my bietjie dronkslaan omtrent *Kikoejoe*, is die wyse waarop die gruwelike verkragting onderspeel word. Neem die skrywer dit nie so ernstig op nie of is dit simptome van die tyd waarin die gebeure hul afspeel dat die saak ligtelik verbygaan (omdat wittes só ’n daad minder ernstig sou bejeën waar dit ’n swart vrou aangaan)? Moontlik hou dit verband met die gevoel wat ek ervaar het m.b.t. ’n klimaks waarop die leser voorberei word, wat nooit werklik voltoer word nie. Of miskien is die verskriklikste ding wat gebeur (in die oë van die wit mense op Soebatsfontein), ironies-lagwekkend, die feit dat Charles Jacobie [*sic*] se lieflike wit perd byna die slagoffer word van ’n absurde monsterjag!

139 I am thinking here particularly of Coetzee’s analysis of the emptiness of the landscape, as well as of the occlusion of black people (in particular, of their labour) from much ‘white writing’, what he calls a “failure of the historical imagination” (1988c: 9; cf. 1988d, 1988e). See Chapter 5 for a closer consideration of the occlusion of black people from the pastoral mode as it occurs in the so-called farm novel.

It would be instructive to compare the way in which the rape of Tsitsi is dealt with in *Kikoejoe* with the way the rape of Lucy Lurie is dealt with in J. M. Coetzee’s most recent fiction, *Disgrace* (1999). The first and most important point is that, in this text, the rape is central to the narrative, while, in the case of *Kikoejoe*, it is not, as I have indicated. Indeed, within the broader context of *Kikoejoe*, the rape seems almost incidental, while in *Disgrace* the rape is at the centre of the narrative. It is implicitly juxtaposed with sexual harassment and the fall into disgrace of David Lurie after an affair with a

student, Melanie Isaacs (see, for instance, one of the episodes during which he makes love to her [1999: 24-25]). This leads to Lurie's departure from Cape Town to stay with his daughter, Lucy. In *Disgrace*, the rape itself is described in as little detail as – even less detail than – the rape of Tsitsi. But the narrator in *Disgrace* never presumes to enter the minds of others. His knowledge is limited, marked as it is by his separation from others. Of the rape *itself* the reader reads nothing. Instead, s/he reads the horrifying things David sees – the shooting of the dogs (1999: 95-96) – and experiences – being set alight (1999: 96) – and reads of his fear of what might be happening to his daughter. Yet the rape is the central figure in the novel, also as far as the confrontation between Africa and the 'West' (cf. 1999: 95, 201-202, 204) is concerned. In the end, subsequent to the rape and her resultant pregnancy, Lucy stays on the 'farm' and accepts the arrangement suggested by Petrus: that he will look after her and the child in exchange for the 'farm' (her dowry). Lucy tells her father to go back to Petrus and "Say I accept his protection" (1999: 204), despite his protestations. Thus she becomes a "bywoner" (1999: 204) on her land, as Petrus, the new African farmer, reclaims Africa. As should be evident from the above, the rape of Lucy in *Disgrace* functions on many levels and is central to the novel with regard to issues involving power and gender, colonisation, and the relationship with the land and animals.

140 They had already come to the farm at least once before, during the day of Verwoerd's visit to Cradock, because of the suspicion that Pa was involved in supposedly subversive meetings and in a "programme of action undermining the preparedness of the youth" (174/164 [Translation modified: "program van optrede wat die weerbaarheid van die jeug ondermyn"]; cf. 157-158/149). During this raid they had dealt with Pa, Ma, the workers and the guests in a very high-handed manner.

141 Translation modified. "is, en sal altyd vir my so bly, 'n gedroomde tyd. Nie omdat die domein van drome mooier en meer verteerbaar is nie – eerder miskien omdat die droom telkens die werklikheid beter geïnterpreteer het as wat ek as bogkind dit bewustelik kon doen."

142 Translation modified.

My troepe dra rubber-waterskoene en swaar is die voeteval van die arbeidsleër, em met die oorwinning, uiteindelik, staan die skryfvrou [Olive Schreiner] weer op en kom Windpomp, Boe se man, gloeiend, glimlaggend uit die rooi binne-oond van die hooimoed [*sic*]; warm strooihalms stof hy van sy klere af, deur brokke vuurrooi hooi tree hy, stap met handevol koring wat smeltend van sy hande aftap.

143 "Ek smelt van die Kamdeboo se rand af, ek drup, ek drup . . ."

144 "Rooi smelt Reitz se hande om die gaffel en sy lyf begin smelt en hy vloei in sy rooi stewels in. . . ." One might at this point note the recurrence in the novel of images of fluidity. Perhaps these images of melting and other

processes involving altering states suggest the lack of permanence of time, with the inability finally to determine either the past or the other.

- 145 Translation modified. “Die een met die af vinger.”
- 146 “. . . as ’n hooimied goed gepak is – soos ons s’n – brand hy vir ses maande, swart van buite, maar as jy die kors wegkrap, is dit binne blakerend rooi. . . .”
- 147 “en die geur van die brandende mied is oral, in haar klere, in haar drome; sy kan daarvan nie loskom nie”
- 148 “Laat dit maar daar, laat dit om ons wees soos die reuk van die brandende mied daardie dae heelyd om ons was, oral, op die tennisbaan, in die swembad, in die sitkamer en die rondawels, oral die geur van dít wat ongesê bly, van dít wat liefs verswyg word.” Of course, one needs to distinguish between what is *repressed* and what *cannot* be said. The smell of Windpomp’s burning corpse becomes associated in the novel with both these modes of silence. On the one hand, his death would seem to be too horrific to be described, while it nonetheless calls for representation in its continual presence as odour on the farm. On the other hand, with this smell present all the time, it comes to stand for that which is kept quiet. Like so much else which is repressed and remains unspoken by the characters, the smell of Windpomp remains unarticulated.
- 149 Translation modified.

Sy het reeds só baie verloor, verlies en verlange het haar afgetakel, die Seisoen – dít wat Hotel Halesowen se grootste seisoen moes wees – dreig om uit te rafel.

En nou staan sy net daar, te moeg om haar te verset teen die wegneem van die laaste houvas: haar majoor . . .

Ma staan daar en voel hoe dinge om haar aan flarde torring. Sy kyk diep in die fortuinkoppie van daardie somer in en alles wat sy wou ontken, wat sy wou dooddrink met haar Oude Meester, wat sy wou wegpraat met haar grappighede, alles word suur en dreigend soos die ruik van daardie smeulende mied: skerp, rokerig, met iewers diep geborge in die brandreuk die stank van ’n lyf wat stadig in rooikool verteer.

- 150 Perhaps one should rather claim that this nothingness does not appear, because (after all) it cannot be represented. Nothingness cannot be represented because it is truly beyond the phenomenal realm and therefore transcendent: it is an absence beyond the dichotomy absence/presence, the radical separation of death, something the experience of which cannot be experienced. Similarly, Windpomp is dead, yet the trace of his otherness in death persists as a reminder of something which never was, of an immemorial past. Certainly, Windpomp can be said to escape all signification for the reason that he never *is* represented in the novel. His presence and absence in the burning haystack and, consequently, in the novel is a reminder of absolute alterity: Windpomp

simply is not located within the purview of this novel or its reader. In this regard, compare the comments above on autobiography and death, as well as the discussion which follows in which the experience of absolute alterity – that of death, of nothingness, or of the concrete other – is related to the experience of transcendence in the trace of otherness.

- 151 My discussion of this theophany is indebted to that of Robbins (1995).
- 152 This is not to reduce alterity to evil, but to insist that it is not necessarily ethical. See Chapter 3 note 1.

Chapter 5

Life at Home: Irony, Otherness and the Farm Novel

5.1 Introduction

Joël Matlou's *Life at Home and Other Stories* (1991) consists of stories which trace, broadly speaking, the coming of age of a young boy, Medupe, in the Pretoria district. However, this process cannot be circumscribed in terms of a latter-day, South African *Bildungsroman*. On the contrary, Matlou's stories, while evidencing a great deal of self-consciousness and reflection, also disrupt the unitary subjectivity upon which such a novel would have been premised. The content of the collection may be described, following André Brink (1998a: 26), as consisting of "'ordinary' experiences like living on a farm, or working on the mines, or courting a girl, [turned] into an extraordinary vision of hell".

This comment encapsulates my points of departure in this chapter. In the first place, Brink's reference to the 'ordinary' may be understood as an allusion to Njabulo Ndebele's distinction between the ordinary and the spectacular and thus suggests a direct link between Matlou's work and Ndebele's. This link is strengthened by the narrative of urbanisation implicit in Brink's remark, from which I take my cue to discuss Matlou's work against the background of its relation with the South African farm novel and *plaasroman*.¹ And, finally, Brink's suggestion that *Life at Home* turns 'ordinary' experiences "into an extraordinary vision of hell" suggests the degree to which Ndebele's project is exceeded by Matlou's work, not least in its emphasis on *suffering*.

In this chapter I consider the relation between irony and otherness as it appears with regard to the way in which Matlou's *Life at Home* reinvents the farm novel. My reading of *Life at Home* will argue that this text continues the farm novel but, in so doing, radically disrupts it. And this disruption enables the appearance of the other *without its appearance* in the farm novel (see below, 5.5). *Life at Home* may be read *against* the farm novel because it gives a voice and a face to that which is voiceless and faceless in the farm novel, namely the black labourer. As the fictionalised autobiography of an urbanised farm labourer, *Life at Home* may be said to become a

prosopopoeia: it constructs a face for the narrator. This narrator is, moreover, exemplary of the labourer absent from the farm novel.

But if it is a prosopopoeia of otherness in the farm novel, then it is such a prosopopoeia which also disrupts the face given to the narrator. The text does not, that is, establish some new narrative in which the other appears in a whole, coherent and apparently closed-off form. This is so for the reason that the narrative draws attention to the disruptive nature of its ordering impulse: ironically, this text is as much about homelessness as it is about life at home. Indeed, the text suggests that there is an otherness at the heart of the domesticity with which it concerns itself. *Life at Home* disrupts the nationalist teleology of the farm novel without, however, allowing itself to be inserted in some new narrative teleology.

This point is of particular importance for the reason that my reading largely follows J. M. Coetzee's investigations of the farm novel and *plaasroman*. Coetzee is self-critically aware of the danger of the kind of reading in which he (as well as I) engages. Reading the other, Coetzee says, is reading absence. And this reading of "the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. . . . It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn" (1988: 81). Elsewhere Coetzee (1992f: 106) characterises his procedure in *White Writing* as "soured . . . by a certain relentless suspiciousness of appearances" and continues by saying that he is "now suspicious of such suspiciousness" for the reason that it amounts to a reversal, a positing of a new 'truth' that may itself be a mystification which would have to be treated with suspicion: ". . . a demystifying criticism privileges mystifications" (1992f: 106).

I am conscious that my reading, too, is in danger of simply amounting to an inversion, whether of Ndebele's criticism or of the farm novel and pastoral tradition in South African writing: my reading might mistakenly be taken to suggest that Matlou's work amounts to a simple inversion of the farm novel. For this reason my procedure here will attempt to do justice to Matlou's text by *not* reducing its alterity, by refusing simply to invert terms.² I shall, in other words, attempt to read *Life at Home* without setting it up as being 'triumphant' (to use Coetzee's term) or somehow 'exemplary' of the triumphant subversion of this or that theory or genre, "exemplarity being a property that is put in question by the uniqueness of each literary act", as Derek

Attridge puts it (1994: 250). Rather, I shall attempt to maintain the singularity (in Derrida's terms, the *datedness*) of this text while, nonetheless, reading it.

5.2 *Matlou, Ndebele's Aesthetic and Irony*

Matlou's stories initially enjoyed prominence largely due to praise by Njabulo Ndebele in influential essays published in the 1980s.³ In the course of a discussion of new township writing, including Matlou's story "Man Against Himself", Ndebele (1991a: 55) states that "The significance of these stories for me is that they point the way in which South African literature might possibly develop". Ndebele's praise for Matlou's work must be situated within the context of his larger project, and it is to a consideration of that project that I now turn. Not only does Ndebele's aesthetic deserve closer scrutiny because of his praise for Matlou, but because of the central place of irony in it.

Briefly, Ndebele's essays urge a departure from what he, following Lewis Nkosi, calls "the *journalistic*, informational ambience" of fiction writing and towards a "*storytelling*, narrative ambience", a move away from the "spectacular" and towards the "ordinary" (1991: 31). This is a move towards depth and interiority and away from the exteriority of "posturing and sloganeering" (1991a: 47). To Ndebele the "spectacular" is typical of so-called "Protest Literature" (1991a: 40; cf. 1991a: 44-47). It results in "the complete exteriority of everything" and lacks "subtlety" (1991a: 43). The "ordinary", by contrast, "is defined as the opposite of the spectacular" (1991a: 50). It is just this break with the tradition of the spectacular and the movement towards the interiority of the ordinary "within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up" (1991a: 56), which is celebrated by Ndebele in terms of, among others, Matlou's stories.⁴

In "Redefining Relevance", Ndebele's scheme is developed in terms of the identification of irony as the necessary trope of depth, complexity and art. By extension, irony for Ndebele becomes a necessary underlay of the ordinary in contrast to the surface sloganeering of the spectacular: Ndebele states that, unlike the "propagandist", the artist "can never be entirely free from the rules of irony" (1991b: 67). This is a significant statement in that it suggests a dialectic which would, ironically, cast doubt on Ndebele's rather stark contrast between the spectacular and

the ordinary. If the artist can never be entirely free from the rules of irony, then the implication would be that the work of art can never come to rest in a position of finality. Such a finality would be impossible for the reason that irony, in interrupting the narrative line, works disruptively.⁵ It would be impossible in absolute terms to distinguish between a text which may be characterised as 'ordinary', and another which is 'spectacular': just as Albie Sachs claims "that there is bad in the good, and . . . that there can be elements of good in the bad" (1990: 20), so one might say that there is the spectacular in the ordinary and that there can be elements of the ordinary in the spectacular. Irony just does not work in terms of clearly established binaries; as I attempted to indicate earlier in this thesis, irony always involves an element of otherness within the same. In this case, the otherness which cannot be shut out is the spectacular. This is not to revalorise the spectacular but simply to specify Ndebele's approach to irony, a trope that characterises the aesthetic in terms of which he celebrates Matlou's work. The point is that Ndebele's approach to irony is inconsistent: it is valorised as the necessary underlay of his aesthetic, and therefore of the ordinary, and yet the ordinary is contrasted in rather stark, apparently mutually exclusive terms to the spectacular. The ordinary, which is characterised in terms of irony, turns out to be an unironic category in its spectacular disavowal of the spectacular.

This is something noted by Tony Morphet in an illuminating discussion of Ndebele's aesthetic (with that of Sachs).⁶ Morphet approaches Ndebele and Sachs in terms of the thrust of their systems as "redemptive" (1990: 135): each celebrates indeterminacy, but in terms of the incorporation of such indeterminacy into the overall system of the text by means of irony. Morphet points out that the redemptive thrust evident in Ndebele and Sachs tends "towards 'complexity' 'contradictions' 'hidden tensions' 'ambiguity' 'imaginative recreations' and the exploration of specific genres. In both papers the case they are arguing against is given as the static, predictable, formulaic rehearsals of fixed positions" (Morphet 1990: 135).

It would seem as if this passage situates Ndebele and Sachs within a project which respects otherness. After all, terms such as "complexity" and "contradictions" imply the presence of an otherness which subverts the ability to offer clear-cut, single-minded resolutions to problems. Yet, as Morphet goes on to indicate, the redemptive thrust of Ndebele's and Sachs's systems tends towards a teleology and, consequently,

to a new set of fixed positions. The celebration of openness and experience evident in the quotation above, is qualified by Ndebele's discussion of irony which "recalls, at the same time that it works to displace, the formalist construction of irony" (Morphet 1990: 135). For the New Critics (whom Morphet discusses under the heading 'formalists'), "irony was *the* literary figure precisely because it was through it that the openness to complex experience could be sustained without damage to the formal order of the work" (1990: 135).⁷ What Morphet calls the liberal/formalist settlement (cf. 1990: 134) of intellectual enterprise, is characterised by such a conception of irony, which Morphet proceeds to call "*incorporative irony*" (1990: 136; Morphet's italics). But this settlement has been subverted by the dramatic irony of a revisionism characterised by a teleology which identified "the goal of revisionist cultural practice with the notion of correct political practice" (1990: 138). This confluence of cultural and supposedly correct political practice, with its emphasis on concrete positions is, according to Morphet, the butt of Ndebele's and Sachs's protest: ". . . what both are protesting against is the absence of the ironic vision from current cultural practice; and . . . what they are calling for is something akin to a return to the incorporative modes of the earlier [liberal and formalist] settlement, . . . with one important difference" (1990: 138). This important difference between Ndebele and Sachs is to be found in the nature of the teleology of each: while Ndebele's project concerns "the Black oppressed" (1990: 140), and would tend towards the end of such oppression, Sachs "presents the ascendancy of the ANC as something akin to the fulfilment of history" (1990: 140). But regardless of the degree to which Ndebele and Sachs might disagree as to details, Morphet convincingly shows each to be implicated in a teleology, a narrative tending towards the closure of liberation. And he indicates the extent to which irony is subordinated to such an end: it is as if, now that liberation and/or the ascendancy of the ANC has been attained, "the opportunity emerges once more for the incorporative procedures of a formalist irony" (1990: 140).⁸

Morphet shows the incoherence of such a position. Ndebele's conception of irony, in its celebration of ambiguity, contradiction and openness, is itself contradictory because it is offered within the framework of the teleology of national liberation. As Morphet (1990: 141) puts it, Ndebele's conception of irony is characterised by contradictory impulses, by both the "formalist rules of indeterminacy and inclusive tension" and the "revisionist rules of relocation and solidarity". As a

result, "The position is incoherent. The indeterminate contradictions of human experience must be resolved to demonstrate the victory of a determinate ideological position". Ultimately, for Morphet both Ndebele and Sachs "founder on the issue of closure. Both appeal to the notion of incorporative irony for the sake of greater range, flexibility, complexity and openness, but neither is able to relinquish the fixed point of closure in the framework of social action to which they have committed themselves" (1990: 142).

Morphet thus calls for a conception of irony which will not result, as incorporative irony does, in closure. Closure, after all, is implicit in what Morphet designates a formalist conception of irony, as his choice of the term 'incorporative' to designate such a conception in fact implies. Irony would resolve contradiction and incorporate ambiguity and would thus necessarily tend towards closure. It would, indeed, be a "principle of structure" (Behler 1990:102) which would organically unify the literary text (cf. Dane 1991: 153). Even if such a view of irony apparently celebrates complexity, ambiguity and otherness, it does so merely to incorporate them into the text in order thus to close them off in it. Against such a view of irony *vis-à-vis* contemporary South African cultural and literary practice, Morphet would like to see a conception of irony which works "across the lines of the multiple discourses that are constructing the cultural nodes and spaces of the society" (1990: 143). This would be a view of irony which does not settle the otherness of contradiction or ambiguity by incorporating it into the text or relocating it in some or other "solidarity criticism" (Sachs 1990: 20). On the contrary, it would work in a "*translocative*" (Morphet 1990: 143; his italics) way, crossing borders and unsettling orders. I would claim that such a translocative conception of irony may be aligned to the conception of irony employed in this thesis, seeing that it is concerned precisely with the way in which the closure is rendered problematic through the interruption of conceptualisation characteristic of narrative as teleology.

Matlou's work may be said to disrupt the narrative teleology implicit in Ndebele's project; as well as his conception of irony in the service of that teleology. Indeed, as Dorothy Driver (1992: 117) notes, Ndebele's project, which rests on the work of Matlou and others, is also exceeded by that work: "Ndebele first called for a writing of the 'ordinary' in 1984, after reading Matlou (among others), and now Matlou has written the 'ordinary' in a way which extends, rather than conforms to, the

critic's decree". Morphet also considers the degree to which Ndebele's work is exceeded by Matlou's writing. This he does by elaborating on the teleological nature of Ndebele's project, specifically in terms of its relation to both a "universalizing framework inherited from the Enlightenment" (1992: 130) and a framework which is "anti-universal and particularistic" (1992: 131) and derives "from the traditions of Romanticism and Nationalism" (1992: 131). It is important, from the perspective of this thesis, to note Morphet's assessment of Ndebele's project as caught between these Enlightenment and Romantic/Nationalist impulses, something which characterises his project as "post nationalist" (1992: 137). For Ndebele's project may be said to trace a movement into modernity (cf. Pechey 1998: 64). In short, his aesthetic situates the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' in terms of "a return to the pre-modern experience of 'peasant' life in South Africa" (Morphet 1992: 138), an experience characterised by "some field of perception and understanding within black life which has remained uncontaminated by the public discourses of the White establishment, the urban black milieu and the liberation movement" (1992: 133). Despite Ndebele's (1991: 19) disapproval of fiction which, in dealing with peasant life, "soon shifts to the towns", the complicated process of urbanisation is implicit in Ndebele's project to rediscover the ordinary, return to roots, and attain an essentially African freedom from oppression (cf. Pechey 1998: 64). Ndebele's teleology, whether it is nationalist or 'post nationalist', is thus imbricated with the changing relationship to the land. And Ndebele's celebration of Matlou's work must be recognised as being founded on the latter's portrayal of rural, in particular peasant life, as it moves *away* from the farm. As such, it might be useful to approach Ndebele's appropriation of Matlou's work (as a demonstration of the 'rediscovery of the ordinary') in terms of the farm novel. After all, Ndebele's project involves the retrieval of history and its renarrativisation in terms of black experience (cf. Morphet 1992: 134), and specifically in terms of the recovery of the *reality* of black *peasant* experience (cf. Morphet 1992: 131, 138, 140; Pechey 1998: 64).

Indeed, Brink's critique of Ndebele rests on his apparently unquestioning acceptance of the nature of reality, something which would allow one to call Ndebele's a realist aesthetic. Brink (1993: 52) avers that Ndebele's project "does not seem to me to go far enough. It is the real itself . . . which requires reinvention".⁹ To Brink, this reinvention of the real is always involved in the turning of history into

story. He describes this process in the following way: "... the obvious links with the determining influence of tradition are suspended; an imaginary opening is created which makes it possible for events that originally appear fixed in time and space, canonised by convention, sanctioned by authority, to be *reinvented*" (Brink 1993: 54). This would imply that the 'reinvention of the real', including that brought about by Matlou, would necessarily exceed the conceptual categories constitutive of what is deemed to be the real. The "imaginary opening" created by Matlou's work which suspends the "determining influence of the tradition", would also suspend conventionalised attitudes pertaining to the real. This particular "imaginary opening" disrupts, apart from Ndebele's project, also the farm novel as one "tradition" within which Matlou's work may be read (I return to this latter disruption below.)¹⁰

As far as the disruption of Ndebele's project is concerned, Morphet (1992: 139) indicates how Ndebele domesticates Matlou's work in order to fit it into his teleological project by not recognising how the *disruptive* power of the stories exceeds "his [Ndebele's] own boundaries" (1992: 139). Matlou's stories are, for Morphet (1992: 140), the creation "of an extraordinarily self-aware, disordered, consciousness" and employ "a profoundly reflexive authorial strategy". They are an "account of absolute internality" yet "succeed in constructing a coherent identifiable external world". It is this combination of the interior and the exterior which, to Morphet, is an indication that Matlou's work exemplifies less the ordinariness of the "pre-modern 'storyteller'" than that of a "post modern 'fabulist'" (1992: 140).

This is to say that, according to Morphet, Matlou's work does not fit into Ndebele's scheme of things. On the contrary, his work disrupts the teleology of nation and for this reason also Ndebele's aesthetic with its emphasis on a return to a pre-modernity which would be the locale of the ordinary, a wellspring to nourish black intellectuals threatened with white or black urban entrapment (cf. Morphet 1992: 133).

For the reason then that Matlou's work refuses to be boxed neatly into a teleology of nationhood and freedom – a teleology which, moreover, appears in both the farm novel (as I argue below [5.5]) and in Ndebele's aesthetic – but, on the contrary, disrupts such a teleology because its irony is disruptive and unsettling rather than incorporative, this chapter suggests a departure from Ndebele's reading of Matlou against the tradition of spectacle. Instead, it might be more profitable to turn

to a consideration of the disruptive, indeed ironical, relationship between Matlou's work and the farm novel.¹¹

Matlou's work disrupts notions of a unified, interiorised subjectivity situated within a universe ordered in terms of a clearly defined telos, such as Morphet claims Ndebele's project evinces. His work may be characterised as opening the self to the other in the disruption of self-centred conceptions of time and space as linear and enclosable, assumptions characteristic of the farm novel in the wake of which Matlou's work follows. That is, far from exemplifying the triumph of the subject (no matter how ordinary), Matlou's suffering, even persecuted, protagonist is subject to a radical alterity within. Moreover, I argue that Matlou's text, quite apart from whether its protagonist is portrayed as triumphant or alienated, 'transports' the reader into otherness: it opens the reading self to otherness in the course of the unsettling experience of reading *Life at Home*.

The importance of an otherness within is, interestingly, something suggested by Ndebele himself but not developed with reference to Matlou's work. In an aside (framed by his discussion of Matlou's "Man Against Himself"), Ndebele (1991a: 53) considers the ordinary as constituting "the active social consciousness of most people". At this point he introduces into his discussion the notion of an alterity within, without however following through the implications of his statement:

We are confronted here with the honesty of the self in confrontation with itself. Literature cannot give us lessons, but it can only provide a very compelling context to examine an infinite number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitisation of people towards the development of the entire range of culture? [sic]

(Ndebele 1991a: 53)

I shall be approaching this alterity within, which according to Ndebele entails the confrontation of the self by itself in the text and leads to a confrontation with the reader ("We"), in terms of the *form* of this text. For it is in the formal characteristics of *Life at Home* that the disruptive otherness of this text appears.

5.3 *Form and Strangeness*

In a recent consideration of cultural innovation in terms of the encounter with the other, Derek Attridge emphasises the degree to which the emergence of the other takes place in reading (1999: 24). Following Sartre, he argues that reading entails a reinvention, an invention which follows the invention of the text, with a text being considered “not a fixed set of signifiers or signifieds but something like a field of potential meaning awaiting realization without wholly determining it in advance. . . . Reading involves working against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same” (1999: 25).

The encounter with what is other which occurs in reading entails “my singular and active relation to the particular configuration of possibilities represented by the text that is the site of alterity” (1999: 26). This leads Attridge to the following important proposition: “Rather than the familiar model of the literary work as friend and companion, sharing with the reader its secrets, I propose the work as stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately. . . .” (1999: 26). This ‘strangeness’ of the text, encountered in reading, is linked by Attridge to form. He distinguishes between on the one hand creative labour which entails “the manipulation of ideas, the construction of arguments, the representation of previously existing entities in a new light, or the imagination of hitherto nonexistent entities”, and on the other hand creative labour which “is combined with, and is in a certain sense always subject to, the selection and arrangement of words” (1999: 26). Thus Attridge claims that “the creative achievement is a *formal* one, whatever else it may be. The commonest current name for works of this kind (though it is certainly not without its problems) is *literature*” (1999: 26).

Despite the various problems (enumerated by Attridge, but with which I shall not directly concern myself here) attendant upon such a designation of texts as ‘literary’ on the basis of form, Attridge believes “the focus on formal singularity and otherness (which are not separate properties) has a certain usefulness” (1999: 26). This usefulness lies in the recognition that otherness is staged in works which are formally innovative. This innovativeness entails a reconsideration not only of the “sounds and shapes” (1999: 26) of words in their links with other words, but also of their links with culture and history: “The formal sequence . . . functions as a kind of

staging: a semantic and emotional performance” (1999: 27). The apprehension of otherness in a text is what gives rise to its meaning, something which in turn arises in repeating it. This repetition – which is reading – is a performance which stages the otherness consequent upon the strangeness of the text. Repeating the text in reading it is a staging, the “intense but distanced playing out of what might be the most intimate, the most strongly felt, constituents of our lives” (1999: 27). Attridge concludes that “Without the crucial functioning of form, there would be no sense of staging. In the reading of literature, one might say, meaning is simultaneously formed and performed” (1999: 27).

In this regard, Attridge’s contention with regard to critical methodology is important. To do justice to a text, in particular a strange one, is not to reduce its strangeness:

The creativity required in a just response to the otherness of a literary work, therefore, involves not only a singular affirmation of the work’s singularity based on an apprehension of its inventive reordering of the cultural matrix but also an affirmation of its occurrence, in being read, as an intellectual-emotional event. A straightforwardly discursive, analytic commentary, valuable though it may be, cannot make these affirmations. Only a new, unpredictable, singular, creative act, as an inventive event in its turn, can do justice to a literary work as a literary work.

(1999: 27)¹²

What this implies is that the critical commentator must herself or himself be creative in her/his response to the text s/he discusses. If the response is not creative, it will flatten out the otherness of the text being considered. For Attridge’s argument (admittedly in simplified form) is that creativity entails a confrontation with the other. In terms of this thesis, and my own *modus operandi*, the conceptualisations I make here need to be (creatively) disrupted if the otherness of the texts I consider is to be respectfully maintained. The text must *not* be boxed into a narrative which allegorises otherness, which makes sense of the strange. I hope to do this by resisting what must be recognised as, ultimately, Ndebele’s flattening narrative about Matlou’s text.

It is also for this reason, as intimated in the opening remarks to this chapter, that the strangeness of *Life at Home* will be a constant, disruptive presence in my own attempt to read this text. My consideration of *Life at Home* is constantly exposed to the possibility of simply again reducing its otherness by forcing it into my

conceptualisation of it. This means that my conceptualisation of this text in terms of the farm novel must itself also necessarily be disrupted.¹³ I hope to indicate that *Life at Home*, in its strange peculiarity, implies less a narrative teleology (whether of nation or liberation) than an infinite 'narrative' sphere which cannot be encompassed.¹⁴

The strangeness of *Life at Home* intimates otherness in its form as short story cycle following in the wake of the farm novel. But this otherness is also an otherness *within*: both the reader of the text and its protagonist (as claimed above with reference to Ndebele's reading of "Man Against Himself") are subject to otherness discovered in the self. After a consideration of the strange form of this text, I shall proceed to an examination of this otherness within.

5.3.1 *Strangeness: The Critics*

Apart from Ndebele's comments on *Life at Home*, little sustained critical work has been done on this text. This is not to suggest that Matlou's work has somehow been undervalued. On the contrary, as the discussion above of Ndebele's approach to Matlou attests, it has been celebrated as a new departure in South African English fiction. However, unlike Ndebele – who we have seen notes the break from the spectacular evident in *Life at Home* without, nonetheless, placing enough emphasis on its radical interrogation of the real – critics have generally remarked on the strangeness of this text in terms of just this disruption of the real.

In view of the strangeness of the stories, *Life at Home* does not seem to fit comfortably into any particular tradition. So, for instance, Driver (1992: 116) asserts that this volume "opens up a mythic space that seems to me to be quite unfamiliar to and *uncontainable* by South African English literature as it is currently known".¹⁵ And Brink (1998a: 27) recognises in Matlou's work, among that of others, "the regenerative powers of South African literature", while Mike Kirkwood (1991: 9), in his introduction to the volume of stories, notes that Matlou's work is not categorisable in terms of any "overt political standpoint" and, as a result, that it "challenged" its first readers (who expected political commitment) when individual stories started appearing in *Staffrider* magazine at the end of the 1970s (cf. Ndebele 1991a: 53).

This strangeness of the stories is evident in the language which is employed in them. Driver (1992: 117) notes that “Matlou’s use of English is often idiosyncratic, and some of the stories’ magical quality may rest in the sudden surprise of grammatical oddity”.¹⁶ This is language which disrupts the conventions of what is still in some circles admirably referred to as ‘Standard English’. Here a writer to whom English is not a mother tongue employs that language in a way which makes it foreign, that is, *others* it. The numerous Setswana and Afrikaans phrases and words, not all of which are rendered in English in the text, would have an estranging effect on a reader unfamiliar with these languages. Even where the Setswana and Afrikaans are rendered in English, the text has an estranging effect on the reader in its apparently clumsy or unidiomatic phrasing. This might mean that the language employed in *Life at Home* entails a strategy of authenticity, of claiming an other English.¹⁷

In this regard, it may be useful to take note of the procedure of so-called ‘foreignising translation’, underscoring as it does the possibility of rendering an original in such a way as to enable it to resist being incorporated into the canon of the target language. This strategy entails *not* eliding the otherness of the original being translated, so that the reader of the translation remains aware of the fact that the text comes from a context other than that of the reader. As such, Matlou’s estranging use of English serves as a trace of the otherness of his text, specifically *vis-à-vis* its status as an *English* text within the canon of South African *English* literature.¹⁸

But this disruptive strangeness also results from the form Matlou employs: that of the short story cycle. If *Life at Home* has been, comparatively speaking, neglected in critical discussion, then this might be as a result of the strangeness of the stories or chapters. Critics might simply not know what to *do* with this text. It is my hypothesis that this critical *impasse* might, at least partially, be attributable to the form of the text. Indeed, Brink (1993: 53) notes that *Life at Home* “can be read either as a series of short stories or as a (very short) novel”. This implies that its form is to a greater or lesser extent indeterminate, if not undecidable. The *form* of this text as short story cycle calls for closer attention with regard to its strangeness.¹⁹

5.4 *The Short Story Cycle*

In an examination of Ivan Vladislavic's *Missing Persons* (1989), Sue Marais (1992) provides an illuminating discussion of the short story cycle in South Africa.²⁰ She notes that "The short story cycle or integrated collection of stories is a form in which a conflict between the exigencies of unity and diversity . . . is implicit" (Marais 1992: 41). Such cycles may be characterised as tending towards either unity or diversity. In the case of the first, the cycle may be characterised as making use of "integrative or centripetal strategies" (Marais 1992: 42), whereas in the latter "atomistic or 'centrifugal' forces . . . work to dissociate stories in a narrative cycle" (1992: 41). Marais notes a number of forces which work centrifugally: discontinuities may be present, such as "the reader's sense of closure in individual stories, and the variety in type or genre" (1992: 42). Centripetal strategies may range from an "external framing device" to "internal and more subtle linking devices" (1992: 42). Among the latter devices may be

a pervasive tone or mood . . . ; a central character, often a narrator-focaliser or character-focaliser . . . , whose reappearance in consecutive stories . . . creates a sense of connectedness . . . ; a fixed or limited set of other characters who, in isolation or in combination, occupy several if not all of the stories and who may be linked by familial bonds or a genealogical sequence . . . ; and a common fictionalised setting – a localised rural town . . . , a region . . . , or a city. . . . Finally, to the internally cohesive strategies listed above may be added other more subtle or elusive devices such as the repetition-with-variation of motifs, metaphors, themes, and phrases which assume a significance larger than the instances of their individual expression.

(Marais 1992: 42)

Repetition (with variation) thus appears to be a fundamental characteristic of the short story cycle as form, in particular in its centripetal guise. According to Marais (1992: 43), one of the important consequences of integrative, centripetal strategies is "a strong sense of community or place". She uses the term 'community persona' to describe this effect and states that such a 'community persona' "assumes a significance over and above the sum of its individual members, and place and community may acquire an idyllic or even mythological dimension" (1992: 43). Marais therefore notes that it is not surprising that "the modern short story cycle has a marked association with regionalism" (1992: 43) as well as with realism: "Generically

speaking, then, the short story cycle would appear eminently suited to a verisimilitudinous depiction of regional communities” (1992: 43).

Among the examples of South African short story cycles cited by Marais (1992: 44) which may be said to tend towards realism and regionalism is Pauline Smith’s *The Little Karoo* (1925). Indeed, both her *The Beadle* (1926) and *The Little Karoo* exemplify characteristics of the short story cycle. The various techniques employed by Smith, which link her stories to one another, serve to create a cohesive, believable portrait of a particular region. Certainly *The Little Karoo* may be said to exhibit characteristics of the short story cycle, seeing that overlapping elements (characters, setting and the like) occur in different stories. Moreover, one finds some narrative elements, such as the figures of the miller and Esther Shokolowsky/Sokolowsky, the farm Harmonie and Mijnheer van der Merwe, in both *The Beadle* and *The Little Karoo*, which would link the two texts in terms of Smith’s larger oeuvre (cf. Smith 1972: 7, 11, 39; Smith 1990: 32, 36; Driver 1984: 62). One might argue that the Aangenaam valley within the Platkops district of the Little Karoo assumes just the kind of ‘community persona’ Marais identifies as typical of the short story cycle in its centripetal guise. And, to confirm the status of Smith’s work in terms of the short story cycle, Coetzee has indicated that she makes use of similar authorial techniques in her two texts mentioned above, including free indirect speech (cf. 1988b: 123ff.) and transfer (cf. 1988b: 117).²¹

These various authorial techniques serve to connect the stories in *The Little Karoo* to one another as well as to *The Beadle*. But, of course, these two texts (and in particular *The Little Karoo*) not only exhibit characteristics of the short story cycle but also of the farm novel. For this reason, and because I believe that *Life at Home*, similarly, has the form of a short story cycle and is affiliated to the farm novel, I would now like to consider more closely the farm novel before I continue my discussion of the form of the short story cycle *vis-à-vis* *Life at Home*.

5.5 *The Farm Novel and the Absence of the Other*

The farm novel and *plaasroman* have been extensively theorised over the last few years, in particular by J. M. Coetzee in three essays in his 1988 collection *White Writing*.²² Coetzee (1988c: 4) notes the predominance of the pastoral over “its twin

genre, the utopia" in the literature produced by white South African settlers, and relates this phenomenon to the status of the whites of South Africa as "unsettled settlers". The focus of such unsettled settlers is related to the retrospective guise of the pastoral rather than the prospective gaze of the utopia. The pastoral thus serves an ideological purpose in establishing a representation of settlement and territoriality, something at the heart of the modern conception of nation (cf. Noyes 1997). But this process occurs precisely because the settler is unsettled and alienated, and because there is no nation. The farm novel constructs a past which elides the nomadic by foregrounding, in the justificatory mode of the pastoral, the thrift and labour of the white settler as against the vices of the city (cf. Coetzee 1988c: 3-4). It tends to proffer a coherent representation of the settled land as the foundation of the nation.

In "Farm Novel and Plaasroman", Coetzee characterises Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) as a pastoral text, but qualifies this by stating that her work forms part of an "antipastoral tradition" (1988: 81) within which her representation of the farm, rather than being a "realistic representation of an African stock farm [should be read] as a figure in the service of her critique of colonial culture. . . . Schreiner is anticolonial both in her assertion of the alienness of European culture in Africa and in her attribution of unnaturalness to the life of her farm" (1988: 66). Coetzee here, importantly, draws attention to the realist nature of the farm novel. Within it, realistic representations of African farms conventionally appear. But in the case of Schreiner such realistic representations attain figural status and, as it were, move *beyond* the confines of a realist aesthetic (even if they remain founded upon such an aesthetic). That is, according to Coetzee, Schreiner unsettles the realist conventions of the farm novel in her representation of an African stock farm, which is what allows *The Story of an African Farm* to move in a direction beyond the pastoral. Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* and *The Little Karoo*, by way of contrast, are firmly situated within the confines of the pastoral.²³

But Smith's work also, in its way, serves to render problematic the relation with the real. Coetzee (1988: 68-69) notes, for instance, that Smith's invention of the African farm is peculiar in that it is not markedly *African*. Instead, Smith's work seems to offer "a *regional answer*" (1988: 69; Coetzee's italics) to the "crisis on the *platteland*" (1988: 78), to "a rural order . . . clearly in crisis" (1988c: 6) as a result of urbanisation. Smith's work encapsulates the pastoral tradition as a "nostalgia for

country life" (1988: 75; cf. 1988: 76, 1988b: 125), a way of life – precapitalist and characterised by "classic peasant social organization" (1988: 71) – which has been lost. According to Coetzee (1988: 78, 79), one finds the conflict between the old and the new, the peasant and the capitalist, country and town, dramatised in and at the core of both Smith's work and the Afrikaans *plaasroman*.

Despite the significant differences between Schreiner and Smith, and between Smith's two books (cf. 1988: 70), Coetzee does posit some important commonalities. The first of these is the closed-off nature of their representations of the farm. Coetzee (1988: 64) describes Schreiner's African farm as being situated within a Karoo which has a topography spanning a "limitless plain beneath limitless sky" and a chronography "extending from prehistory to a posthistory after man".²⁴ The farm is situated somewhere "between the infinitesimal and the infinite", yet is described as carrying on "its *self-absorbed* existence" (1988: 64; my emphasis): it is "a tiny community set down in the midst of the vastness of nature, living a *closed-minded and self-satisfied* existence" (1988: 65; my emphasis). Although Smith's farm Harmonie and its setting, the Aangenaam valley, are described as "desolate" and "the poorest of Platkops valleys" (Smith 1972: 7), Coetzee shows that their desolation is soon forgotten. Not only is Harmonie situated in a kind of Eden, but "The mythic values that accumulate around the valley are those of the womb: *closure . . . and fruitfulness*" (Coetzee 1988: 67; my emphasis). Each farm, Smith's as well as Schreiner's, "seems to lie outside history" (Coetzee 1988c: 4). One therefore needs to note the paradox inherent in the farm novel as a pastoral form evincing an *a-historical regionalism*.

The second commonality pertains to the ethnically other on the farm. According to Coetzee (1988: 71-72),

silence about the place of black labour . . . is common not only to Schreiner and Smith but, by and large, to the Afrikaans *plaasroman*, and represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll (or in Schreiner's case the anti-idyll) of African pastoralism.

While Schreiner may be characterised as being antipastoral and Smith pastoral, a characteristic of each is "the occlusion of black labour from the scene" (1988c: 5). Schreiner, by attacking the sloth, "idleness, ignorance, and greed of colonial society"

(1988c: 4), and Smith, through her “selective silence about hired labour” (1988: 72), thus both remain within a broadly pastoral tradition, respectively indicting and celebrating rural life.²⁵ Broadly speaking, the relation to the land, Africa, is constituted in terms of the *absence* of labour (Schreiner) and the celebration of *white* labour (Smith). Driver – while asserting that, even if “black-white relations [are not] more than briefly dealt with, they are given an allusive force in *The Beadle*, acting as a reminder of the potentialities of inequality and oppression” (1984: 50) – has stated that Smith’s fiction “is not directly concerned” with “the indigenous people” (1984: 49).²⁶

This absence from the farm novel of “the indigenous people” (the silence about them which constitutes the “occlusion of black labour”) may, retrospectively, be understood as being ironic for the reason that this absence today has a disruptive effect on the farm novel. Because the survival of the farm as well as of the cohesive region of which it formed part historically depended on the labour of black people, their absence merely hides the inevitability of their presence in the novel as well as the region from which they are excluded. This is to say that it is possible to read the *absence* of black people from the farm novel as being present in its absence: the absence of black people from the farm novel has become notable and visible.²⁷ Absence appears, and it appears as a structural necessity of the farm novel for the reason that the occlusion of the ethnic other serves the important purpose of suggesting the cohesiveness of the land: its familiarity is not disrupted by the intrusion of otherness. Through the occlusion of the ethnic other the land becomes a region, an extension of the self as owner of *his* land.²⁸

As the absence of the other today appears noteworthy, one might venture that it is possible to claim that the other itself appears, palimpsestically, in the farm novel, disrupting the narrative from which it has been excluded (cf. Coetzee 1988: 81). And such a disruptive appearing of the other in the farm novel, without nonetheless appearing in it (the other is *absent* and can, on the most literal level, not appear in the farm novel), means that the other may be said to be no longer entirely absent from the farm novel, nor entirely present in it. The other ‘in’ the farm novel may thus be said, from our vantage point, to be beyond presence and absence. It is possible to read the farm novel ironically by making the other appear without making it appear. That is, the other might be said to disrupt the conceptual schema of the farm novel. As I have

intimated, this is particularly the case as far as its regional character is concerned to the extent that it is just this regionalism which depends on the occlusion of otherness (be it of the ethnic other, or of the land made landscape and thus brought into human ken).

Driver (1984: 48) has elaborated on the regional character of Smith's work by pointing out that she is more than a merely regional writer.²⁹ But, as I have argued *vis-à-vis* the form of the short story cycle, her writing is certainly evocative, in what may be called a realist mode (cf. Driver 1983: 22-23), of a particular region with its local colour. The occlusion of otherness discussed above may be said to strengthen the regional nature of Smith's texts.

But the regional nature of Smith's work is also strengthened as a result of the fact that she employs specific techniques which may lend her work the characteristics of a short story cycle. At this point I return to a consideration of the short story cycle as form.

5.6 Life at Home as *Short Story Cycle*

I have been arguing that – as a result of the deployment of elements from the short story cycle, as well as of similar authorial techniques, in order to create a fictional world in a very specific part of the South African Little Karoo – a strong sense of cohesiveness is created in Smith's work. It is important to repeat that this cohesiveness of form and, particularly, of the representation of a region, is dependent on that which it excludes: black labour. Indeed, with reference to the genre of the short story cycle in general and the regionalism characteristic of much apartheid writing in particular, Marais (1992: 45) argues that “the ostensible reality to which such a regionalism refers is premised not only or innocently upon a clearly defined sense of place and period, but frequently also upon a distinct ethnic or cultural identity”, something which she relates to the racially exclusivist thinking culminating in and characteristic of apartheid. Against this kind of regionalism, and in terms of the fact that the short story cycle may exhibit not only centripetal but centrifugal tendencies, Marais (1992: 43) importantly argues that this genre has the potential “to represent not only the impulse in any society or community towards association and cohesion, but also the opposing impulse towards dissociation and estrangement”.

Recent South African short story cycles in particular have tended to express “the divisive experience” of apartheid and to “capture the alienation, dislocation and fragmentation – the collapse or lack of a sense of community and a regional identity – in contemporary South African experience” (Marais 1992: 45). Some collections do affirm “a defiant if tenuous sense of community” (Marais 1992: 45). But, on the other hand, and in terms of “the implicit dualism of the short story cycle”, Marais claims that texts such as Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and, most radically, Vladislavic’s *Missing Persons*, depict “a perplexed sense of misplacement and guilt” (1992: 45).

I would add Matlou’s *Life at Home* to this latter group of texts. Indeed, what Marais says of *Missing Persons* might, I would claim, be said with equal justice of *Life at Home*. It is worth quoting the following description of *Missing Persons* at some length. According to Marais, this text

represents the most radical and disturbing eschewal and subversion in the local short story cycle to date of the ‘fiction’ of a collective sense of community and identity, or a shared history and destiny, in South Africa. In its place the collection confronts the legacy of apartheid as a hangover of isolation and irreality which at times borders on the hallucinatory, the surreal and the grotesque – a landscape in which identifiable and familiar locales dissolve into bizarre and unstable mental terrains. Moreover, its exposure of the textuality of contemporary South African history and its depiction of the extremities of an alienated vision/version of South African reality entail a postmodern dissolution or sliding of the ontological boundaries between the empirically verifiable and the fictional or imaginary, the personal and the public, the comic and the tragic, mundanity and absurdity, reality and nightmare, innocence and guilt, and history and fantasy. . . . It thus paradoxically but acutely captures the consciousness of dislocation and frustrated striving for that elusive sense of belonging, a national identity, which so characterises this particular society in the throes of the interregnum.

(Marais 1992: 45-46)

It is around just such oppositions that Matlou’s text, too, is constructed. The effect of its spatial and temporal dislocation, which may be directly related to its form as short story cycle, similarly “borders on the hallucinatory, the surreal and the grotesque”.³⁰ *Life at Home* similarly subverts the traditional centripetal, integrative short story cycle (tending as the latter does towards regional cohesiveness and a sense of community). But, unlike a text such as *Missing Persons*, this text is also explicitly cast in the mould

of the farm novel. It may therefore be read not only as subversive of the short story cycle, but also of the farm novel.

The one part of Marais's description of *Missing Persons* which I do not believe can unproblematically be transferred to *Life at Home*, concerns what she calls the "frustrated striving for that elusive sense of belonging, a national identity, which so characterises this particular society in the throes of the interregnum". On the contrary, I intend to show that Matlou's text exhibits no such longing and striving and that, like Vladislavic's, and "Unlike previous writers who have utilised the short story cycle form in this country to convey a sense of community and regional identity", it in the end "presents no such comforting fictions" (Marais 1992: 55). Instead, *Life at Home* may be read as generating an irony which results from a "regional identity" premised upon the tendency to elide otherness. The text disrupts the sense of cohesion characteristic of the short story cycle and, I would argue, of the farm novel by presenting the experience of the other who has been all but elided from the farm novel.

Matlou's work may, then, be approached in terms of both the farm novel and the short story cycle. In view of the discussion of the short cycle, one may characterise Smith's work as exhibiting predominantly centripetal characteristics. In terms of the conventions of the farm novel, her fictional world is, finally, bound to a cohesive representation of the land as region. But Matlou's stories tend centrifugally to disrupt space and to make diffuse what had seemed a specific, regionally coloured locale (that of Mabopane, the Pretoria district and the Magaliesberg area stretching to Rustenburg). The sense of cohesiveness – what Morphet calls "a coherent identifiable external world" (1992: 140) – is, as soon it has been created, disrupted. And this dislocation is, significantly, linked to the farm setting of the initial stories.

Even though the stories which make up *Life at Home* started appearing in the 1970s (as noted above), and thus may not have been conceived as a cycle, they are nonetheless connected to one another as a result of repetitive strategies which shape individual stories and link them to one another. So, for instance, the figure of the Moruti in the story "Farm-boy" is repeated in "Life at Home" (27; cf. 20).³¹ The designation of Medupe's parents' life on the farm as that of "slaves", suggested in the first story (cf. 14-15), is repeated in the second (cf. 23, 25, 27, 30, 33, 34).³² As far as the setting of *Life at Home* is concerned, repetition also plays an important role. The

locale sketched in "Farm-boy" is highly specific. The text provides a detailed description of a specific region:

The farm where we lived was called Sterkfontein and it was under the mountain of the Magaliesberg near Pretoria North. We were not far from the nursery of Mr Malan and Son where trees are sold. Our farm was in the bush. We lived in a one-roomed house with a bed and table and one bench, but no windows. Near the house there was a big marula tree. We used to make fire with wood, not coal. In front of our house we had built a small, round room with reeds, which is called 'sebesong', where we used to cook food.

(12)

This passage provides the reader with highly specific references to the locality ("Magaliesberg", Pretoria North", "the nursery of Mr Malan and Son"). The description of the house which follows is repeated, with some differences, in "Life at Home" (24). The reader is also informed that "Our farm was in the bush", an assertion made again later (cf. 15, 35). By the last story ("My Ugly Face"), which recapitulates the first story in presenting the reader with an account of when and how "I came to light" (87), the reader is informed that "We were living in the bush" (87). But the difference is that the locale has now become diffuse and unspecified, and that the people are described as being "destitute" (87) and sleeping in "tents" (88). "My Ugly Face" also blends into "Life at Home" in its repetition of the enigmatic saying "Speech is silver, silence is golden" (87; 34).³³

In "Farm-boy", the narrator says "My father did not drink beer or smoke" (14), an assertion repeated later: "Matlou did not drink or smoke" (25). In "Man Against Himself" this is repeated with regard to the narrator: "Many people were happy to visit me as they knew I was a peace-lover and didn't drink or smoke" (75). The repetition of this information makes the figures of Matlou and his son blur. Elsewhere, Mr Matlou is described enigmatically as smiling "for the last time with his missing teeth" (34). This makes Mr Matlou blend into the man who hires labourers at the offices as R.P.M: he "was a black man with three missing upper teeth" (54).

In "Life at Home", the narrative describing how Matlou and family leave the farm for the Boekenhoutfontein township is interrupted by a strange episode which is presented under the heading "Croco and Impa" (36ff.). The impala returns in "Man Against Himself" in the description of the surreal landscape which confronts the narrator after he flees the mine with his pay: ". . . I crossed a ditch in which a half-

eaten impala lay" (70). This half-eaten impala evokes the description in the earlier story of the attack on the impalas by the crocodiles and thus lends this description a certain hallucinatory character, an effect strengthened by the apparently deadpan way in which the half-eaten impala is mentioned. Moreover, just before the impala is mentioned, the narrator states that "Two black men and a white man on a tractor looked at me, surprised" (70). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these men are linked to the narrator's father, Mr Matlou, and to Oubaas Dick, who are more than once described on a tractor (cf. 12, 19, 25).

These apparently trivial details stand out in a text which seems random, containing as it does 'stories' (the text is called *Life at Home and Other Stories*). Details such as these, with many other repetitions (such as the use of terms like "clever" and "careless"), serve to connect the stories into a short story cycle. They help make *Life at Home* more than merely a loose collection of stories, yet less than a fully-fledged novel.³⁴ *Life at Home* is established as something *between* a novel and a short story collection: it might be said to be a short story cycle and, as such, already disrupts the narrative teleology of the novel as genre.

In addition to the preponderance of apparently irrelevant details (which are, moreover, repeated), a number of unsettling self-reflexive moments recur in the text. Thus, in a section of the story "Life at Home" with the heading "Matlou and Family", the reader is informed that "Mr Matlou and his family were slaves. *Life at Home* says Matlou's family were 'swop-shops'" (27). Similarly, "*Life at Home* says Matlou did not have a reference book, even his wife did not have one" (29). Each of these instances of self-reflexivity draws attention to the constructedness of *Life at Home* in the course of the description of the enslaved position of its protagonists. In addition, it is made quite clear in the text that these protagonists are the Matlous, and that their third child Medupe (30), who explicitly offers himself as the narrator (cf. 11-12), is in fact Joël Matlou himself. One of the pen sketches to be found in the text, portrays a woman carrying a child on her back. The child says "Mama", while the woman says "Aag Aiii Joël shut up!!" (88). And, in "My Lifestyle", the narrator says his name is Joël, although his employer "scratched" that name and called him "Ou Kaak" (51). In "Man Against Himself", the narrator is called by a friend who addresses him as Joël Matlou (60-61). These recurrent self-reflexive moments serve to connect the different stories.

Indeed, the most immediately apparent concrete exemplification of the form of this text as short story cycle is the fact that the individual identified at the start as “the little son of Mr Matlou” (11) is the central figure in the text. This protagonist appears in all the stories save “Carelessman was a Madman”. As noted, Medupe/Joël Matlou is explicitly identified as the narrator of four of the stories in which he appears (of these it is only the story “Life at Home” which seems to have a third-person narrator). In these stories, which consequently appear unrelated yet sustain an interconnectedness among them (or which are related yet in many ways seem unconnected), Matlou traces the life of the youth Medupe (11, 15, 17ff., 30, 89, 96) or Joël (51, 60, 88) Matlou, who says “I am Mr Joël Medupe Matlou of Mabopane” (73). This youth moves with his family from the farm to the city and becomes variously an entrepreneur, a gardener and a miner. Indeed, the fact that the protagonist of *Life at Home* shares a name with its author suggests that *Life at Home* is presented as the fictionalised autobiography of Joël Matlou. But this autobiography is disrupted through the hallucinatory character of the stories, which has a disruptive effect on a realist aesthetic or narrative teleology.

The hallucinatory effect is also of some importance for the reason that a tension might be said to result in *Life at Home* between on the one hand the dreamlike, hallucinatory atmosphere presented and, on the other hand, the harsh *realities* with which the text deals. Indeed, throughout the text suffering appears as a central motif. The protagonist of this text is *not* at home and not secure. This lack of security, of not being *at home* at home, is already suggested in “Farm-boy”. While the story steers clear of any direct comment, the fact that the narrator’s mother “was a ‘kitchen girl’” (12), as well as the assertion that there is no progress at the farm, prepares the reader for the end of the story: “. . . a plan was made for us to leave the farm for ever” (22). In the course of “Life at Home”, Medupe’s father (Mr Matlou) and his family do finally steal away from the farm and move to another home in Boekenhoutfontein.³⁵ The description of the dusty township is bleak. As the narrator puts it, “Life at home was really like at hell. But everything was all right. . . . Matlou was the owner” (40). As I continue to argue below, the move to the township appears as a repetition of (rather than an escape from) the suffering characteristic of life at home on the farm. As such, the move to the township might be said to disrupt the text centrifugally (a break from the farm occurs) while simultaneously unifying it

centripetally in equating, to a degree, life on the farm with life in the township. Each is life at home; moreover, neither offers a true sense of being at home.

5.7 *The Farm Novel, Datedness and Life at Home*

While *Life at Home* starts off on a farm, by the end of the second story that locale has been left behind: the Matlous move from the farm to a township. The text therefore traces the process of urbanisation.³⁶ That the Matlou family moves from the farm to the city suggests the insufficiency of the kind of farm life experienced by them and, indeed, little if any nostalgia – so characteristic of the farm novel in the pastoral mode – is in evidence in this text.

Despite the process of urbanisation, which provides the basic narrative impulse of this text, the farm of the first two stories remains an important reference point against which the later stories may be read. In its representation of farm life from the perspective of the black working-class family which ensures its survival, and in transcending the representation of life on the farm and the mode of realism of the farm novel which is dependent on the occlusion of that on which it is dependent (namely black labour), Matlou's *Life at Home* may be read as moving towards the transcendence of the pastoral. In this sense, *Life at Home* might be a concrete exemplification of Coetzee's (1988: 81) contention that "the silences in the South African farm novel, particularly its silence about the place of the black man in the pastoral idyll . . . speak more loudly now than they did fifty years ago". Matlou's may be read as just such a voice which subverts the farm novel and lets its silences speak by subverting its formal coherence and the cohesiveness of its landscapes. Matlou's voice, that is, may be understood as constituting a voice of alterity in the farm novel. If this is the case, it becomes possible to read the farm novel in terms of, or against, Matlou's response to the narrative of farm life from the perspective of the master.

Yet Matlou's response is by no means a simplistic inversion of terms. Instead, as I hope to show, Matlou does not offer an other cohesion, an other closure. On the contrary, his work may be understood as unsettling such neat inversions and thus moving beyond a whole set of conventional oppositions (among others Ndebele's between the ordinary and the spectacular). As noted above, Ndebele's celebration of Matlou implicitly relates his work to narratives of peasant life. This relation may be

extended to the farm novel, at least partly because *Life at Home* starts off as a representation of life on the farm. Moreover, the text might be said, like the farm novel and *plaasroman*, to dramatise the conflict between the peasant and the capitalist.

The first two stories/chapters of *Life at Home* are concerned with life at home as life on the farm, while suggesting the tension between a slavelike life on the farm and a possibly liberating life away from it. As a "Farm-boy" (11) Medupe is at home on the farm, while his father and mother work as virtually indentured labourers (cf. 23). Medupe knows things only children who live on farms do, such as that "Pigs do not live in the water, but a pig can put its head under water for nearly ten minutes without breathing!" (16). As a farm-boy, "My real play was to climb trees, make wire cars, chase the small pigs and throw apples all over the trees. Also, I used to play with water by opening the taps" (16). The narrator describes farm life as "better than living in the location. Farm life is 100% safe. But at the farm there is little progress" (14). Despite its disadvantages, he claims that "Farm life is better than town life" (17). But this assertion is immediately disrupted because in this, the first story, Medupe's father is already starting to make plans to escape the lot of the peasant by moving to Boekenhoutfontein.

This is a project he pursues in the next story, "Life at Home". Despite the fact that logically as well as chronologically "Life at Home" follows "Farm-boy", in it many of the points made in the first story are repeated, as I showed above. But "Life at Home" is marked from its beginning as being different from "Farm-boy", for it apparently employs a third-person narrator where the earlier story is written in the first person. Even though the opening line of "Life at Home" does employ the first-person plural – "Where we were, we could really feel what the life of a slave was like" (23) – the third-person narrative of the story has the effect of suggesting an other perspective on the circumstances of life on the farm as described in "Farm-boy". The "we" of the first line links "Life at Home" to the first-person narrative that is "Farm-boy", while formally the two stories are to be distinguished in terms of the predominantly third-person narrative of "Life at Home".³⁷ But this narrative mode is disrupted when the narrator again briefly, and apparently inexplicably, slips into first-person narration. This 'slip' occurs in a description of Baas Dick, the farmer: "His

head was not bald but his feet showed *us* that he was old enough to be slow, no one to blame" (31; my emphasis).

It is significant that the 'slip' into first-person narration occurs in a description of the "Baas", a description in turn embedded in a description of an encounter between the farmer and his farm hand, Mr Matlou. The farm hand is making plans (cf. 30) to escape from the farm with his family. In order to do this "they wanted to apply for reference books" (31). Matlou and family are without identity papers: their 'paperlessness' is evident in the fact that Matlou is a tractor driver "without a licence" (25), and he and his family do not have the passbooks that black people in apartheid South Africa were required to carry when travelling, which means that they cannot leave the farm and its environs. They are indeed slaves: they have no freedom of movement. When the family leaves the farm they are described as "escaped convicts" and as "bandits . . . on the run" (35). Baas Dick agrees to provide the family with reference books: "For the boss it was very simple. The following day they were taken to the commissioner for their books. They were fixed without any problems" (32). In this way the members of the family are incorporated into apartheid bureaucracy: the precondition for the freedom of leaving the farm is to give up freedom from that bureaucracy.³⁸

Matlou calls his master by the name: "Baas Dick! Baas Dick! Baas Dick! It is me." (31). It is at this moment that the narrative briefly slips into the first person, identifying the narrator with the Matlous (perhaps strengthening the suggestion that the narrator is their son). The encounter between farmer and worker is described as a meeting "face to face with his favourite boss about their problems" (30). This encounter with otherness, this face-to-face encounter, is not limited to Matlou and his wife's encounter with the boss, but also extends to the narrator who, in bearing witness to this event, as it were suddenly *is present* at this scene, in a sense *becomes* Mr Matlou and his wife:

'Baas Dick! Baas Dick! Baas Dick! It is me.'

Without any problem the boss opened the old wooden door. He was wearing morning shoes and '1945 World War pyjamas'. His head was not bald but his feet showed *us* that he was old enough to be slow, no one to blame.

(31; my emphasis)

The antecedent of the pronoun “us” is unclear. The first-person pronoun “me” in Mr Matlou’s phrase “It is me”, suggests that the pronoun “us” refers to Mr Matlou and his wife, but it also by implication refers to the narrator and his reader. The boss’s feet “showed us” that he was old. The reader and narrator read the signs of senescence in the boss’s feet. That is, it is not only Mr Matlou and his wife who encounter Baas Dick, but also the narrator and reader of *Life at Home*. This may be confirmed with reference to the opening line of “Life at Home”: in reading this story, this text, we are transported to the farm, “we could really feel what the life of a slave was like” (23). The reader of *Life at Home* is forced into an encounter with Baas Dick, but also with Mr Matlou and his family, as well as with peasant life as indentured labourers on a farm in apartheid South Africa.

This suggests that the otherness of the encounter described here involves substitution of the self for the other. In the encounter with otherness, the self itself becomes other. While I claimed above that the reader in a sense *is present* or *becomes* Mr Matlou and his wife, it is important to underscore that s/he is present and bears witness only to the extent that s/he is not present and does not become these characters. The reader is present at the scene in her or his absence, and becomes the characters in not becoming them. In the act of reading, the singular event being narrated is repeated ‘in’ the reader. The self experiences an alterity within, an alterity which, moreover, implies a singularity that inescapably involves her or him and nobody else. After all, it is *this* reader who is reading and who is, consequently, confronted with the otherness of and in the text. It is *this* reader (in the irreducibly singular experience of reading *this* other text) who is transported into an other space and time, and who thus encounters also the other in the text, while simultaneously remaining the same – if altered – individual reading the text. I read the story here, now, while typing at the computer, while *at the same time* I become an other and am altered in my encounter with Baas Dick, with life on the farm as a slave. I am here and I am there: I am myself and I am an other. I am substituted for the other.

My consideration so far of an otherness within the reader hinges on two important discussions: that of Derrida (cf. 1992a) on the deportation of the date, and that of Levinas (cf. 1996d) on the concept of substitution. These two notions are closely related: in the deportation of the date the reading self is transported into an encounter with otherness, enforcing a responsibility which was not chosen by the self

but occurs in an unpredictable way in the course of the act of reading. This responsibility arises outside of the volition of the reader in the course of her or his reading of a text that s/he might or might not have chosen to read. One could say that the reader to a certain degree *surrenders* herself or himself to the text. Even though reading admittedly is an (inter)activity, it therefore nevertheless does to an important degree entail *passivity* in the face of the otherness to which it gives access or, rather, which confronts the reader.

It should be noted that Derrida (1992a: 388) insists as follows on the singularity of the date: “This you [the date], which must be an I . . . always figures an irreplaceable singularity. Only another singularity, just as irreplaceable, can take its place without substituting for it. One addresses this you as one addresses a date, the here and now of a commemorable provenance”. The date cannot be substituted because of its “irreplaceable singularity”. But this use of the term ‘substitution’ does not cancel out a Levinasian approach. The other, as much as the date commemorated, is always past, always singular and always irreplaceable. Yet the self here and now encounters it. The self has a certain responsibility for the other, for the date.³⁹ This responsibility entails, among other things, respecting its otherness. The self is responsible for the otherness of the other and, indeed, for the other itself. It is in this sense that the self must be – and is – substituted as hostage for the other. This is a responsibility for the other who is substituted by the self, so that the self’s identity is broken up by the intrusion of otherness *into* the self. In Levinas’s terminology, the self is, as a hostage of the other, persecuted by the other in her or his obsession with the other – in this case, with the event of the other encountered in the act of reading. This persecution of the self by the other arises precisely because the self, in her or his radical responsibility for the other, is substituted for the suffering, persecuted and naked other. The other’s suffering becomes the self’s suffering. The other “is the persecuted one for whom I am responsible to the point of being a hostage for him” (Levinas 1981: 59). The self herself or himself is substituted for the other because of the singularity of the self. No one can replace me in my responsibility for the other as the self cannot be substituted in the act of substituting itself for the other: “I am then called upon in my uniqueness as someone for whom no one else can substitute himself” (1981: 59). It is in this sense that the self becomes the hostage of the other.

According to Levinas, the self is *affected* by otherness, but “without the source of the affection becoming a theme of re-presentation” (1996d: 81). That is, the other which affects the self, in its irreducible pastness (as noted in Chapter 3) remains always outside the purview of the self’s gaze: the other, as trace, is not a phenomenon but an enigma. In “Substitution”, an essay which later was to form the central chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas designates this ‘unrelating relation’ an “obsession”: “The term *obsession* designates this relation which is irreducible to consciousness” (1996d: 81). In its irreducibility to consciousness, this strange relation with the other “overturns” consciousness while manifesting itself in it. As such, “obsession traverses consciousness contrariwise, inscribing itself there as something foreign, as disequilibrium, as delirium” (1996d: 81). The self, in the encounter with the other, is dislodged by something an-archic, without origin – the encounter is beyond the opposition between order and disorder. As I argued in my earlier discussion of Levinas, the other *disturbs* the order of the same without disturbing it. As he puts it, “Disorder is but another order, and the diffuse can possibly be thematized. . . . Anarchy troubles being beyond these alternatives” (1996d: 81).⁴⁰ Because of the irreducible pastness of the other, it always exceeds the attempt of the self to contain it. As a result, “the Ego is evinced in the ascendancy of the Other over the Same to the point of interruption, leaving it speechless: an-archic, obsession is persecution. Here persecution does not amount to consciousness gone mad; it designates the manner in which the Ego is affected and a defection from consciousness” (1996d: 81).

The important point which I would like to emphasise here is that, in its disturbance which does not disturb, the other disrupts the self’s satisfaction. Levinas compares this disturbance of the “foreign”, which results in “disequilibrium”, with “delirium”. The disturbance of the self by the other appears as a kind of madness. The self’s coincidence with itself, “the return to self of consciousness” (1996d: 84) – which Levinas designates the philosophical description of identity (cf. 1996d: 83ff.) – is broken up by the other so that the self no longer coincides with itself, a process he suggests is akin to delirium, a state of excitement, mental confusion, hallucination. Yet Levinas continues by claiming that the obsession or persecution of the self by the other “does not amount to consciousness gone mad”. This is because Levinas, too, is confronted with the dilemma that to describe otherness, and the encounter with the other, is to reduce its otherness. To describe this encounter in terms of delirium is to

incorporate it into an order: "Disorder is but another order. . . .". Thus Levinas interrupts his determination of the encounter with the other by claiming that such an encounter cannot be characterised as "consciousness gone mad". Rather, obsession, which is persecution, "designates the manner in which the Ego is affected and a defection *from* consciousness" (1996d: 81; my emphasis). The point, importantly, is that the encounter with otherness takes place both inside and outside of consciousness, seeing that "this relation overturns consciousness and manifests itself there" (1996d: 81). It takes place in a kind of "No-place" (Levinas 1996d: 87; cf. Waldenfels 1995: 44). That is, the encounter with otherness exceeds consciousness so totally that it is beyond the opposition between consciousness and non-consciousness. While it thus resembles delirium, it cannot be determined as madness because then it would still be defined in terms of the opposition between presence of mind (or sanity) and a being beyond oneself. This is to say that the encounter with otherness, which exceeds consciousness, also exceeds intentionality, retaining as the latter does "the initiating and inchoate motif of a voluntary intention" (1996d: 82).

For Levinas, the responsibility for the other thus exceeds consciousness, intentionality and freedom: ". . . for consciousness, responsibility is always strictly measured in terms of freedom, and thus always limited" (1996d: 82). Consequently, Levinas places the philosophical notion of identity as the coincidence of consciousness with itself – the return or recurrence of the self to itself – in question. The self-identity of the self is radically placed in question in the encounter with the other: ". . . persecution [is] a placing in question anterior to questioning, a responsibility beyond the logos of the response, as though persecution by the other (*autrui*) were the basis of solidarity with the other (*autrui*)" (1996d: 82). This is to say that the process of substitution for the other, which Levinas characterises as the ethical unrelating relation to the other, implies an infinite and radical responsibility for the other. Waldenfels (1995: 44) puts this point succinctly:

Levinas takes this kind of responsibility as original substitution. Through this substitution, I become a corporeal hostage of the Other and have to substitute myself for him with life and limb, and that in a radical form. The responsibility for Others that originates at this point does not mean a pure co-responsibility, which would presuppose self-responsibility and which would be grounded in compassion, benevolence and empathy. On the contrary, I am responsible by substituting myself for the Other.

The reader of *Life at Home*, I am arguing, in being involved in and bearing witness to life on the farm, is made responsible for the other's life on the farm by being included by the other – or, rather, substituting for the other – in the encounter with that existence. But at the same time the otherness of life on the farm is not reduced: life on the farm, and the singularity of the life on the farm of *this* family, remains irreducibly other to the self. This otherness is apparent in that the description of life on the farm is *other* to that described in the farm novel. Life on the farm is described here from the perspective of the black labourers on whose labour it is built.⁴¹ That the farm does not belong to the people who work it is made explicit right at the start of *Life at Home*, a point implicitly linked to the political situation in apartheid South Africa, as suggested by the reference to the South African flag which “was still in the air” (as if its presence were temporary):

It all started like a dream, when I was a farm-boy near the Magaliesberg mountain. The South African flag was still in the air, waving its colour-signs. I must have been very little then, because I could only see as far as 1 000 metres. I was born on the farm of a white family. I was the little son of Mr Matlou. Really, I was a farm-boy.

(11)

Moreover, the fact that the people who do the work do not own the farm, is suggested particularly strongly in “Life at Home”. The “wealthy farmer” (23) “looked after his staff” (24): “He built houses, fed the staff, transported their children to school and to hospital, and guarded them at night when they were asleep. The farmer thought he was doing well, that he was a good farmer and not like other farmers” (24). However, “his people were slaves and suffering”. In view of the bondage of his “staff”, the fact that the farmer “guarded” them at night – with “four dangerous police dogs” (14) – appears ominous. Guarding the farm is meant not only to protect the people on the farm, but to keep them there, something suggested in the later description of the farm as a “jail” (35), as noted above.

The Matlous live “on one of the farmer’s properties” (24), yet another indication of unequal distribution of affluence and power. This “wealthy farmer” employs other farmers to oversee his farms: “Matlou’s family was so worried because after every two years there would come a new farmer on their land. The farmers were changing land after two years, but Matlou’s family must always remain on the land

with new farmers” (24). While Mr Matlou has to work extremely hard, “[waking] up early in the morning to feed birds, pigs, cattle, cats and dogs” (25), the farmer “woke up at ten o’clock” (25). Mr Matlou

used to work seven days a week without any time off. The farmer did not want anyone to help him because, he said, Matlou was a hard-working man and a ‘good boy’. He was working hard so he could feed his children and his wife. His wife was a ‘kitchen girl’ with a good old reputation. Also, she was a hard worker.

(25)⁴²

“Matlou did not have a clocking-off time for his work” (29). He works all the time: “Sometimes his ‘boss’ (the farmer) would call him at night, using the sound of a gun, to help him at the garages of their two old-model Ford station-wagons. When Matlou heard the sound of a strong gun he would know that his boss wanted him nearer” (29). The lot of these landless peasants is strikingly described in *Life at Home* as “a hard work to unsuccess” (25).

As should be evident, *Life at Home* differs from the farm novel in particular in taking the vantage point of the black, embodied other on the farm. Taking this perspective, I am arguing, confronts the reader of *Life at Home* with the otherness of the life of the black other on the farm, so different from the kind of farm life described in the farm novel. Yet the singularity of this otherness is maintained, I would argue, as a result of the formal devices employed in this text.⁴³ One such device occurs in the ‘slip’ from third into first-person narrative which opens the (reading) self to the other, which substitutes the (reading) self for the other with which s/he is confronted in reading.⁴⁴

The opening of the reading self to an alterity within her- or himself may also be illustrated in terms of the *specificity* of *Life at Home*, in particular as far as space and time (places, dates, times) are concerned. In this specificity *Life at Home* markedly differs from the farm novel, as implied in my discussion of the (apparent lack of) historicity of that form.⁴⁵ The highly particular dates and times in evidence in this text are not only uncharacteristic of the farm novel as pastoral text, but reinforce the singularity and separateness of each story and act centrifugally to dissociate them from one another. At the same time, the specification of the locale of the stories with their constant reference point, namely home – the farm close to the Magaliesberg and

Pretoria (cf. 11, 12, 23-24, 29, 34) and Boekenhoutfontein/Mabopane (cf. 22, 33, 36, 48, 54, 61, 73, 75), places which are, moreover, regionally linked – serves centripetally to connect them. The stories have the ‘same’ locale as reference point: home (albeit different homes), while that reference point is circumscribed by various datelines.

As noted above (5.5), *Life at Home* starts with a detailed description of the regional locale which forms its setting. In this regard, Coetzee’s (1992e: 61) comment pertaining to the pastoral mode is germane: “At the center of the mode, it seems to me, lies the idea of the local solution. The pastoral defines and isolates a space in which whatever cannot be achieved in the wider world (particularly the city) can be achieved”. The “idea of the local solution” is important with respect to *Life at Home* for two reasons, both of which pertain to Matlou’s move beyond the pastoral. In the first place, this idea contrasts with the paradoxical lack of specificity, the a-historical nature of the regionalism of the pastoral as well as of its inverse, the anti-pastoral (such as evident, according to Coetzee, in Schreiner). The rather bizarre specificity of place and time in *Life at Home* perhaps does not invoke, oppose or resist the pastoral as much as it leaves the pastoral behind. Secondly, Coetzee’s comment is significant also in that it would seem to make explicit, when applied to *Life at Home* as a text beyond the pastoral, the degree to which this text does *not* offer solutions (whether local or otherwise). Where the pastoral mode, as evident for instance in the farm novel, is nostalgic for a way of life which has passed, and does attempt to offer local, often nostalgic solutions – in view of my discussion above of the farm novel, I am thinking more of Smith than Schreiner – *Life at Home* is far from nostalgic with regard to farm life and uncompromisingly bleak in its assessment of possible solutions to the problems of modernisation and urbanisation. These latter factors, of course, as I indicated above, constitute the *raison d’être* of the farm novel as pastoral form.

As far as the strange specificity with regard to locale and time characteristic of this collection is concerned, one should note that such specificity is a recurrent technique of the text. That is, the specificity of the descriptions exacerbates the hallucinatory nature of the text rather than rendering it more ‘real’, more *historical*, as might have been expected. The preponderance of specific, indeed singular, dates and times does not seem in any way to communicate essential information or familiarise the reader with the text. On the contrary, the very irrelevance of these data lends them

an air of the absurd which I would claim exacerbates the reader's sense of homelessness in the text.

The dreamlike sequence in "Farm-boy", when the boy is attacked in his sleep by the Moloji Mogwapa (17-19), is one case among many which might be used to illustrate this point. This strange, magical realist sequence,⁴⁶ is prefaced by a specific reference to a date: "The day was a Saturday of June 1962" (17). Later the reader is informed that "Now the time was half past nine (9.30 p.m.)" (17) and that "At about 12.30 a.m. the Mogwapa or Moloji opened the window by style" (18). After the Moloji has "hammered a big needle into the top of my head to kill me" (18), one reads that "In the morning at about six o'clock the young John woke up and went to his usual play. I was left dying" (18). The relevance of the highly specific information with regard to date and time is unclear: it does not seem to make any difference *when exactly* this event occurred. And yet, within the space of a page, the reader is given such information four times. The significance of the information, of course, is its *insignificance*: it serves to highlight the strangeness of the sequence in its apparently irrelevant specificity, its very real historicity. Part of the strangeness of this dreamlike sequence is that it seems to be offered as being perfectly run-of-the-mill, as not being strange *at all*. Indeed, this episode is sketched as one among many other, apparently more ordinary ones. The deadpan insertion of such an apparently magical incident, with the highly specific information pertaining to the singular date and time of its occurrence, highlights its strangeness.

It should also be noted that, while highly specific dates and times are provided, this information is as often as not pertinently relativised. The narrator refers to "a Saturday of June 1962", "*about* 12.30", "*about* six o'clock" (17-18; my emphasis). The moment a certain air of historicity is lent to this strange, magical episode (thus, as I have been arguing, rendering it even stranger in its apparent ordinariness), this historicity is simultaneously disrupted. If such a thing were possible, one might say this episode – and Matlou's text generally – evidences vague specificity. Such 'vague specificity' (or singular generality) disrupts itself and might, in terms of my consideration of irony in this study, be called ironic.

Indeed, this kind of 'vague specificity' is involved also with what I above called the 'transportation' of the reading self into the text, and into an encounter with the other. This 'transportation' of the reader is dependent on the 'deportation' of the

dates in the text. As this is a point of some importance to my argument with regard to an otherness within, I would like to consider at some length Derrida's illuminating discussion of the date *vis-à-vis* the work of Paul Celan. Derrida (1992a: 389-390) notes that

It is necessary that the mark which one calls a date be *marked off*, in a singular manner, detached from the very thing which it dates; and that in this demarcation, this deportation, it become readable, that it become readable, precisely, as a date in wresting or exempting itself from itself, from its immediate adherence, from the here and now; in freeing itself from what it nonetheless remains, a date. It is necessary that the unrepeatable (*das Unwiederholbare*) be repeated in it, effacing in itself the irreducible singularity which it denotes. . . . It must efface itself in order to become readable, to render itself unreadable in its very readability. For if it does not annul in itself the unique marking which connects it to an event without witness, without other witness, it remains intact but absolutely indecipherable. It is no longer even what it has to be, its essence and its destination, it no longer keeps its promise, that of a date.

The date must be deported if it is to be readable. If it is to be a date at all, it must be 'de-marcated' from the absolutely singular event which it commemorates, for it would not be decipherable as commemorating that unique event if the other were not to bear witness to that event via the date which stands in for – substitutes – the absolutely other, thus enunciating "the possibility of a recurrence" (1992a: 394). The date is deported from the event and thus read in the text; this deportation of the date implies the transportation of the reader, the other who bears witness to the event.

A date is per definition singular and unrepeatable, yet must in principle be repeatable and therefore generalisable if it is to be readable. Derrida (1992a: 380-381), quoting Celan's exclamation "*Aber das Gedicht spricht ja! Es bleibt seiner Daten angedenk, aber – es spricht*". . . . ('But the poem speaks! It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. . . .'), notes that

despite the date, in spite of its memory rooted in the singularity of an event, the poem speaks; to all and in general, to the other first of all. The "but" seems to carry the poem's utterance beyond its date: if the poem recalls a date, calls itself back to its date, to the date *when* it writes or *of which* it writes, as of . . . which it is written, nevertheless it speaks! to all, to the other, to whoever does not share the experience or the knowledge of the singularity thus dated

(Derrida 1992a: 381)

It would seem that a text is rooted to its singular date and speaks of that date. The otherness of the text is apparent in its datedness. Yet this text, in its otherness, speaks to an other, to an other who or which is itself dated. The text speaks from its date to an other date. The dates 'of' the text are necessarily in the past and the future. In speaking to a future date, the date of the text becomes generalised *in its singularity*: ". . . writing *at* a certain date [means] not only writing on a given day, at a given hour, but also writing *to* [à] the date, addressing oneself to it, committing oneself to the date as to the other, the date past as well as the promised date" (1992a: 381).

But the date, even as it effaces itself in order to become readable – as it annuls in itself "the unique marking which connects it to an event without witness" (1992a: 390) – remains irreducibly other. In its substitution for the irreducibly other, it is in itself another singularity, unique and specific at the same time as, in order to be readable, generalised and 'vague'. And in this substitution for the other without substituting it, the date is like the reader. For s/he, too, reads the unreadable in encountering otherness in the text via the date. The reading of the date *necessarily* reduces its otherness and the otherness of the event which it signifies. But this reductive reading must, in turn, be reduced in order to maintain the absolute singularity of the other being read. The recurrence of the event in the date which marks its occurrence must be recognised as not being an *absolute* recurrence, but as marking "the spectral return of that which, unique in its occurrence, will never return. A date is a specter" (Derrida 1992a: 394).

In commemorating, and thus signifying something which is irreducibly other, yet allowing it to recur spectrally, the date is like a *shibboleth*: it is like a password which gives the reader access to the event it commemorates. Derrida notes this with regard to the fact that more than one event can be signified or commemorated by the same date: "The date itself resembles a *shibboleth*. It gives ciphered access to this collocation, to this secret configuration of places for memory" (1992a: 402). A series of singular, apparently unconnected events and places can be invoked by a single date, which allows them to be reconfigured as a "collocation" in memory. The point here is that the date always refers to a singular event, but in its potential reference to such singularity it can also, and must be able to, link disparate, apparently unconnected events to one another in aleatory fashion. This suggests that a particular date is less a

point in time than a *singular multiplicity* of singularities. The date, in revealing the event, may and does also reveal other events which may become readable in terms of yet other, similarly dated events. As much as the date discloses as *shibboleth*, it also indicates the infinite absence of an infinite number of other events marked by the same date. The date thus marks an irreducible absence not only in its commemoration of an absolutely irreducibly other event (which it nonetheless allows to 'recur' and thus to become readable, thus transporting the reader into otherness), but also in *other* similarly dated events.

This is to say that the date hides as much as it reveals: it refers to *this* event, and to an infinite number of others which it does not explicitly commemorate but which would have occurred on that date all the same: "The date (signature, moment, place, gathering of singular marks) always functions as a *shibboleth*. It shows that there is something not shown. . . ." (Derrida 1992a: 413). Even though Derrida's reading of the date as *shibboleth* is specifically, singularly a reading of a number of poems by Paul Celan, this is the case as far as *any* kind of language is concerned: "In a language, in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*" (1992a: 413).

What Derrida says about the date applies not only to texts which are explicitly dated. All texts are necessarily dated: a text much be repeatable, its singularity and otherness in principle effaceable.⁴⁷ And it applies, too, to the date in general. Nonetheless, given that dates and times play such a prominent role in *Life at Home*, one might say that this text seems particularly mindful of dates.⁴⁸

Yet Derrida indicates (as noted above) that the text speaks *despite* this mindfulness of the singularity of the date (or dates) of which it speaks. The absolutely singular date of the text, from which it is written and to which it refers, recurs in the reading of the text. Despite the absolutely irreducible otherness of the text evident in the absolute singularity of its date, the text speaks. In fact, it is *because* rather than *in spite* of this otherness that the text can speak: "Instead of walling it up and reducing it to the silence of singularity, a date gives it [the text] its chance, its chance to speak to the other!" (1992a: 382). The text as other is due to its date but also due to an other date, at which it is read. Derrida (1992a: 382) notes that this means the text speaks of its date only in as far as it "acquits" itself of that date

without, however, “disavowing” it. Even though it is eternally marked by its date, it “absolves”, and must absolve, itself.

It absolves itself of it so that its utterance may resonate and proclaim beyond a singularity which might otherwise remain undecipherable, mute, and immured in its date – in the unrepeatable. One must, while preserving its memory, speak of the date which already speaks of itself: the date, by its mere occurrence, by the inscription of a sign as memorandum, will have broken the silence of pure singularity. But to speak of it, one must also efface it, make it readable, audible, intelligible *beyond the pure singularity* of which it speaks. Now the beyond of absolute singularity, the chance of the poem’s exclamation, is not the simple effacement of the date in a generality, but its *effacement faced with* another date, the one *to which* it speaks, the date of an other strangely wed or joined in the secrecy of an encounter, a chance secret, with the same date.

(Derrida 1992a: 382)

It is just this kind of singularity – “a Saturday of *June 1962*”, “about 12.30”, “about six o’clock” (17-18; my emphasis) – which is in evidence in *Life at Home*, but which is simultaneously (already in being posited in its singularity and otherness) also qualified and generalised. Not only do these dates and these times imply *other* dates and times (mine, yours, others’) in being mentioned, but in being mentioned in this way the necessary generalisation and effacement which would make them readable are enacted in the qualification of their specificity. That is, these dates and times – which are other *but* already, in their “mere occurrence”, speak of themselves – are incorporated into a general economy of the sign. But the trace of their singularity remains in their singularity which is indeterminable. These dates and times contain within themselves the otherness of the text, an otherness which is ironically interrupted as it occurs, for otherwise it would not be readable. But the date of the other who reads is “the same date” as that of the text: the date has not been ‘disavowed’. The reading other’s date is, in the encounter with the text, “strangely” (Derrida 1992a: 382) the same date as that of the text. Reading the text, the self is not only confronted with otherness in the reading encounter, but that encounter entails the interruption of the self by the other. As I read the text, its singular date is repeated and becomes mine. I experience the date of the other on the date of my reading now. My date is also an other’s date. The text, in its otherness, confronts me with an otherness within myself.

As I noted above in my discussion of Levinas's notion of substitution, the self-identity of the self is radically placed in question in the encounter with the other. I also noted there that this interruption of self-identity in the encounter with otherness is compared by Levinas with madness, and that this comparison itself is interrupted so as to prevent the determination of the encounter with otherness *as* madness. A second important point with regard to the encounter with otherness needs to be made: that, despite the interruption of self-identity, the self is not alienated from itself. Levinas is quite clear on this point. The constitution of the self is 'dependent' on an encounter with otherness. As Waldenfels (1995: 44) puts it, "substitution [does not] stand for alienation, because this would imply that there is already a self that becomes alien to itself". The subject – who is a subject in being subject to the demands of the other (cf. Waldenfels 1995: 42) – is an entity that consists of an alterity within, rather than of a self identical to itself. If the self has an essence, then that essence would be that it has no essence. The self is alienated from itself in denying its own alterity and its related responsibility to what and who is other: "Paradoxically it is qua *alienus* – foreigner and other – that man is not alienated" (Levinas 1981: 59).

Furthermore, as I also noted above, in terms of the logic of substitution the self is persecuted in the persecution of the other. But this persecution must not be misunderstood as being mere "compassion, benevolence, and empathy" (Waldenfels 1995: 44). The suffering of the other *is* the suffering of the self. J. M. Coetzee has put this in eloquent terms:

The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure.)

. . . . Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. . . . And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.

(Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human

suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.)

(1992a: 248)

One does not *grant* the authority of the suffering body: it is beyond volition. The suffering of the other, as Coetzee puts it, overwhelms the self. Or rather, it overwhelms himself, his self. The self who is Coetzee, overwhelmed by suffering, experiences an unbearable, radical, and infinite responsibility for the other, who suffers. This responsibility for the other experienced by the self as “being-overwhelmed” is as good a description as any of Levinasian substitution with its concomitant persecution of the self by the other who is persecuted. The suffering body of the other calls for a response, for a responsible response (cf. Levinas 1996d: 87). In Coetzee’s case, such a response at least partially entails “fictional constructions”. And these responses, no matter how “paltry” and “ludicrous” they may be, no matter how much they may seem to be “defenses”, are, nevertheless, responses to suffering.

It is important to note that *no* response to the suffering of the other, no matter how responsible, can ever be adequate. This is, of course, not to claim that any response will do. But Coetzee’s denigration of his fictions in terms of their inadequacy as responses not only implies a degree of self-conscious irony (as does also his reference to the allegedly sophisticated superiority of philosophy over fiction), but acknowledges that *nothing* can – and may be allowed to – prevent one’s “being-overwhelmed” by suffering.⁴⁹

In view of my discussion of the Levinasian notion of substitution, I would now like to turn to the question of suffering in *Life at Home*. While the reader of *Life at Home*, in reading the text, discovers an otherness within her- or himself (by being transported in order to bear witness to events, a process I have attempted to link to the deportation of the date) this otherness within the reader is augmented by the description of the protagonist of the text as an alienated, suffering man. In other words, while one must distinguish between on the one hand the alienation suffered by the protagonist (an alienation which in the text is suggested to be the consequence of material conditions such as exploitation on the farm and in the mine, as much as the inauthenticity of his existence) and, on the other hand, the otherness within discovered by the reader of *Life at Home*, this representation of the protagonist nonetheless would

seem to disable further the ability of the reader comfortably to settle down, as it were at home, in the text.⁵⁰ The text is *other* and strange, singular in its form, language, and dates. And its otherness is augmented in its descriptions of suffering and madness.

Suffering unremittingly forms part of *Life at Home*. Indeed, this suffering has its origins in the status of the narrator-protagonist and his family as peasants very much caught up in a localised version of pastoral on a farm, and later township, in apartheid South Africa. It is in order to *escape* from the life of a suffering and enslaved pastoralist on a distinctly unpastoral farm that the Matlous leave the farm to join the stream of humanity looking for solutions in the city, in the township with its apparent access to job opportunities in factories or mines. However, as I have intimated, these solutions prove to be problematic and it is the suffering of the protagonist, his consequent alienation from himself, and the exacerbation of the reader's alterity within (consequent upon the suffering of the other), which I would like to emphasise in my discussion.

The story "Man Against Himself" is an evocative, disturbing account of what being "an iron or steel hunter" (42) entails, that is, what it is like to be black and working a mine in apartheid South Africa. In this story, Medupe decides to try for work at the Rustenburg Platinum Mine (R.P.M.) at Bleskop (53). The story commences with a frenzied rush to board trains (54ff.), with the protagonist running out of money and, consequently, being forced to sleep in a toilet (55). As the story proceeds, the link between capital and apartheid is made clear: the prospective employees have to hand in their passes (54, 59, 60). Moreover, they are subjected to humiliating communal medical check-ups (60).

Despite this depiction of deprivation and suffering, Ndebele claims that in "Man Against Himself" "there is a sense of the ordinary that is the very antithesis of spectacle" (1991a: 50) for the reason that "There is no unearned heroism here; instead there is the unproclaimed heroism of the ordinary person" (1991a: 53). Suffering and deprivation would make poignant the narrator/protagonist's journey away from and back towards home. The story might thus be described, following Ndebele (1991a: 51), as "a long odyssey of suffering".

Noyes (1997: 26) has argued as follows with reference to narrative teleology and the notion of nation:

In the time stretched out between the beginning and the end of a tale, we experience a departure and a longing for home, an Odyssey in which narrated experience gains meaning by virtue of its disparity from the promise of fulfilment on which the narration is founded. . . . In the mythology of delayed return the pathos of nation is told as a spatialization of life.⁵¹

Narrative is premised upon an absence from home, which means that narrative structurally tends towards breaking down in the return home of the absent one, something which ends the narrative and closes it off (cf. Noyes 1997: 28, 31). As Noyes (1997: 25) argues, “The sedentary basis of national unity – that is to say its territoriality – is self-evident”. But this modern understanding of the nation as constructed upon sedentary life, is based on “the mythology of a departure and a return home [which] serves as a tale of sedentary life and an exclusion of nomadic life” (Noyes 1997: 24).⁵² That is, the journey enacted by narrative is conditional upon the necessary arrival home at the termination of the journey. The journey is finite. The suffering which figures so strongly in “Man Against Himself”, and which is articulated in highly explicit terms (cf. 72, 73), would thus constitute a necessary rite of passage, “a kind of initiation story” (Ndebele 1991a: 51) on the way home.

Ndebele (1991a: 51) confirms that, after having undergone “such brazen and humiliating exploitation”, the protagonist “[emerges] from the entire experience feeling triumphant”. To Ndebele this is suggested in a passage he characterises as evincing “deeply philosophical contemplation” (1991a: 51). This passage describes the narrator’s escape (cf. 68) from the mine. He has worked underground for twenty-four days and waited another six days for his pay. During these six days he has wandered around aimlessly (68), not realising that he “was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown” (69). Finally, the narrator is handed the money for which he has “risked my life and reason” (69). The remarkable passage to which Ndebele refers then follows:

. . . I just thrust it [the money] into my empty pocket and walked out of the main gate towards the bush to free myself. That time life was not endless but everlasting. The earth was once supposed to be flat. Well, so it is, from Hlatini to Northam. That fact does not prevent science from proving that the earth as a whole is spherical. We are still at the stage that life itself is flat – the distance from birth to death. Yet the probability is that life, too, is

spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the hemisphere we know.

(70)

Ndebele cites this passage as a sign of the ordinary in its “discovery of complexity in a seemingly ordinary and faceless worker” (1991a: 51), but then moves on without considering the passage at any great length. But the passage is deserving of closer scrutiny. In it Matlou moves, with dizzying speed, from a specific locale to infinite extension. The result is a deeply unsettling confrontation with alterity, an opening of life conceived as an enclosed totality to a disruptive infinity which exceeds it. The moment of freedom is interrupted by something which defeats understanding, namely the possibility that life resists being narrativised and thus ordered, that history is profoundly non-narrative (cf. Jameson 1981: 82). Just like the earth was once supposed to be flat, even though science has in the meantime proved it to be spherical, so life is still supposed to be “flat”. It is flat because it measures “the distance from birth to death”, a distance which results from being given the order of autobiography.⁵³

The alterity discovered by the protagonist in himself is a consequence of the incapacity of the subject to be ‘at home’ with himself: he is deeply split, that is, not only as a consequence of an inauthentic existence, something resulting from alienating labour in an apartheid mine, factory, or on a farm, but also because his self-sufficiency and ability to contain the story of his life is put in question. His *representation* of himself, which is necessarily narrative in nature, is inadequate to his life in that it necessarily leaves something out because life, indeed history, is profoundly *non-narrative*. This is to say that any representation of the self (which would necessarily be a *narrative* representation) is at once fragmentary and denies that fragmentariness. It denies its fragmentariness in that it presents itself as a whole: narrative offers a face. But the face offered by narrative is necessarily premised upon the exclusion of something else: the face excludes otherness in order to appear.

Any representation presupposes alterity within itself because it is necessarily incomplete and fragmentary. Alterity is a structural necessity of narrative. And the subject of *Life at Home* in this passage may thus be said to discover alterity within (his version of) himself.⁵⁴ The self is not self-identical; the ‘recurrence’ of the consciousness of the self to itself, to put it in Levinas’s terms (cf. 1996d: 82ff.) is

necessarily interrupted by another. And in this interruption of self-identity by the other, which exceeds representation and yet is presupposed by representation (in that representation is dependent on what it excludes), the self discovers that in its suffering it substitutes for the other. The narrative representation by the self of itself, attempting to exclude as it does otherness, already implies the introduction of otherness into the account. The self in the passage quoted above may be said, in his suffering, to recognise the otherness within himself which is part of the identity of the subject (as subject to the other). Even though “life itself is flat”, this is only a stage similar to that which “once supposed [the earth] to be flat”. He recognises that any view of the life of the self which excludes otherness – what we do not know, or exclude, or ignore – is “flat”.

But this flatness is one-dimensional in its perspective on life. It is true that life may be narrativised and may, as a result, appear to trace the distance from birth to death, just as it is true that the earth is, quite literally, flat from Hlatini to Northam. However, of course, even though the earth may *appear* flat in the presence of the self, it is not flat at all but a curve (as science has proved). Similarly, even though it might appear, in the supposed presence of the self (for instance in autobiography), to be possible to measure the distance between birth and death and designate it life, it is entirely possible that such a measurement is an imposition from the outside which lends order to what has none. That is, in autobiography the complexity of life is reduced in order to render that life comprehensible. Only in reducing that complexity – in excluding otherness – does one become able to narrate the life of the subject of autobiography.⁵⁵

The feasibility of such a procedure is radically questioned in this passage: “Yet the probability is that life, too, is spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the hemisphere we know”. Life is probably not flat at all, but a sphere. In fact, what we know of life is only the half of it (“the hemisphere we know”). The other half cannot be known, which means that life is “much more extensive and capacious” than what we know. It is for this reason that life (as sphere) always exceeds our (flattening) narrative of it. The passage thus moves from the teleological linearity of realist narrative to the spherical nature of identity faced with infinity; the passage disrupts *conceptuality*.

Autobiography, like narrative generally, inevitably leaves something out. As I argued above, alterity (the *infinity* of alterity) is presupposed by the structure of the representation and narration of the self. And in this passage the self who is about to set itself free after having suffered immensely on an apartheid mine, is confronted by just this alterity. It is an alterity which is not to be known, and which exceeds all representations made of it. It is an alterity, that is, which interrupts all attempts to enclose it and which disrupts the neat narrative of the self.

Moreover, importantly, this is an alterity which interrupts the self-satisfaction of the self. Instead of being satisfied, or, indeed, 'triumphant' at his escape from a hellish existence (as Ndebele would have it), the protagonist experiences a sense of intense, hallucinatory dislocation bordering on madness.⁵⁶ The passage under discussion is followed immediately by the following sentences: "The black dots in my eyes turned brown, like a dagga-smoker or a dreamer. I felt like a political asylum-seeker, running to Tanzania. To get to Northam I had to cross two compounds. I ran like hell until I crossed A and B Compounds" (70). The freedom that the self wants eludes him. Like "a dagga-smoker or a dreamer", the protagonist experiences a bizarre sense of spatial and temporal dislocation further heightened by his encounter with a set of random, strange events marked, as elsewhere in *Life at Home*, by 'vague specificity' as far as dates and times are concerned. The narrator is on the run and does not find peace and freedom: "Far from the ploughing men I crossed a ditch in which a half-eaten impala lay. Birds were singing, animals roaring. At 8 p.m. cars passed me, one after another and I started to fear for my life. I hid under small bridges or in the long grass" (70).

The end of "Man Against Himself" may appear triumphant. The story ends with the narrator back home, in Mabopane:

There was nothing which worried me. I had thought that getting back to Mabopane's dusty roads would lead me to suffer, but eating alone was almost more than I could bear. I learned to forget yesterdays and to think of tomorrows. Each morning in the township, I said to myself: 'Today is a new life.' I overcame my fear of loneliness and my fear of want. I am happy and fairly successful now and have a lot of enthusiasm and love for life. I know now that I shall never again be afraid of sleeping under a tree alone, regardless of what life hands me. I don't have to fear blasting. I know now that I can live one day at a time and that every day is a time for a wise man.

(75-76)

However, far from exemplifying the triumph of the narrator over suffering, this passage is highly ambivalent. Each suggestion of (triumphant) release or escape is qualified. Despite his reassurance that “There was nothing which worried me”, the narrator avers that his return home to Mabopane is far from unproblematic. His fear “that getting back to Mabopane’s dusty roads would lead me to suffer” is born out in the apparently incoherent sentence within which it is contained. This sentence continues with the qualification “*but* eating alone was almost more than I could bear” (my emphasis). Despite the earlier assertion that “Many people were happy to visit me as they knew I was a peace-lover and didn’t drink or smoke” (75), no mention is made of companionship. Instead the narrator appears not only as incoherent and lonely, but pathologically afraid of such loneliness. His repetition of the reassurance that he has made a new start (“I learned to forget yesterdays and to think of tomorrows. Each morning in the township, I said to myself: ‘Today is a new life’”) seems hollow, in particular when read with the following repeated assertions: “*I know now* that I shall never be afraid of sleeping under a tree *alone*. . . . *I know now* that I can live *one day at a time*. . . .” (75-76; my emphasis). The repetition of such assertions (that the narrator has overcome fear and gained wisdom) would seem to suggest that this is *not* the case at all. Moreover, this apparent freedom at home is further qualified by the slightly earlier assertion that “Even I was happy. If suffering means happiness I am happy” (73).

Even *if* the narrator has gone home to Mabopane, then, the return home is far from unproblematic. This is something already suggested by the ambiguous opening of “Man Against Himself” – it is unclear what the referent of “where” in the following passage is:

He must work before the sun goes down. The life of a man is very heavy in his bones and his future is a deep unknown grave.

One day when I was alone, struggling to get money, and far away from my home where no one lives or grows, I met a man from Zululand called Dlongolo.

(53)

It is not really clear from this passage whether “where” refers to “far away” or to “home”. A reading of “home” as a dismal place “where no one lives or grows” is

particularly persuasive in view of the last story of the collection, where the narrator's family is described as living in complete destitution (cf. 87ff.) and with little scope for the kind of enriching life which results in "growth". This is also suggested with respect to life on the farm, where there is "little progress" (14) and life in the township: "Life at home was really like at hell" (40). Life at home, far from appearing as a self-enclosed world enabling self-satisfaction, does seem to be life in a place "where no one lives or grows".

Even if this passage were not to describe home itself, what it would nonetheless underscore is the condition of not being at home. Even if it were not to be *home* "where no one lives or grows", then this phrase would still describe where the narrator is, which would in any event describe his absence from home, security and domesticity. That is, either the narrator at home is at a dismal place, or he is not at home at all. Instead, as I have shown, he is an alienated, suffering man.

Homelessness thus appears as the condition of the narrator/protagonist of *Life at Home*. The title of the collection is deeply ironic: Medupe *leaves* his home, the farm, and never returns to the farm. (Of course, the farm is shown in the first two stories not to have been properly a home at all.) Life at home is life on the road. The journey has no end, and home is an alien place. The collection depicts the pathos of a wandering and consequently suffering protagonist. This suffering leads to the breakdown of narrative on the most literal level: the border between reality and fiction is disrupted as a result of the hallucinatory consequences of suffering.

Whether one considers "Man Against Himself" in isolation (as Ndebele was forced to) or in the context of the collection, the apparently "triumphant" note on which the story ends has a false note to it.⁵⁷ The ending of the story is not really an escape from the hallucination resulting from suffering. The suffering Medupe experiences on the mine is merely a prelude to insanity and hallucination, and if the ending of the story is triumphant at all, then this is an interlude between the suffering and hallucination of this story and that of the final two. In view of this deep-seated rootlessness, Ndebele's celebration of "Man Against Himself" as an exemplification of the ordinary becomes questionable. The man described in the story, instead of emerging out of his 'initiation' intact, is deeply split, as suggested by the title of the story. Indeed, I have been arguing that the story is concerned with the disruption of the self by an alterity within, an alterity bordering on the experience of madness.

Madness is figured even more explicitly in “Carelessman was a Madman” (the story which immediately follows “Man Against Himself”). This story, bewilderingly, if one reads *Life at Home* as a text evincing a measure of narrative teleology, as it does as a result of its centripetal tendencies (as discussed in 5.6 [above]), seems to interrupt the unit consisting of the first four stories in its radical difference from those stories. These stories form a unit, given their similar narrative technique (each, apart from “Life at Home”, is predominantly a first-person narrative), as well as the fact that the same protagonist occurs in each and that his fortunes are traced in a more-or-less linear way as he moves with his family from the farm to the city in order to work. If “Carelessman was a Madman” disrupts the (admittedly shaky) teleological tendency of the first four stories by introducing another protagonist (Mr David Letshwene [77]), then it is restored only to an extent in the last story, “My Ugly Face”, with the return of Joël/Medupe to the narrative. At the end of the collection Medupe asserts “My name is Medupe”, and his interlocutor replies “My lost son, I am your mother” (96). However, even though the return to the mother might signify a return home, the collection ends without reaching its end, namely home.⁵⁸ This is made clear in the final sentences of the collection: “Then she took me on her back, like a small hitch-hiker, and we returned to South East. On the way while I was on her back I slept and she just *kept on going*” (96; my emphasis).

Even if “Carelessman was a Madman” serves to interrupt the degree of narrative cohesion created in the first four stories, there are nevertheless links between this story and the earlier ones. The locale remains broadly that of the Pretoria region, with its references to Winterveldt (77), Moretele (77) and Hammanskraal (78). And, importantly, the story is linked to “Man Against Himself” in its elaboration of the notion of madness, something suggested in the passage discussed at length above. Despite Medupe’s complete absence from the narrative, there are markers of similarity between him and the protagonist of that story (such as the Scotch tie each wears [cf. 72, 78]). Moreover, this character is linked to Mr Matlou and family’s escape from the farm by being described with exactly the same phrase: “The man just disappeared with the water *and was never seen again*” (86, cf. 35; my emphasis).

This is to say, at the considerable risk of over-simplification, that the form of *Life at Home* moves from specificity to generality, from a broadly centripetal to a centrifugal cycle. There seems to be a tendency within the collection away from a

broadly realist aesthetic to a disruption of the assumptions underpinning such a mode in the last two stories.⁵⁹ The point needs to be made, of course, that the first stories of the collection by no means fit snugly into such an aesthetic. Nor, as I indicated in the previous section, are they simply a continuation of the farm novel. As I noted there, the farm novel is disrupted in, among other ways, the magic realism of certain episodes of *Life at Home*. But the last two stories make even less sense in terms of a realist aesthetic, blending as they do what seem to be elements of realism – as well as links with earlier stories – with respectively madness and magical elements.

In the previous section I already devoted some attention to one such instance of magic realism in “Farm-boy”, that pertaining to the attack on Medupe by the Moloji. Another apparently magical moment occurs during the strange episode when Matlou and his family steal away from the farm to Boekenhoutfontein. The episode is rendered odd by the language used there, which tends towards a distortion (or supplementation) of reality. Oddly, Matlou and his family are described as “[breaking] *into* the jail and the daring escape was made” (35; my emphasis). The preposition “into” could be an instance of what I have termed ‘foreignising translation’, and thus an othering mechanism, or it could signify that Matlou and his family are not really escaping.⁶⁰ After the escape, they are described as “bandits . . . on the run. Detectives are watching on TV2. But Matlou’s family is never seen again” (35). It is not only as if the family’s disappearance from the farm is described as a disappearance from the face of the earth, but as if – magically – their escape is itself recorded by means of a massive surveillance system, something which would seem evocative of magic realism in the deadpan assertion of this improbability (and further suggests that the family is, in an almost Kafkaesque way, imbricated with apartheid bureaucracy).

In itself, “Carelessman was a Madman” is not magical, but its central figure nonetheless engages in extraordinary behaviour, reported repeatedly: “I tell you, he used to chew his pillow until 3.30 a.m” (77; cf. 80, 82). The story in the collection which is most markedly magical is “My Ugly Face”. In the night, “At about two o’clock in he morning”, Medupe is raped by “an animal like an ape”:

The animal approached us and touched my forehead. After that the animal started to kiss me nicely like a person. It put its tongue inside my mouth and I even started to exchange kisses with it. It was dark. It was a female animal.

It touched me all over my body and wanted to undress me. It acted like a person and lay on top of me. It was serious with my body. Time and again I was kissed. My friends looked on without helping me.

(91)

In this episode the borders between human and animal, as much as between the plausible and the improbable, the credible and magical, appear to blur. Indeed, the otherness of this episode is stressed, as elsewhere in *Life at Home*, by means of the deadpan way (itself a trait of magic realism, as noted above) in which it is encountered:

Then the animal grew tired and it started to move back into the bush. We stood up and ran away. On the road at about five o'clock in the morning I found that my trousers in front were wet with the animal's work. It was a surprise to find that the animals in South East want to sleep with human beings.

(91)

After Medupe's friend, his "right hand" (95) dies, he is alone. He decides to return to South East camp, his home of homelessness "where my mother had left me alone, with people I did not know" (95). During his journey, Medupe "never slept on the road during the night because I knew that female animals would rape me continuously. I didn't want to father an animal child" (95-96). Medupe's friend has died as a result of having been attacked by rats: "At the middlenight we *heard* things biting our toes" (94). Medupe and his friend, strangely, *hear* rather than feel the bites. After they wake up (which they had not done while their toes were being bitten because "Our sleep was heavy . . . and the biting did not hurt us" [94]), the friend starts complaining about the pain in his toes and body and Medupe discovers "that all his nails were gone and blood was coming out" (94). Eventually, "big rats came out from under the jersey fast, like a rolling stone" (94). The friend "fell slowly onto the floor, like a wanted man who had been shot by police, or a cowboy in a film" (94-95).

As should be clear from these examples, commonplace assumptions with regard to the nature of 'reality' are overturned: reality and magic blur. Furthermore, supposedly commonsensical expectations concerning the linearity of time and space are overturned. In this story, "the hemisphere we know" of "Man Against Himself" is transcended through the compression of time and space. Medupe is born, carried by

his mother, grows up, journeys, and is carried off by his mother again, all within a couple of pages, while the locale is an unspecified place called South East camp not far from Zimbabwe. The reader is told, "We decided to walk to the capital city, which was very far away" (89). But no indication is given of which capital this may be. The infinite (or at least nonspecifiable) time and space of this last story, with the consequent dizzying and hallucinatory sense of the indefinite, contrasts starkly with the regionalised, indeed domesticated, landscaped setting of the farm novel as well as, to a degree, of the earlier stories.

In *Life at Home*, then, the apparent totality of the farm novel is opened to the perspective of the infinity of otherness. The protagonist is homeless at home; he does not arrive home at the end of the collection; the real is disrupted in moments of madness, hallucination and magic, all of which exceed "the hemisphere we know". All this may be taken to imply that *Life at Home* interrupts the teleology of nation shown by Noyes to be so clearly imbricated with narrative: Medupe's suffering is suffering with no end and no resolution. Instead, this collection confirms Noyes's (1997: 35) speculation that "Perhaps the only story that can be told about a person and a nation is the story of leaving a place which was never home in search of an unseen place which is; and the story of departing and returning home to find everything different and everything the same".

Infinite alterity disrupts the supposed totality of narrative teleology and makes closure impossible. As such, Matlou's work may be said to open out the flattened narratives of the self evident in the farm novel, a form dependent on the occlusion of otherness – in particular, of the black labourer – for its efficacy relative to the narrative of nation. One might add, finally, that Matlou's work also disrupts Ndebele's conception of irony within this disruption of the teleology of nation, in particular as evident in the farm novel. Ndebele's conception of irony, as I have argued, may be characterised as being premised on a view of irony which understands it as offering closure by transcending contradiction. But the irony to be found in Matlou's work does not work incorporatively. Rather, one might say that it dislodges the tropicality of autobiographical prosopopoeia and unsettles its closure. Matlou's work, in dislodging the tropicality of the farm novel (as much as of autobiography), and in unsettling its teleological movement towards closure premised on an organic, nostalgic, inherited relation to the land, may aptly be read not as *employing* irony as

much as *generating* it. This is to claim that *Life at Home*'s relation to the farm novel may be defined in terms of irony, if not the irony to be found in Ndebele's aesthetic. Irony in Matlou's stories can be linked to questions of identity involving self and other, questions which are imbricated with issues of form. This is evident in the disruption of the narrative line and its concomitants, linear time and space in *Life at Home*. Matlou's work *disrupts* linearity by establishing what might be called an 'aesthetic of the sphere',⁶¹ thus also opening the *reader* to an otherness within. In this regard, Pechey's (1998: 67) recent comment *vis-à-vis* J. M. Coetzee might as well apply to Matlou:

Coetzee is a textual exile who nonetheless lives at home; his aesthetic migration is exactly the very precondition of his ethical engagement with exactly where he is. . . . Reading him, the world becomes for us politically and culturally – and not just geographically – a sphere, a surface upon which any point is a centre.

Similarly, in Matlou's work life at home ironically signifies a migrancy at the heart of domesticity; within the supposed linearity of narratives are always to be found the absences of others. In its interruption of the farm novel without establishing a new, enclosable narrative, *Life at Home* may be said to propose an endless narrative sphere "upon which any point is a centre" rather than a plane which may be interrupted, or inverted, at any point before *still* attaining its end.

5.9 Notes

- 1 Elsewhere, Brink more explicitly discusses Matlou's work *vis-à-vis* Ndebele's emphasis on the 'ordinary' (see 1993: 52ff.). I consider the importance of peasant experience and urbanisation in more detail in my discussion of Ndebele's aesthetic and its appropriation of Matlou in the section which follows, and return to this point in my discussion of *Life at Home vis-à-vis* the farm novel.
- 2 In this regard, Coetzee's scepticism about criticism is worth bearing in mind: "But what is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?" (1992e: 61). Derek Attridge's postulation is that "an equal marriage" is not possible, but that a "new, unpredictable, singular, creative act, as an inventive event in its turn, can do justice to a literary work as a literary work" (1999: 27).

- 3 The essays concerned are “Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction” (cf. 1991: 33) and “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” (1991a: 47-48, 50-54).
- 4 In addition, Ndebele’s celebration of Matlou must also, crucially, be related to the former’s association of the ordinary with pre-modern peasant life, as I shall argue below.
- 5 See Chapter 3 (3.2.3, 3.3.1) for a discussion of irony and narrative.
- 6 Morphet’s discussion is a response specifically to Sachs’s position paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (1990). In his response to this paper, Morphet relates Sachs’s work to an essay by Ndebele which predates it, “Redefining Relevance” (1991b). Despite Morphet’s focus on these papers only, his discussion has broader implications for Ndebele’s aesthetic.
- 7 See Chapter 2 (2.2.1) for a discussion of New Critical assumptions as regards irony.
- 8 See above, Chapter 1, for a discussion of the critical dismissal of irony, where I show that Chapman makes a similar move. In fact, as I indicate there, Chapman’s view of irony (a view which he sets up in order to reject irony) is not very far removed from that of Ndebele.
- 9 Similarly, Peter Horn (1993: 14) points out that Ndebele neglects to recognise that “‘realism’ is a highly problematic concept, that the nature of ‘reality’ rests on a number of unqueried assumptions”. This problematic acceptance of the notions ‘realism’ and ‘reality’ implies quite a stark opposition between what seems real and what does not, without, however, asking “why certain things appear ‘natural’ or ‘realistic’ to us, and others not”.
- 10 In addition, it serves as another reason to question Ndebele’s assimilation of Matlou for his aesthetic. Right at the start of the text, the category ‘real’ appears problematic when the reader is told “It all started like a dream, when I was a farm-boy near the Magaliesberg mountain” (Matlou 1991: 11). The entire text of *Life at Home* thus stands in the sign of the *unreal* or, at least, the *dreamlike*.
- 11 This move beyond Ndebele clearly does not mean to imply a cancellation of his project. On the contrary, it might be construed as a continuation of that project if the latter can be characterised as a call “for a post-heroic culture of irony” (Pechey 1998: 57).
- 12 It may be interesting parenthetically to note here that Attridge’s formulation would situate his approach firmly within a Romantic, post-Schillerian idiom in that it emphasises the coincidence of theory and practice. Sychrava (1989: 51) dismisses such coincidence of theory and practice as “contrived” and defines it as a “sentimental principle”. I do not in this thesis explicitly address the post-

- Schillerian heritage of critical theory. See Chapter 2 for a more detailed consideration of Sychrava's notion that irony is a sentimental phenomenon.
- 13 In the chapter on Coetzee's *Age of Iron* I examine more closely the relation between the reader and the text in terms of respect for and *trust* of otherness.
- 14 One might argue that Matlou, in his disruption of narrative as evident in the form of *Life at Home*, moves beyond narrative. See my discussion below (5.8).
- 15 Driver's contention, of course, explicitly involves the notion of canonicity. *Life at Home* seems uncontainable within the canon of South African literature. That is, it would seem resistant to attempts – like that of Ndebele – to incorporate it into a canon, something which would imply the reduction of its otherness. See Attridge (1994) for a discussion of otherness and the canon. See also my brief discussion below of 'foreignising translation'.
- 16 As should be evident from Driver's statement, she relates the strangeness of Matlou's work explicitly to the language he uses. Indeed, it is through the form of the words and the way he uses them that the "magical quality" of his work may appear. Driver thus implies a link between the language of *Life at Home* and its strangeness, which she defines as "magical". This might suggest that Matlou's work evinces characteristics of so-called magic realism, something picked up as well, in fact, by other critics (Brink 1998a: 26-27; Chapman 1996: 376).

Magic realism might offer an intriguing link between Matlou's work and Ndebele's aesthetic, in particular as far as the provenance of Ndebele's key terms 'ordinary' and 'spectacular' is concerned. Scott Simpkins points out that "the inception of magic realism" may be traced to "a reaction to the 'blind alley' of photographic realism. . . . Realism, in effect, produces a text plagued by the ordinary, the *too real*. And imagination, another aspect of the 'real,' is given short shrift at best. As Borges' narrator in 'The Secret Miracle' says, compared with his imagination, 'the reality was less spectacular. . . .'" (1988: 116; his ellipsis). Magic realism appears as an escape from the "ordinary" of photographic realism and towards the "spectacular" of the imagination. That is, as Simpkins (1988: 116) argues, "magic realism demonstrates its hopeful scheme to supplement the realistic text through a corrective gesture, a means to overcome the insufficiencies of realism (and the language used to ground realism)". But this spectacular nature of magic realism is doomed to failure if it is, indeed, an attempt at 'correcting' the real through supplementing it – it engages with the real on the terms of the latter by proffering a new "realism heightened by magic" (1988: 118). As a result, "there is undoubtedly something unsatisfactory about the strategy of magic realism. . . ." (1988: 117).

It might be worthwhile considering more closely the dissatisfaction with the 'spectacular' quality of magic realism expressed by some its practitioners (cf. Simpkins 1988: 117-118), and Ndebele's dissatisfaction with the spectacular nature of so-called 'protest' writing which results in surface

exteriority empty of deeper significance. This is not an avenue I have the space to explore, though the terms used here to describe magic realism do bear a striking similarity to those used by Ndebele. It is important to note, though, the absence of the category 'magic realism' in Ndebele's essays considered in this chapter, in particular as Matlou's work would seem to exhibit certain magical tendencies. The absence of this category in Ndebele's consideration of Matlou's work is all the more glaring in view of the importance of *peasant* experience in both Ndebele's project and in magic realism: Jameson (1986: 302) identifies the latter in terms of "a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth". Jameson (1986: 302) does complicate this link between peasant experience and magic realism by noting "the problem of the political or mystificatory value, respectively, of such texts, many of which we owe to overtly left-wing or revolutionary writers. . . .".

See also note 46, below.

- 17 See Ashcroft et. al. (1989: 7-8, 195-197) for a discussion of English and english(es). Walder (1998: 42-55) provides a recent summary of the politics of language use in postcolonial practice.

- 18 See Venuti (1986; 1991) for a theoretical elaboration of 'foreignising translation'.

See Derrida (1985, 1992a) for a consideration of the untranslatability of "the marked differences of languages" (1992a: 408) in a multilingual text, especially with respect to the consequent singularity and otherness of the text which appears in its resistance to translation. In principle, *Life at Home* would be an untranslatable text because of the multiplicity of languages in it. With reference to Celan's poem "In Eins", Derrida writes "What seems to bar the passage of translation is the multiplicity of languages in a single poem, all at once" (1992a: 399).

- 19 With reference to Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Lost in Cape Town* (1987), Sue Marais (1995: 42 note 5) notes that many short story cycles are met with "critical confusion". Thus Wicomb's text, which Marais persuasively argues should be taken as constituting a cycle of short fictions, was initially described by critics as episodes of a novel, a kind of *Bildungsroman*, and as being novel-like.

In my opening remarks to this chapter, I too of course use the term *Bildungsroman* with reference to *Life at Home*.

- 20 See also Marais (1995).

- 21 Coetzee defines transfer "as the rendering of (imagined) foreign speech in an English stylistically marked to remind the reader of the (imagined) foreign original" (1988b: 117). Thus Smith's relation to the English she lets her Afrikaans characters use is complex.

This procedure may be compared to (or contrasted with) Matlou's use of 'foreignising translation', as discussed above. But it should be pointed out

that, to Coetzee, Smith's use of transfer and free indirect speech is a sign of her *domestication* of the Afrikaans language in order to "create in the echo chamber of the English prose tradition felicitous effects that cohere neatly with the Afrikaner's myth of himself as Israelite" (1988b: 126). That is, these techniques allow her to create a prose similar to that of the Authorised Version. Her domestication of Afrikaans enables her "to validate the homegrown Calvinist myth in which the Afrikaner has his type in the Israelite" (1988b: 118). (One might add that one of the most important examples of this would be Herman Charles Bosman.) Ridge (1983: 207) rejects this view and claims that Smith's rendering of Afrikaans in English unsettles the English reader's prejudices – a view which would allow one to consider Smith's use of transfer in terms of 'foreignising translation'.

- 22 The essays are "Farm Novel and Plaasroman" (1988), "The Farm Novels of C. M. van den Heever" (1988a) and "Simple Language, Simple People: Smith, Paton, Mikro" (1988b). See also Ampie Coetzee (1996: 134) for a summary of some of the characteristics of the farm novel, in particular with reference to its "closed-off unity" and pastoral nature.
- 23 Driver (1990: ii) qualifies this by asserting that, "Like Olive Schreiner before her, Smith presented the farm as a pastoral retreat even while recognising the intellectual and moral dangers of life in an insular community".
- 24 Coetzee refers to Schreiner (1982: 35, 38).
- 25 Coetzee makes the point that "Pastoral in South Africa . . . has a double tribute to pay. To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labour; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labour" (1988c: 5).
- 26 Elsewhere Driver asserts that Smith's stories contain "various analogical reverberations" (1990: xiii) which indirectly address racial issues: "Such political commentary remains, of course, deeply repressed in Smith's writing. But it is there" (1990: xii). Driver detects a tension in Smith's work between "critique and nostalgia" (1990: xv).

Michael Chapman (1996: 189) notes the absence from much 'white writing' of racial issues. According to him, "few white writers of the 1920s and 1930s felt the need to devote attention to intrusive racial issues". Ampie Coetzee (1996: 139) traces this absence of the black people whose land has been taken by white farmers to contemporary farm novels:

In the "speculative histories" (the words of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* . . .) of Coetzee and Schoeman and Etienne van Heerden . . . voices are conversing in silence, without human intercourse, about the past, about a story that has already ended – monologues moving through time. They have created themselves in words that alienate. And the servants, those who have no land, who have always said: "Mies is die mies", "Ja mies", "Dankie, mies" – their voices cannot be remembered. . . .

- 27 One might note here Mrs Curren's description, in *Age of Iron*, of a photograph in which she appears as a child. She ponders the absence of the (black) labourers from this photograph. The garden which is shown in the background *must* have been tended. Yet there is no evidence in this representation of the garden that this was the case. Mrs Curren speculates that, if the garden was tended not by her grandfather, then it was not rightfully his. The absent labourers are now remarkable *in their absence*:

Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in?

Dies irae, dies illa when the absent shall be present and the present absent. No longer does the picture show who were in the garden frame that day, but those who were not there.

(Coetzee 1991: 102)

Michael Marais (cf. 1993: 2ff.; 10) has considered this passage in terms of the politics of representation.

- 28 See Steward Crehan (1998) for a consideration of how land becomes landscape, in the course of a critique of Coetzee's 'rewriting of the land' as constituting both "a complex literary articulation" of the disavowal of ownership of the land and a subversion of the "kinds of discourse built around such an articulation" (1998: 5).
- 29 Coetzee also qualifies his already quoted assertion that Smith's representation of the farm is a "*regional answer*" to the crisis on the *platteland* by stating parenthetically that "from [this] it does not necessarily follow that *The Beadle* is a regional novel" (1988: 69).
- 30 I noted above the fact that the entire collection stands in the sign of the unreal and dreamlike (see note 10). I consider the hallucinatory nature of *Life at Home* at greater length below.
- 31 In the later story he is specified as being Mr Matlou: information is posited, but subsequently amended, something which disrupts the reader's conceptualisation of characters, acts and events narrated in the text.
Numbers in brackets without dates refer to Matlou (1991).
- 32 I noted above the centrality of repetition-with-variation in the short story cycle. For an important consideration of the role of repetition in fiction, see Miller (1982). Miller's discussion is particularly pertinent to my consideration of *Life at Home* and, indeed, *Kikoejoe* and *Age of Iron*, in that he recognises the potentially hallucinatory effects of repetition (cf. 1982: 6ff.).
- 33 For a consideration of the aphorism in terms of its iterability, see Derrida (1992b).

- 34 It should go without saying that no aesthetic value judgment is implied here with respect to the novel or short story collection (or cycle) as genre.
- 35 The name of this township might be significant in that it is also the name of Paul Kruger's farm (Kruger was an Afrikaner nationalist president of the old Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek). That the Matlous move from one form of enslavement to another is suggested by their metaphorically moving from one farm (that of Baas Dick and the various other owners of the farm) to another (a township named after the farm of an Afrikaner hero). See note 38 and my consideration below of the escape *from* the farm as an escape *into* apartheid bureaucracy.
- 36 As I noted above (5.2), the process of urbanisation is implicit in Ndebele's work, too. See Graham Pechey (1998: 64ff.) for a discussion of Ndebele's project *vis-à-vis* the experience of urbanisation. Clearly this process is related to Ndebele's emphasis on peasant as opposed to urban experience.
- 37 This initial use of the first-person narrative mode in "Life at Home" also links the story with the other first-person narratives in the collection, all of which are narrated by Medupe/Joël. While the stories are thus linked, in particular in terms of narrative mode, what I claim about the relation between "Life at Home" and "Farm-boy" also applies to the relation between "Life at Home" and subsequent (first-person) narratives: they are both linked and dissociated in terms of narrative mode. Moreover, one might argue that the first-person narratives are also linked to the two third-person narratives ("Life at Home" and "Carelessman was a Madman") as a result of the recurrence of aphorisms. See also note 33.
- 38 This is confirmed later in the text. "Life at Home" is echoed in "Man Against Himself" when a friend tells Joël "This place is a jail" (61), referring to the mine. Thus the farm, from which the family escapes, and the mine are linked. Entrapment on the farm is followed not by liberation but by entrapment in the apartheid world outside the farm.
- 39 Below I consider at greater length the date, as well as its importance in *Life at Home*.
- 40 Levinas (1996d: 180 note 9) adds a footnote in which he explains that "The notion of anarchy introduced here precedes the political (or antipolitical) meaning popularly ascribed to it".
- 41 A. Coetzee notes the paucity of texts dealing with farm life and the issue of land from the perspective of the dispossessed. As apparent from his claim that Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) "is also – as far as I know, in English (and I cannot judge in the other nine languages) – the only text concerning land and farming which could specifically be considered part of this discourse [on land] *by a writer of the dispossessed*, by one of those being

marginalised" (1996: 132; his italics), Coetzee seems unaware of Matlou's work and the degree to which it, precisely, concerns itself with the farm and the land.

- 42 This demeaning description of adults as children is reported more than once in *Life at Home* (cf. 12, 27, 50). For a consideration of the origins and effects of such 'allochronism', see Fabian (1983). One might note that allochronism has the effect of denying the 'embodied other' "coevalness as the *problematic* simultaneity of different, conflicting, and contradictory forms of consciousness" (Fabian 1983:146). According to Fabian, cultural difference is temporally simultaneous – it is coeval in a "radical contemporaneity" (1983:xi). It already grasps the other by situating her or him within another time which is circumscribed by and contained within the time of the self. This strategy is not to be confused with Levinas's insistence on the irreducible pastness of the other. The former precisely claims to incorporate the other within the present of the self by situating her or him within the *past* of the self. A fairly recent example of such an allochronic move is reported in the South African *Sunday Independent*. The British *Telegraph*'s Stephen Glover called Nelson Mandela, during his trip to Britain, a "*child* of Empire [who] always believed in Western, especially British values" (Bliksem 1996:10; my emphasis). Glover is then quoted concluding the article in the following way: "Standing there in Westminster Hall, he may still see us a little with the eyes of a Tembu *child*, as being more important than we really are. But that is not really the reason why we like him so much. Even in criticising what we have done wrong, he offers us the forgiveness of a friend" (1996:10; my emphasis).

But Levinas claims that the other can never be encompassed by the self and for this reason is always anterior to the attempt of the self to grasp the other.

- 43 I have mentioned devices such as the deployment of languages other than English (Setswana, Afrikaans) and of an other English, as well as the form of the short story cycle, with apparent *non sequiturs* and logical slips such as the oscillation between third and first-person narrative in "Life at Home" discussed above.
- 44 I must stress again that, despite my approach to *Life at Home* in terms of its 'embodiment' of the black novel in the farm novel, this thesis is less concerned with 'embodied' (ethnic, gendered) others than with otherness itself. My argument in this chapter thus concerns less the giving of a face to an 'embodied' other (though this is doubtless an important point) than it does the degree to which otherness is figured in the text: the degree to which the reading self discovers the other in her or himself, and the degree to which the refusal to maintain a particular representation of the 'embodied' other ironises it.
- 45 Even though all texts are 'dated', I would like to claim that specific dates and times are generally speaking of less importance, and accordingly less prominent, in the farm novel than in *Life at Home*. This is certainly the case

with respect to *The Story of an African Farm*, *The Beadle* and *The Little Karoo*, though one would have to consider other examples of both the farm novel and *plaasroman* before generalisations could be made with a measure of certainty. Nonetheless, this relative lack of specificity as far as date (as well as, by implication, setting) is concerned has been noted by Coetzee and linked to the pastoral (or anti-pastoral) mode of the farm novel (cf. 1988: 64ff.), as quoted above (5.4)

- 46 By 'magical realism' I understand a mode of writing in which the supernatural is presented in a deadpan way: the apparently abnormal is presented as normal, and magic lurks in the ordinary. Referring to his play *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, Mda (1997: 281) puts this as follows:

. . . in this play the interaction between the living and the dead is presented in a matter-of-fact manner, in the mode of magic realism. In magic realism the supernatural is not presented as problematic, or as contradicting our laws of reason. It does not contradict empirical reality. It is not a matter of conjecture or discussion. It happens and is accepted by other characters and by the reader as an event.

Mda interestingly relates his mode of writing to his experience of his culture as "magical". He also explicitly relates this magic to peasant culture in his opposition between urban and rural areas:

I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting. It is taken for granted. No one tries to find a natural explanation for the unreal. The unreal happens as part of reality. The supernatural is presented without judgement. A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernization".

(Mda 1997: 281)

See note 16 for a possible link between magical realism and Ndebele's aesthetic.

- 47 Derrida plays with the double sense of "dated" by asking "How, then, can that which is dated, while at the same time marking a date, not date?" (1992a: 390). The double structure of the date appears here: the date dates the poem both by marking its singularity, and it also makes the poem readable by inserting it into history, by dating it: ". . . a poem dates if it ages, if it has a history, and is of a certain age" (1992a: 390).
- 48 Of the three texts I consider in this thesis, only *Age of Iron* is explicitly dated ("1986-89" [Coetzee 1991: 181]). *Life at Home*, of course, as noted above, consists of stories/chapters which initially appeared separately. Although both *Age of Iron* and *Kikoejoe* quite clearly stipulate the year in which the action of each takes place – in the case of *Age of Iron* it is 1986 (cf. Coetzee 1991: 92),

and of *Kikoejoe* 1960 (cf. van Heerden 1996: 1) – and although each text is dated to the extent that it commemorates event/s, in neither of these texts are dates and times as recurrently and explicitly mentioned as in *Life at Home*.

- 49 That Coetzee's comment with regard to his fiction is ironic, and ironic in terms of my use of the term in this thesis, seems to be the case with reference to his definition of stories in terms of irresponsibility (cf. 1992a: 246). Coetzee seems to be warning readers of his work not to take it as *adequate*. If his work is, as Coetzee avers, a response to suffering, and if that response to suffering is inadequate (but "paltry, ludicrous defenses"), then the reader must be warned against taking it too seriously. Coetzee's work does not consist of totalities which would contain plenitudinous responses to the suffering of the other. Instead, as stories, they are irresponsible responses or, rather, as Coetzee qualifies, they exemplify "responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged" (1992a: 248). That is, one might argue that Coetzee's works *interrupt* their status as adequate, serious responses – apparently responsible responses. This seems to suggest, with Levinas, that any responsible response would have to take account of the infinite nature of responsibility for the suffering of the other. That is, perversely, in a radical sense *no* response is *fully* responsible, and *all* responses are to some extent irresponsible. And this implies that an apparently 'irresponsible' response, which ironically recognises its own inadequacy as response, might in fact be more responsible than an entirely serious response blind to its own inherent inadequacy. The language of irresolution, to this extent, might be more responsible than that of blind resolution. Elsewhere, in an interview which deals among other things with his directionlessness while studying in the US, Coetzee puts this as follows: "A *real* resolution would have been to hurl myself bodily into the anti-imperialist struggle (I use that language in a spirit of irony; yet what other language is there?)" (1992d: 337).

On suffering, the body, and writing, see also Coetzee's remarks in his "Jerusalem Acceptance Speech" (1992g: 98-99).

A consideration of irony in terms of the philosophy/literature (or criticism/poetry) dichotomy would take us too far here (see Chapters 2 and 3).

- 50 As should be evident from this sentence, as well as from the foregoing consideration of substitution, my discussion of the suffering of the *protagonist* of *Life at Home* does not necessarily suggest a link between that suffering (in terms of alienation) and Levinas's perspectives on substitution. In other words, I am not suggesting that it is only possible to engage in a 'Levinasian' analysis of suffering as otherness within the *protagonist*. As implied by my phrasing, suffering in *Life at Home* could be profitably read in terms both of 'persecution' by or 'obsession' with the other, and of a Marxian or Sartrean analysis of alienation. However, I do not have the space in this thesis to devote extensive attention to such analysis. And my focus in this thesis is not on the question of alienation. I wish merely to draw attention here to possible contiguities between my analysis – which draws on Levinas's notion of substitution (and, indeed, its concomitant terms 'persecution' and 'obsession') in order to suggest an otherness within the *reader* which enforces her or his

- substitution for the otherness being encountered – and Marxian and Sartrean analyses of suffering and alienation.
- 51 Noyes (1997: 21) specifically situates his examination of the link between nation and narration *vis-à-vis* a collection of essays edited by Bhabha (1990). With respect to the teleology of narrative as journey, see also Brink (1991: 7), who claims “the archetype of narrative is the journey or the quest”.
- 52 The celebration of the sedentary and exclusion of the nomadic are, moreover, characteristic of the farm novel, as I argued above (5.4).
- 53 As I noted above, as a consequence of a number of self-reflexive moments *Life at Home* may be said to be presented as a fictionalised autobiography of Joël Matlou.
- 54 This alterity within the self is quite independent from the status of the self as happy or satisfied, or otherwise. It is a *structural* alterity.
- 55 In this respect, I quoted Frey in the previous chapter: “One tells one’s life, not because one has a face, but in order to give one to oneself, and to preserve rather than to lose it. In autobiography the self is not given in advance, but only emerges as what the biography outlines” (Frey 1985: 124).
- 56 Compare my discussion above of the link between madness and the persecution of the suffering self by the other in Levinas’s description of substitution.
- 57 At the time of Ndebele’s consideration of “Man Against Himself” (1986), the collection *Life at Home* had of course not been published. Nevertheless, a consideration of this story within the context of the collection would serve only to confirm that Ndebele’s attempt to appropriate Matlou for his project in terms of “Man Against Himself” is problematic. The story in itself, as I have shown, is far from unambiguous with respect to the triumph of its narrator-protagonist.
- 58 Clearly, this ‘return to the mother’ invites psychoanalytic consideration, in which I nonetheless do not wish to engage in this thesis.
- 59 I have claimed that the early parts of the narrative evoke the farm novel in its depiction of the farm, albeit from the perspective of the workers rather than the master.
- 60 On this point, see notes 35 and 38.
- 61 I am indebted to Dennis Walder for this phrase.

Chapter 6

Age of Iron: Confession, Irony and Otherness

6.1 Introduction

Mrs Curren is dead. The letter she writes to her absent daughter in America gives a face and voice to her through an autobiographical recounting of her last days. Upon her death, Mrs Curren leaves behind this confessional letter which, in being read, gives her voice. In re-presenting her, this letter allows the dead one to speak, if falteringly. As Mrs Curren is dead but lives again in the text of *Age of Iron*, her survival may be said not only to be textual but, above all, explicitly prosopopeic.

That the novel is a prosopopoeia should be clear from the fact that Mrs Curren is dead. And that she lives on through her letter is suggested explicitly in the following passage:

This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow towards her, may I live in you.

(120)¹

This letter from the dead enables the survival of the dead within the living who read(s) it. It functions as a face for that which has no face; as such, the text is a death mask for Mrs Curren. A dead person has no face and, therefore, any face returned to her would have to be a mask. Nonetheless, this text-as-death-mask allows the dead to assume the face of the living. If the prosopopoeia gives a face to the absolutely other, then this amounts to a reduction of the otherness of that absolutely other entity: the reader, in reading *Age of Iron*, might appear to get to know Mrs Curren, not only to 'see' her but *through* her and thus, in a sense, to have access to her being. Yet Mrs Curren, in her absolute alterity as a dead person who, moreover, as a character in a fiction, has never been, is irreducibly other and radically resists its reduction. It is for this reason that the prosopopoeia that is *Age of Iron* is, and must be, interrupted continuously.

One way in which this particular prosopopoeia is interrupted relates to its confessional nature. *Age of Iron* is a novel which thematises confession and which,

occasion engages in what she explicitly calls confessing (cf. 67, 124-125, 150-151, 178).² Thus characterised as a confessional text, the ending of *Age of Iron* should hold the promise of absolution, as confessions do. Indeed, a number of critics have argued that Mrs Curren is saved at the end of *Age of Iron*.

Thus, in her discussion of Vercueil, Susan VanZanten Gallagher posits this character as the instrument of Mrs Curren's salvation:

As he listens, he prompts and facilitates the story. And while telling and writing that story, Mrs. Curren *saves* her soul.

With Mr. Vercueil's silent assistance, she learns that *one cannot earn salvation, but one can accept grace*. By giving her confession to Mr. Vercueil to deliver and by relying on his physical care in her final days, Mrs. Curren puts her life into the derelict's hands. . . . [In] her naming of 'mutual election', Mrs. Curren has found a *final peace* for her soul. She no longer fears 'Dies irae, dies illa', the day of wrath which will reduce the age to ashes, as described in the traditional requiem mass. Instead, her death will bring *release*, and she envisions herself becoming ash and blowing away.

(1991: 204; my emphasis)

The optimism evident from this citation is striking. Also striking is the absence of any detailed textual analysis to support Gallagher's optimism regarding Mrs Curren's fate (or the fate of her soul). Instead, Gallagher seems to fall back on Calvinist notions of election and predestination, which she rather unconvincingly (and certainly without supporting textual evidence) attributes to Mrs Curren. The reference to "mutual election" (179) in my view misses the complexities of Mrs Curren's and Vercueil's relationship. This phrase seems to me to suggest the fortuitousness, indeed, haphazardness, of their meeting and relationship, something intimated when Vercueil responds to Mrs Curren's question why he chose her by admitting that he did not.³ The only reason he came to her house was because "You didn't have a dog" and "I thought you wouldn't make trouble" (169). Initially Mrs Curren feels that Vercueil has chosen her, that she is a chosen one, with all the religious and quasi-mystical associations this entails (which might be linked to the idea that Vercueil might be an angel). But, in a characteristic gesture, she dismisses the idea that she has been chosen by Vercueil as soon as she articulates it: "But I did not choose him. He chose me. Or perhaps he merely chose the one house without a dog. A house of cats" (11). And, of course, so it happens to be, as Vercueil in the end admits (169). It should also be noted that, right from the start, Mrs Curren disavows the possibility that Vercueil

be noted that, right from the start, Mrs Curren disavows the possibility that Vercueil might be an angel (cf. 12ff.). Far from being an Angel of Death, a harbinger of salvation, or an agent of an electing God, Vercueil is simply a homeless person with a dog. This is not to deny that Vercueil is associated in the novel by Mrs Curren with an angelic messenger (cf. 28, 44, 146, 153). But she explicitly disavows such associations even as she draws them: "Vercueil has disappeared again, leaving the dog behind. A pity about Vercueil. No Odysseus, no Hermes, perhaps not even a messenger. A circler-around" (128). Indeed, it is part of my argument in this chapter that Mrs Curren continuously interrupts the conceptualisations she makes of others.⁴ A reading such as that of Gallagher cited above, despite referring to "the ambiguous Mr. Vercueil" (1991: 203), too easily assimilates characters like Vercueil (but also Mrs Curren and, in fact, the novel itself) into a Calvinist moralism.

Like Gallagher, Benita Parry believes that Mrs Curren is saved in *Age of Iron*. She reaches this conclusion in terms of her indictment of this novel in particular, and of Coetzee's fiction in general, as "dissipat[ing] the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes" (Parry 1998: 164). Parry's condemnation of *Age of Iron* is formulated on the basis of her belief that the novel intimates salvation for Mrs Curren while refusing to hold out hope for a better *social* future. It is worthwhile quoting this passage at some length:

A novel which speaks an intimacy with death was welcomed in reviews as an allegory where the narrator's affliction with cancer is a figure of a diseased body politic – and certainly this is a connection which her rhetoric insistently makes. But since the narrative of Mrs Curren's dying occupies a different discursive space from the story of South Africa's bloody interregnum, her terminal illness is detached from the demise of a malignant social order; while her *salvation*, effected by Vercueil, the tramp-as-figure-of-*deliverance* who ensures that in the disgraceful state of the old South Africa she will die in a state of *grace*, also draws attention to the absence of any prospect of another, transfigured social order. This withholding of a gesture to the politics of fulfilment in a novel which does intimate a *personal redemption* is made all the more conspicuous because the aspiration of the oppressed for emancipation detaches the narrator from an attachment to a liberal-humanist ethic; and the text's refusal to countenance the hope for a tomorrow . . . is perhaps the strongest signification yet of the fiction's urge to mark its disengagement from the contingencies of a quotidian world in transition from colonialism.

(Parry 1998: 162-163; my emphasis)

As is the case with the Gallagher passage cited above, there is a surprising lack of textual detail in evidence here which would support the notion that Mrs Curren at the end of the novel will enjoy “salvation”, “deliverance” or “personal redemption”. This is despite the lengths to which Parry goes in order to make her point about Coetzee’s alleged separation of the private and the public, the personal and the political, a point which seems to depend on the notion that Mrs Curren is saved. It seems simply inadequate and unconvincing to state in categorical fashion that this is “a novel which does intimate a personal redemption” if this rather important aspect of the argument is made without any referencing (or indeed arguing) to substantiate why this should be the case.

Parry phrases this critique of Coetzee in terms of his alleged refusal to give voice to the ethnic other, yet at one and the same time indulging – in both *Age of Iron* and *In the Heart of the Country* – in feigning woman’s writing:

But why does a male novelist take the risk of simulating woman’s speech, indeed her self-constitution in language . . . while this same white novelist refrains from dissembling the voices of those excluded from the dominant discourse (where such voices are audible, their status as written by a white narrator is made apparent), instead elevating their silence as the sign of a transcendent state?

(1998: 158)

According to Parry, “the effects of bestowing authority on the woman’s text, while withholding discursive skills from the dispossessed, is [*sic*] to reinscribe, indeed re-enact, the received disposal of narrative power, where voice is correlated with cultural supremacy and voicelessness with subjugation” (1998: 158). Coetzee’s fiction in effect merely reinscribes (white) cultural supremacy.

David Attwell, in his accomplished rejoinder to Parry’s contention that Coetzee’s novels do not engage with (ethnic) otherness, in effect argues the contrary case (of course, I simplify somewhat here). According to him, there *are* numerous interlocutors “in Parry’s sense” (1998: 168) to whom Mrs Curren speaks and who speak to her, and there *is* a sense of political fulfilment in Coetzee’s work (1998: 177-178). But Attwell does not address in more detail the apparent inconsistency in Coetzee’s fiction pointed out by Parry (the eschewal of giving voice to the ethnic

other, while, simultaneously, speaking *as* a woman). That is, Attwell does not draw attention to the possibly problematic fact that Mrs Curren is a *female* narrator.⁵

While he does not specifically address the question of gender, Marais's approach to Coetzee's fiction in terms of its refusal to 'embody' otherness (cf. Marais 1998: 52) seems perhaps the most fruitful avenue for a possible response to the question of gender raised by Parry. Marais examines Coetzee's deployment of Blanchot's treatment of the Orpheus myth in both *Age of Iron* (cf. 1997: 293ff.) and *The Master of Petersburg* (cf. 1997: 321ff.), and develops this examination in order to argue that Coetzee's refusal to attempt to represent the other amounts to a 'looking away', a 'shutting' of the eyes in the very process of meta-representationally approaching the other (cf. 1998: 49ff). The gaze towards the other is averted, that is, in terms of the terminology I have been using in this thesis, *disrupted* even as it occurs. The representation of the other, which is called for and remains inevitable, is *interrupted* as it is posited. The articulation by the narrator of her intercourse with otherness is put in question in the act of articulation.

At least two instances of such 'looking away', of this 'averted gaze', may be cited. The first is the self-consciously fictionalised representation by Mrs Curren of Florence and William's time together after Mrs Curren has left them. Mrs Curren describes what they do, as if she were an observer. But even as she provides this representation she asserts it *while* subverting it by claiming "All of this happened. All of this *must have* happened" (40; my emphasis). This representation of what others do is presented as if Mrs Curren were an omniscient third-person narrator, and thus is lent a certain objectivity which might be said to elide otherness. But the self-conscious way in which Mrs Curren draws attention to her narrating act is an anti-illusionist ploy to relativise that act and its representation *as* representation.⁶ As Attwell notes in his consideration of this passage, "despite the stark otherness registered by Mrs Curren when she confronts the material base of urban black life, she refuses to allow it to condition her apprehension of Florence's world *entirely*" (1998: 169; my emphasis).

The second example of this procedure concerns the death of 'John'. Marais has considered this passage at length (cf. 1998: 50ff.). The point I wish to make is simply that Mrs Curren represents the moment of death *without representing it*. She quite self-consciously describes her imagining the boy's death by stating that "He is

with me or I am with him: him or the trace of him” (159). Mrs Curren represents not ‘John’ but – as other (moreover, as absolutely, radically other because he is dead) – his “trace”. She describes herself as being “here in my bed but . . . there in Florence’s room too” (159). Mrs Curren is and is not a present observer of ‘John’ as “beside him I stand or hover” (159). As Mrs Curren describes what she sees, she acknowledges that she sees nothing. Or, rather, she acknowledges that what she sees she sees because she does not see: it is only because she is refusing to represent the scene that she can represent it *in its otherness* at all: “His eyes are open and mine, though I write, are shut. My eyes are shut in order to see” (159). The representation of the other and of the other’s death necessarily elides otherness. It is only ever through a refusal to represent otherness – by ‘shutting’ one’s eyes – that otherness can be represented. The ‘shutting’ of the eyes, as that which enables writing the other, problematises the written representation of the other. It offers itself not as a representation, but as a non-representation.⁷

Similarly, one might argue that the positing of Mrs Curren’s voice is interrupted as it occurs. As I go on to indicate, this is certainly the case as far as her authority – in particular, her authority as the subject of a confessional narrative – is concerned. One might foreseeably extend this claim with reference to Mrs Curren’s status as a female narrator, though, as pointed out above, this is not my aim at this point. I therefore leave Parry’s objection and a possible response to it in abeyance with the final observation that, possibly, the interruption of the elision of otherness through representation in *Age of Iron* might (self-reflexively) interrupt *any* representation, or speaking on behalf of, including Coetzee’s speaking as a woman.

A final critic who considers the novel as entailing redemption for Mrs Curren is David Attwell who, in an interview with Coetzee, suggests that Mrs Curren is released by death: “What *releases* Elizabeth, finally, is death; in fact, the pact she enters into (or allows herself to fall into) with her Angel of Death, the derelict Vercueil, seems increasingly to represent *the promise of absolution* as the novel develops” (Coetzee 1992a: 249-250; my emphasis). Coetzee responds to this assertion by countering as follows: “As for your question about absolution for Elizabeth, the end of the novel seems to me more troubled (in the sense that the sea can be troubled) than you imply” (Coetzee 1992a: 250).

I wish to argue, against what must be characterised as the optimistic (if nuanced) readings of *Age of Iron* by Gallagher, Parry and Attwell, that Mrs Curren's fate is by no means clear, just as her confession – upon which the absolution to which Attwell refers would be premised – is not uncomplicated. It is not *certain* at all whether she enjoys redemption. The novel seems to me, as I shall argue below, to imply the opposite of salvation or, at the very least, to suspend the question of whether Mrs Curren is saved in view both of an ending which is enigmatic and undecidable and a narrative which is confessional but incomplete. Instead of being a narrative of hope or despair, the novel seems to complicate just such supposedly discrete alternatives.

In a perceptive reading of the novel, Marais (1993) manages to suggest the complexities involved in making sense of the novel and, consequently, of its effect. Initially he argues that *Age of Iron* “is ultimately an optimistic novel” (1993: 6) because Mrs Curren “is aware of the idea of an alternative, ethical community” (1993: 7). However, this initial optimism is tempered in Marais's interrogation of the possibility of attaining such an alternative by means of the novel. He asserts that “*Age of Iron* is haunted by a sense of its own social insignificance” (1993: 22). The novel is thus “ontogenetic” (1993: 16). Marais later develops and complicates this notion *vis-à-vis* *Age of Iron* as a novel evincing “ontogenetic anxiety” (1997: 342), a crucial insight to which I return below. Nonetheless, Marais (1997: 303) continues to claim that *Age of Iron* is, ultimately, optimistic. According to him, *Age of Iron* may, in Levinasian terms, be characterised as an ‘ethical work’. He thus claims that “The generous movement of the novel involves an absolution, rather than loss, of self”. This is a claim which I treat with scepticism in this chapter.⁸ I would like to argue, instead, that the novel seems to tend towards uncertainty and undecidability, as suggested by, for instance, Derek Attridge. In an examination of *Age of Iron*, Attridge (1994: 254) has characterised it in terms of its undecidable play “between two alternatives, the naturalizing and the allegorizing”. As Attridge argues, “Rather than oscillating between naturalization and allegorization, the novel stages both these modes of writing and reading simultaneously and undecidably” (1994: 254; cf. 1994a: 68-69).

In any event, whether the novel might be argued to lead to redemption or not – even if one were merely to claim that the text is a vehicle for Mrs Curren's

redemption, with her possibly “living on” (120) in the reader(s) of the novel – this survival is itself made radically uncertain because of its explicit dependence for delivery, and thus possibly deliverance, on an undependable other.⁹ As Marais (1997: 343) notes, the delivery of the letter is dependent on “an unreliable inebriate, Vercueil”. In subjecting her confession to Vercueil – as well as to the reader(s) of the text – Mrs Curren in effect renders uncertain the redemptive potential of her confession, and possibly of all confession. Moreover, the necessary suspension of truth, in terms of its provisional status, in secular confession should give one pause before asserting the unambiguous redemption of Mrs Curren.

I would now like to turn to a closer examination of the phenomenon of confession in order to explore this claim further, as well as to complicate the broader notion that confession implies redemption.

6.2 *Confession, Salvation and Truth*

Perhaps the reason for the strange optimism evident in the three readers cited above is to be found in the confessional mode of the novel.¹⁰ Gallagher (1991: 204), for instance, mentions “salvation” and “confession” in virtually one breath. Now, according to Foucault (1980: 62), traditionally, and certainly in religious terms, confession does bear with it the promise of salvation: “. . . it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him [the one who confesses]; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation”. And Coetzee notes that

Confession is one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular.

(1992: 251-252)

But with the secularisation of confession, salvation becomes a problematic moment within confessional discourse: ‘truth’, which is what is needed to end the confession – “The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself” (Coetzee 1992: 291) – becomes a questionable category (it is no longer relatively clearly located and accessible outside or inside the self), while ‘absolution’ requires the forgiveness and

grace of an authority which, in the case of sacramental confession, remains unquestioned but, in the case of secular confession, is no longer readily available. Coetzee's essay on confession, indeed, seeks to

follow the fortunes of a number of secular confessions, fictional and autobiographical, as their authors confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived, and of how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of whatever they take to be the secular equivalent of absolution.

(Coetzee 1992: 252)¹¹

In this passage, it is not only truth and absolution which appear problematic, but also the *end* of confession. If truth and absolution are uncertain, then the end of confession, which is to achieve absolution for the confessing subject, becomes uncertain. This, in turn, of course implies that it will become difficult to end off confessional narratives: if the attainment of the end purpose of confession remains uncertain, even infinitely deferred, then it must become a real problem to end confessional narratives, something further complicated by self-consciousness and its tendency "to draw out confession endlessly" because of its "endless awareness of awareness" (1992: 275). Coetzee considers how just this "problem of *ending* is solved" (1992: 275) by reading three major confessional episodes in Dostoevsky.

The self-consciousness characteristic of confession complicates the telling of truth, which would end the confession (cf. Coetzee 1992: 291). The project of the confession, which may be defined as the telling of truth by the subject of discourse of itself, remains an infinite project for the reason that that truth is, in principle, unverifiable (cf. 1992: 266). In fact, it is a characteristic of confession (as it is of autobiography and, indeed, of narrative as such), that the truth is not revealed as much as constructed. Ironically, therefore, as Coetzee realises, confession might be its own impossibility. It is not a question merely of confession covering up as much as revealing the truth of the confessing subject; on the contrary, it is a question of the confessing subject recounting truth, which therefore, in being constructed (at least in the sense that the selection of truth entails its construction), cannot be accepted as fully true.¹² As far as autobiography is concerned (as much as confessional narrative), one might leave something out because, after all, memory entails selection: "You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of

selecting you leave things out. . . . So to call autobiography – or indeed history – true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth” (Coetzee 1992c: 17).

Truth is not merely the absence of lies; it is premised upon a totality which would transcend the process of selection and therefore construction. Truth, if it is to be true, should not be constructed. Especially secular confession, which operates in the absence of such supposedly transcendent truth, has to face the dilemma of sceptical self-consciousness which complicates, if not renders impossible, the end of confession. In an interview, Coetzee expresses this point as follows: “All of us, both great and small, face the problem of how to bring our confession to an end. . . . Against the endlessness of skepticism Dostoevsky poses the closure not of confession but of absolution and therefore of the intervention of grace in the world” (1992a: 249). In Dostoevsky, according to Coetzee, confession is superseded by absolution, which reintroduces grace into secular confession. But the problem of ending a confession remains, as it is precisely the possibility of grace which is put in question by the scepticism and cynicism of secular self-consciousness (cf. Coetzee 1992: 291-293; 1992b: 392-395). It should not be surprising, then, that the confessional narrative that is *Age of Iron* should have a problematic ending.¹³ Indeed, with respect to Coetzee’s reading of Dostoevsky in terms of the crisis of secular confession, Attwell, despite his optimistic reading of Mrs Curren’s end (and the novel’s ending), makes the important point that in the case of confession “what is required finally is grace, for which there is no secular equivalent” (Coetzee 1992a: 247).

As pointed out above, salvation and forgiveness are consequent upon the disclosure of the truth, the possibility of which is rendered doubtful in the secular forgoing of truth as (religious) transcendence (something which per se is necessarily a consequence of denying the existence of a supersensory realm inhabited by God).

6.3 Everything, *Double Thought and the Consciousness of Non-Consciousness*

The nexus of otherness and irony in *Age of Iron*, I would claim, is confession. As a confessional narrative, *Age of Iron* is subject to irony for the reason that confession, as reflection on the self by the self, enacts a doubling of consciousness. In a confession the subject of discourse is the subject in a double sense, as Foucault (1980: 58-59), linking the Western compulsion to confess with individualisation, has argued: “The

truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power". According to him, "our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*. . . . [It] is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*" (1980: 58).¹⁴ The purpose of this science of sexuality, as of the *ars erotica* in other societies, is to tell the truth about sex. But this truth is to be revealed in "the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage" (1980: 59), while in the societies practising an *ars erotica* "there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret . . . because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged" (1980: 57).

The compulsion to confess thus implies a surfacing of truth from the depths of the psyche, which allows Foucault to link sexuality and confession to the production of truth, something "thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (1980: 60). The compulsion to confess, "the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking" (1980: 60), constitutes "An immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce – while other forms of work ensured the accumulation of capital – men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word" (1980:60). This subjection entails a doubleness neatly caught in the double sense of the word 'subject': the veracity of confession is guaranteed "by the bond, the basic intimacy in discourse, between the one who speaks and what he is speaking about" (1980: 62). The enunciating subject is also the subject of enunciation. Confession thus entails a doubling of consciousness, a splitting of the confessing person into a conscious subject speaking about its consciousness.

This doubling of consciousness, moreover, in the secularisation of confessional discourse characteristic of a *scientia sexualis*, entails not only a consciousness of consciousness (which leads to a potentially infinite confession for the reason that the veracity of the confession is subject to the subject and in principle not empirically verifiable), but also entails a consciousness of non-consciousness. The doubling of consciousness characteristic of confession must lead to a consciousness of non-consciousness because the confessant is required by her or his confessor to confess *everything*: "For us, it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret"

(Foucault 1980: 61).¹⁵ This “exhaustive expression of an individual secret” by the confessant requires that “the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness” (1980: 62) be broken. Not only is it required of the confessant to confess what s/he remembers, but also what s/he has forgotten. The confession should contain not only an account of those transgressions of which the subject of the confession is conscious, but also of those of which s/he is *no longer* conscious. That is, it is part of the structure of the confession to bring (or return) the non-conscious to consciousness. Another way of putting this would be to claim that it is an important part of confession to *reduce* the non-conscious, as that which is other to consciousness, to consciousness. What is outside of (or next to) consciousness but nonetheless exists in a relation of simultaneity to it (for the non-conscious is also that which defines the conscious), is now inserted *into* consciousness. The forgotten is remembered; the non-conscious become conscious is narrated *with* the conscious to meet the injunction of the confessor.

I should perhaps qualify at this point, in an aside and at some risk of repetition, what I mean by a ‘consciousness of non-consciousness’. This formulation is intended to evoke de Man’s characterisation of irony as “a consciousness of non-consciousness” (1983: 216; see 3.3.1, above).¹⁶ It should therefore not be assumed that I am claiming that the doubling of consciousness characteristic of confession actually *leads* to the ironic consciousness of non-consciousness: this would be an impossibility, since to be conscious of something is precisely to render it conscious – it can *no longer* be non-conscious. The impossible simultaneity of consciousness and non-consciousness, on the other hand, is characteristic of irony, though it inevitably leads to the allegorisation of that irony. This is not to equate confession with irony, but merely to indicate the ironic potential of confession, something, moreover, borne out by the narrative nature of confession. From this vantage point, confession would appear as involving irony in its splitting of the subject. But this is a splitting which in addition entails the impossible simultaneity of consciousness and non-consciousness and the rendering thinkable of double consciousness in reducing it to narrative. But even if confession cannot be said necessarily to lead to an ironic consciousness of non-consciousness, it *can* be said at the very least to lead to the consciousness that there are non-conscious details – that is, details outside the purview of consciousness – which are to be confessed through remembrance. Such consciousness, ironically,

threatens the confessional enterprise as it in principle makes impossible a final conclusion, namely the full truth (as I argue below). The confessing subject finds him/herself in the position of being conscious *simultaneously* of that of which s/he is conscious (and *can* remember) and of that of which s/he is not conscious (and *must* remember). Two aspects of this argument may be linked with irony: the first is that this consciousness of non-consciousness ironically threatens the confessional project in the very act of remembering (because the remembering can never be guaranteed to be complete); the second is that the narration of the non-conscious amounts to its being reduced to consciousness, that is, allegorised.

This is to claim that both the confessant and confessor participate in an impossible project for the reason that it is never possible to authenticate the non-conscious. Or rather, it is in the nature of the non-conscious not only to define the conscious, but also to threaten it. If the confessant is to render an account of *everything*, including what s/he has forgotten, then there can be no guarantee that what s/he remembers is everything. Indeed, the very fact that s/he has forgotten *something* entails the possibility that s/he has forgotten something else, too. The injunction to confess *everything* is, by its nature, an impossible requirement. But it is not only impossible: it also opens the confessional project to an inescapable uncertainty implicit in the potential that one has not remembered everything, or if one has, that one has, indeed, remembered incorrectly.

I need to make the point right away that my consideration of confession takes place in full awareness of the current, and controversial, space inhabited by confession in South Africa in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While I depend quite heavily on Foucault's – as well as Coetzee's – consideration of confession, it should be emphasised that the former is framed by an investigation into the historical proliferation of sexual discourse. Consequently, Foucault's interest is in the extension of confessional discourse from the institution of the church into everyday life, in particular as regards talking about sex. The compulsion to confess takes place within a whole range of institutions (cf. Foucault 1980: 63) which demand *full* confession in order for absolution, or forgiveness, or a cure to be granted. Similarly, the TRC also demands 'full disclosure' (as one crucial precondition among others) in order to agree to amnesty for applicants. It is part of the pact the applicant enters into with the TRC that s/he recount the *full* truth. If I

argue here that a full account of the truth is, in principle, impossible and that, consequently, absolution (or amnesty) is rendered problematic if not downright impossible, then I do so less with reference to the TRC than with respect to Foucault's analysis of the compulsion and injunction to confess. I do not wish here to engage in an analysis of the TRC and its protocols *vis-à-vis* confession, though such an investigation would no doubt be fascinating and might have important consequences. But I do wish to make very clear that I am not arguing that it is impossible to confess the truth, or even the full truth. I am, however, arguing that it is never possible to *know* with full certainty that *what* one has confessed and what one *believes* is a full confession of the full truth, *is* in fact a full confession.

In this regard, André Brink (1998b: 37) has recently argued that the TRC is caught in "the double bind that the kind of whole the exercise is aimed at can never be complete and that ultimately, like all narratives, this one must eventually be constructed around its own blind spots and silences". Clearly there is a huge difference between on the one hand arguing that it is never possible to make a full confession (as I do in terms of the uncertainty to which such a confession is necessarily subject as regards its finality), and on the other hand that confession always necessarily entails (consciously) hiding something. That is, it is only ever possible to make as full a confession as one can, but it is never possible to be completely certain that such a confession is in fact complete. This is not for a moment to suggest that it does not matter whether one engages in wilful obfuscation or deception in the course of one's confession. No confession can ever be full, which is not the same as claiming that *any* confession will do. On the contrary, there are conditions of sufficiency to be met, conditions which are determined juridically. For a confession to be deemed sufficient, it must meet such conditions, including the condition that it must be full, or, rather, as full as possible. Furthermore, there is no way of determining that a given confession is full, but there are ways of determining whether it is *not* full. Non-consciously not telling everything is not the same as consciously not telling everything.

The potential, even necessary, incompleteness of confession has severe consequences for the confessant. For one thing, it radically questions the possibility of true self-knowledge. If it is possible to keep amending a confession by positing another truth than the one it had been assumed was the truth, as Coetzee shows to be

the case as far as “a Pozdnyshev or a Rousseau” is concerned, then the authority of the confessant must be put in question:

If the confessant is *in principle* prepared to shift his ground with each new reading as long as he can be convinced that it is ‘truer’ than the last one, then he is no more than a biographer of the self, a constructor of hypotheses about himself that can be improved on by other biographers. In such an event, his confession has no more authority than an account given by any other biographer: it may proceed from knowledge, but it does not proceed from self-knowledge.

(Coetzee 1992: 273; cf. 255ff., 292ff.)

Confession becomes autobiography, and autobiography becomes *autrebiography* (cf. 1992b: 394). Coetzee does complicate this cynicism in an interview with Attwell by describing his essay as staging a debate between cynicism and grace: “Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness. The debate is staged by Dostoevsky; the interlocutors are called Stavrogin and Tikhon” (1992b: 392). Nevertheless, Coetzee’s essay, in the end, veers towards the cynicism of autobiography as *autrebiography*, as does, it would seem to me, *Age of Iron* in its apparent insistence on the shamefulness of Mrs Curren’s confession and its necessary incompleteness. This latter point is particularly evident in Mrs Curren’s insistence on shame and shamefulness, an insistence which significantly often accompanies confessional moments in the text (cf. 78, 100, 109, 115, 150-151). For Coetzee notes a second consequence of the incomplete confession for the confessant. In his analysis of confession, an incomplete confession, one which can be improved upon by rendering a “‘truer’ explanation”, would result in shame for the confessant:

. . . to the extent that the new, ‘deeper’ truth is acknowledged as true, the response of the confessant must contain an element of shame. For either the confessant was aware of the deeper truth but was concealing it, in which case he was deceiving his confessor; or he was not aware of the deeper truth (though now he acknowledges it), in which case his competence as a confessant is in question. . . .

(1992: 273)

Of course, in principle one confesses (or would confess) precisely that which is shameful. And a confession is supposed to be shameful rather than shameless (cf.

Coetzee 1992: 274; 1992: 282; 1992: 290). Nonetheless, Mrs Curren's expressions of shame in *Age of Iron* serve to suggest primarily, in view of the discussion above, the incompleteness and thus inadequacy of her confession. In fact, one might argue that these expressions of shame self-reflexively draw attention to the provisional status of the novel: the expressions of shame would put in question the "competence" of the confessant. The point is that expressions of shame, in particular expressions of shame about shame, lead to potentially infinite confessions, as Coetzee shows (cf. 1992: 282, 290). Another cause for infinite confession, one in which absolution is deferred, may of course be that the confessor lacks authority and is therefore an incompetent confessor, a possibility which I consider in the final section of this chapter.

I would like now to turn to a closer consideration of some of the passages in which Mrs Curren expresses her shame. But before doing so, I wish to provide a brief summary of the imbrication of confessional narrative with alterity in terms of my consideration above of the consciousness of non-consciousness.

Requiring an account of everything, including of the non-conscious, confessional narrative would seem to tend towards the elision of alterity – it reduces everything to the realm of the same defined by the consciousness of the subject. But it is this very requirement which reintroduces what is other to the project of confession, and potentially renders it an always incomplete, always provisional, and always fragmentary project. Otherness, and an otherness which refuses to be reduced, is thus part and parcel of the confessional project. This realisation by the confessant is ground enough for shame, for it is the shameless realisation that a confession can always only be provisional (cf. Coetzee 1992: 274). Confessing with an open mind, in the consciousness that one's consciousness might not – and probably does not – suffice to render a true confession of everything, is itself ground for confession.

6.4 *Age of Iron as Confessional Narrative*

6.4.1 *Confession, Shame*

Mrs Curren's "competence" (Coetzee 1992: 273) as a confessant, then, is put in question in *Age of Iron*. This becomes particularly clear in her expressions of shame, linked as they are to the confessional status of her discourse (her letter, her narrative, the novel). In particular, her competence as confessant is put in question in her

expressions of *shame about shame*. I want to argue that Mrs Curren's painful cancer is metaphorised as shame and that it both constitutes and interrupts her confession, which means that this continual interruption of confession may be characterised as irony. In this section I examine examples of the ironic nature of Mrs Curren's confessional procedure.

After having borne witness to the hellish suffering of the townships (cf. Hoegberg 1998), Mrs Curren has gone for a drive with Vercueil. She tells him how disturbing she found these events, in particular the death of Bheki: "I was shaken," I said. 'I won't say *grieved* because I have no right to the word, it belongs to his own people. But I am still – what? – disturbed" (113). This disturbance is directly related by Mrs Curren to the otherness of Bheki, to what she calls "his deadness, his dead weight" (113). She makes this important observation on the disturbance by the other of the self's satisfaction with reference to her fear of 'forgetting' (cf. 111) and her self-loathing as a result of reentering the "ordinary" (109). She is disturbed not only by the death of Bheki, but by the fact that to her "It seems like a bad dream" (109). She is disturbed by the *elision* of otherness as much as by that otherness. To her there is something shameless about the absence of "urgency" (109) which is also evident in her not being able to bring herself so far as to carry through her planned self-immolation: "I lose my sense of shame, become shameless as a child. The shamefulfulness of that shamelessness. . . ." (109).

The sense of shame is quite directly linked to a sense of urgency, of an awareness of and disturbance by otherness, while losing that sense of shame and thus becoming shameless is *itself* something intensely shameful. This confirms that there is no escaping otherness: it is impossible to leave behind the shame attendant upon, in this case, the suffering and death of the other, and the work of mourning is infinite. For leaving it behind and moving on is in itself an act filled with shame: there is an infinity of shame in shamefulfulness as much as shamelessness. It is not clear when, or if, this shame will ever end. This should not be surprising – the endlessness of confession suggests the absence of grace, itself linked to the impossibility of ever *fully* fulfilling one's responsibility towards otherness (be it the otherness one has not remembered to confess, or the otherness of the other person to and for whom one remains responsible). I am, of course, not suggesting that it is possible to *equate* the other with shame, but that shame is part of the disturbing effect of otherness (at least

in terms of Mrs Curren's experience of the confrontation with otherness at this point). It is not possible to deal with otherness once and for all.

This last claim may be substantiated further with reference to Mrs Curren's critique of absolution implicit in her desire not to get over the trauma she has experienced, not to yield to what she calls the "ordinary" (109), to get over getting over things, as she tells Vercueil:

'You think I am upset but will get over it. Cheap tears, you think, tears of sentiment, here today, gone tomorrow. Well, it is true, I have been upset in the past, I have imagined there could be no worse, and then the worse has arrived, as it does without fail, and I have got over it, or seemed to. But that is the trouble! In order not to be paralyzed with shame I have had to live a life of getting over the worse. What I cannot get over any more is that *getting over*. If I get over it this time I will never have another chance *not* to get over it. For the sake of my own resurrection I cannot get over it this time.'

(115)

The only way to get over shame, if it is linked to confession – which it must be, seeing that Mrs Curren is confessing in *Age of Iron* in general and at this point in particular – is to render the confession as fully as possible and to attain absolution at the end of the confession. But what Mrs Curren is saying in this passage is that the absolution implicit in getting over shame is precisely what must be absolved, at least for the sake of "my own resurrection". Mrs Curren's resurrection is conditional upon a confession of shame leading to absolution which in itself is shameful: even if one has to "[get] over the worse" if one is "not to be paralyzed with shame", nonetheless just that "getting over the worse", that *dealing* with shame, is shameful in turn and must be got over. Both the shame and getting over it appear unbearable and must be got over. And the only way of getting over getting over, of getting absolution for the absolution one has enjoyed, is "not to get over it", that is, *not* to get absolution.

The absolution one enjoys at the end of one's confession, of course, ends the confession: there is nothing left to get over, and one is on the path to being resurrected into a new, redeemed life. But Mrs Curren claims that the prerequisite for her resurrection is *not* to enjoy absolution, that is, by implication, not to end her confession. As long as absolution remains deferred the confession must continue. The continuation of the confession, in turn, is the precondition for an absolution which remains a possibility *without certainty*.¹⁷ For Mrs Curren to remain in a

disturbed state of acuteness with regard to the problems and the pain and the suffering of people in the townships and elsewhere, her confession must have an uncertain outcome. If the outcome – absolution – were certain, there would be no point in continuing to confess, and therefore to write, and therefore to live. As a result the reader finds a proliferation of confessions in *Age of Iron*. Many of these confessions pertinently concern the issue of shame.

One such instance occurs by means of a reference to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (104-105). This reference serves to underscore the futility of Mrs Curren's projected spectacular self-immolation in front of the Houses of Parliament, an act which I would argue is lent a confessional aura by Mrs Curren.¹⁸ She decides against this act of protest (as much as confession) because she is afraid it may be misunderstood, that is, that the truth about this deed may never be known. In order to ascertain that her act does communicate its intended protest, she would have to exhibit a letter signalling what the import of her intent was. But there is no guarantee that such a letter would make the slightest difference in people's perceptions. In fact, it is not even certain which letter Mrs Curren would have to paint on the car to explain her action.

Mrs Curren illustrates this dilemma with reference to *The Scarlet Letter*, which in that novel is, of course, the letter A indicating shame (the shame of adultery). According to Mrs Curren, Hester Prynne "wears the A for so many years that people forget what it stands for. They forget that it stands for anything" (105). The letter A, and by extension Mrs Curren's act, is subject to the possibility of being misunderstood. Hester Prynne's scarlet letter A, according to Mrs Curren, no longer stands for Adultery but for *anything*. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the letter A is supposed to stand for the *shame* of adultery, as well as that it is this shame which disappears with time as the letter loses its content. Hester Prynne, as it were, moves beyond the need for absolution with time as her letter loses signification. Or perhaps this should be rephrased: with time the question of absolution loses significance as the letter loses signification. This is to say that the letter is an inadequate expression of shame, for the shame disappears and thus – regardless of what happens in *The Scarlet Letter*, or whether the novel expresses sympathy for and shame about the treatment meted out to Hester – with the disappearance of shame the letter no longer forms part of a confessional narrative tending towards absolution (or its opposite).

As a matter of fact, it should be noted that it has been claimed that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in protest against Puritanism and in an attempt to come to terms with the role some of his Puritan ancestors had played with regard, for instance, to witch trials in the 17th century. Thomas Connolly (1970: 8-9) remarks that

Hawthorne was extremely sensitive about the fanatical roles played by his paternal ancestors in the early days of New England. A deep family guilt settled upon him, and this guilt undoubtedly prompted him to critical attacks in his literary works on the rigours of Puritanism. In 'The Custom House' . . . he publicly confesses that shame and guilt.

In a sense, then, this novel may be read as constituting a confession of sorts, an admission of shame and guilt from Hawthorne's side. This much is suggested by the introductory section to *The Scarlet Letter* (referred to by Connolly in the citation above). The point Hawthorne makes in *The Scarlet Letter* is that branding somebody with a letter of shame (or forcing such a person to wear it stitched to clothing) is an inhumane and thus inadequate (ill-suited because excessive) form of punishment for crimes such as adultery (presuming adultery is a crime at all). Mrs Curren's reference to *The Scarlet Letter*, then, is significant not only in that it too deals with shame, which is precisely what Mrs Curren is experiencing and confessing: in particular, this reference is apt because *The Scarlet Letter* is also a confession expressing Hawthorne's shame about the acts of his Puritan ancestors towards people like Hester Prynne. *The Scarlet Letter* expresses shame at the shameful way Hester Prynne was forced to shame herself, at the shameful way of that shame.

A further point to make relating to *The Scarlet Letter* and shame is that it surely is significant that, just after the passage which refers to the scarlet letter A, Mrs Curren calls Bheki and 'John', and the other children of iron like them, the "new puritans" (75), "the rising generation, who do not drink" (75). This 'new puritanism' is evident, for instance, in the way Bheki and 'John' manhandle Vercueil because of his drinking (cf. 41-44). As is evident from the novel, it is these children of iron, these 'new puritans', who occasion shame in Mrs Curren: as a result of Bheki's death and the events linked to it, Mrs Curren fights against the indifference of the ordinary in order to retain the sense of distress and, indeed, shame it has caused in her life (cf. 109).¹⁹

Given that Mrs Curren compares her self-immolation to the inadequate expression of Hester Prynne's shame (inadequate because it loses its significance and inadequate because it puritanically, excessively marks the shame of *adultery*), and that, as I have argued, a confession would be precisely an expression of shame, one might argue that Mrs Curren's projected suicide would be an inadequate expression of shame and would not lead to absolution and redemption for Mrs Curren. The shame of which it would be an expression is the shame of apartheid, as suggested by her calling the Houses of Parliament "the house of shame" (104) and by her already mentioned association of the children of iron with the Puritans (the agents of shame in *The Scarlet Letter*). This identification of shame with the root cause apartheid implies Mrs Curren's complicity in apartheid. Her projected suicide would be an inadequate confession not only because, clearly, it could not possibly be proper atonement for the evils of apartheid (what could it achieve?) but, moreover, in that it might be misunderstood and come to stand, like Hester's A, for *anything*.²⁰ In addition, Mrs Curren forgoes self-immolation and her consequent disappearance into ash, with its letter from which shame is erased (or to which shame might possibly not even be attributed), in favour of another letter. This is the letter to her daughter which she continually interrupts, while she writes it, with expressions of shame. Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter – *Age of Iron* – is thus defined by shame.

Mrs Curren's continual expressions of shame characterise her letter as a self-subverting confession, one which self-reflectively confesses its own inadequacy. In it Mrs Curren confesses the shame of her confession, a shame which results from its inadequacy and its incompleteness. *Age of Iron* as confession is dependent on shame for its existence *as* confession. Mrs Curren's expressions of shame are therefore productive of the novel in evincing what Marais calls "ontogenetic anxiety", something "which is generated by a self-reflexive awareness that the strategy of excession by which they [*Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*] negotiate language's antipathy to alterity is grounded in language and therefore in the violent mediation of otherness" (1997: 342).

The very fact that language – which mediates between self and other and thus violently reduces otherness in its being said – is used in a novel like *Age of Iron*, makes problematic the attempt of such a novel *not* to reduce otherness. Moreover, it gives rise to an awareness that even the attempt at not reducing otherness already

amounts to reducing it. Not determining otherness amounts to determining it as non-determined. This implies that any attempt to exceed the determination of otherness, which attempt would necessarily occur in language, in particular if that determination were situated in a novel, is doomed to fall back into a determination of otherness and would implicate the novel in the violence of reducing otherness. In Coetzee's case, there is a metafictional awareness of just this double bind, something which leads to and is detectable from the ontogenetic anxiety evinced by his novels. This ontogenetic anxiety is evident already in the fact, noted above, that the delivery of the letter is dependent on Vercueil: *Age of Iron* "seriously questions its ability to ensure that the reader receives its gift of love", as Marais (1997: 343) puts it with reference to Vercueil. But the novel's ontogenetic anxiety "is also strongly apparent in its self-reflexive obsession with the politics of representation" (Marais 1997: 343). Marais relates this to Mrs Curren's lack of authority (cf. 1997: 344).

Marais (1997: 346) dismisses the possibility that the novel's ontogenetic anxiety may simply be explained "in terms of the tired, postmodernist trope of self-subversion through which the text draws attention to the conditions of its own impossibility". Far from being a "tired, postmodernist trope", this textual self-subversion – as evident too in Mrs Curren's self-subverting confessions – may be taken as generative of the novel. In interrupting itself, the novel continues and *must* continue; precisely because it is inadequate it cannot end. The ontogenetic anxiety evident in the novel, in drawing attention to its inadequacy (specifically as confession, but also *vis-à-vis* its status as representation of otherness), evinces a relativising of its representational procedures. This argument is similar to the one made earlier in this thesis, namely that representation of the other is called for precisely *because* the other exceeds all representation (see 4.5, above). If representation were adequate it could end; because it is inadequate it must continue, if only so as to be interrupted continuously by the alterity it elides but which, in its refractoriness to representation, insists on justice – on just representation – impossible and infinite and therefore necessary though that project is.

According to Marais (1997: 266), *Age of Iron*, "rather than represent[ing] and so foreclos[ing] on the other . . . seeks to perform the ethical in its relation with the reader". I would agree with the second part of Marais's claim (that *Age of Iron* involves a staging of alterity in terms of its relation to the reader).²¹ But I would

question whether it is the case that the novel forgoes representation of the other. Rather, I would claim that the novel does engage in the representation of otherness but draws attention to the inadequacy of its doing so. When Attwell (1998: 170) sees the purpose of Mrs Curren's 'construction' of what "must have happened" (40) as "oppos[ing] the possibility of an alterity so radical that there are no grounds for intersubjective recognition", I would agree with him that Coetzee does indeed engage in representations of otherness, as Attwell seems to be suggesting given his insistence that the novel suggests "grounds for intersubjective recognition". Attwell (1998: 171) also agrees with Coetzee's statement in *Doubling the Point* that "In Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation" (1992e: 68). As Attwell notes, Coetzee continues by stating that "the task becomes imagining this unimaginable" (1992e: 68). And this unimaginable to which Coetzee refers clearly pertains to another, indeed, an *other* kind of representation. It is in this light that I make the claim in this chapter that representations of otherness, with their concomitant 'moments of recognition', are interrupted even as they are posited. The novel's representation of the other and of otherness, that is, is placed under erasure and becomes a representation which does not represent, which is not a representation, certainly not the kind of "pure, unmediated representation" Coetzee rejects.

Age of Iron is a novel which draws attention to the problematic status of its (and any) representation of the other in order thus to foreclose on the inevitable foreclosing of otherness attendant upon representation. Such a self-questioning, self-subverting, self-interrupting procedure is metaphorically compared by Mrs Curren with a crab walking sideways:

And this is the one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with last things.
Why this crooked path to you?

My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that
finger stillness, stagnation.

A way of indirection. By indirection I find direction out. A crab's-
walk.

(74)²²

Mrs Curren explains to the addressee of the novel – the reader, her daughter – that the “crooked path” to her is necessary because without it there would be not only “stillness” but “stagnation”, an idea related to the indifference of the ordinary which Mrs Curren fears falling back into (cf. 109). The “crooked path” in this passage refers directly to Vercueil: he is the one “whom I trust with last things”. But the “crooked path”, because it refers to Vercueil, may also be taken to refer, self-reflexively, to Mrs Curren’s discourse. Marais (1997: 345) points out “the implicit analogy between Vercueil, the bearer of the letter in which Mrs Curren gives her self to her daughter, and the novel, the bearer of Coetzee’s gift of self to the reader”.

Elsewhere, in a highly detailed analysis of various images of writing in *Age of Iron*, Marais argues that “the novel does not end with Mrs Curren’s death but with the birth of her new identity. . . . Mrs Curren’s afterlife is . . . a life of being read. . . . Through the act of reading, the word takes on flesh” (1993: 17, 18, 20). Marais links this metamorphosis of the word into flesh with the issue of readerly responsibility in the text. Through the reading of the text, Mrs Curren, whose flesh has become words, will be resurrected and her words will take on life, become flesh once again (cf. 1993: 20). According to him, the reader has the responsibility of co-determining the ending of the novel and “becomes, willy-nilly, not only the novel’s co-author, but also an author of history” (cf. 1993: 23). Marais develops this idea in a later discussion of the novel in which he claims that the reader-as-other inspires, in a sense authors, *Age of Iron*, thus enacting “Coetzee’s refusal to supplement history and thereby violate the alterity of the reader” (1997: 304).²³ The important question then becomes “how the reader responds to the text” (1997: 304), the latter understood as constituting an endeavour “to perform the ethical” (1997: 311). If Vercueil bears the letter to Mrs Curren’s daughter, then the novel bears the letter to the reader. This argument is strengthened by Marais’s observation that the novel’s ontogenetic anxiety is dealt with meta-representationally through the introduction of the notion of trust.

It is part of Marais’s argument that the novel-as-genre tends towards the elision of otherness.²⁴ This means that the novel-as-genre cannot be trusted with the representation of otherness, which precisely entails that the novel *must* be trusted. The novel-as-genre is as untrustworthy as Vercueil, about whom, it will be recalled, Mrs Curren says “Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him” (119) and again “I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil” (120). As Marais (1997: 346) puts it,

“In terms of the analogy between Vercueil and the novel, Coetzee seems to be arguing that, because of its unsuitability for the task with which it has been entrusted . . . the novel *must* be trusted”.

This is also to claim that the novel is to be read in a spirit of uncertainty, and that its outcome must remain uncertain. The novel is to be a “crooked path” which must be negotiated with care. That “the crooked path” may refer not only to Vercueil, but also to Mrs Curren’s discourse, is further confirmed by Mrs Curren’s assertion (already quoted at the beginning of this chapter) that “This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page” (120). The text of *Age of Iron* is Mrs Curren’s life, and it is formed by her “crabbed”, that is, her surly, irritable, perverse “digits”. But the “digits” do not only refer to her fingers but, in keeping with the idea that she is what she writes, to the words she writes. For the word “crabbed” denotes handwriting which is cramped and hard to decipher. Moreover, the word “crabbed”, in describing handwriting, refers to the wayward gait of the crab. Mrs Curren writes ‘crab’s writing’, a crooked, uncertain path which is hard to decipher. It *must* be hard to decipher, crabbed, crooked and uncertain if it is to be trusted. This is to say that the novel must be *other* if it is to be trusted. Before resuming my discussion of Mrs Curren’s crabbed writing, I would like to consider this point more closely.

*Excursion A: The Otherness of the Text*²⁵

Derek Attridge makes the point that the effectiveness of Coetzee’s works as literature “is not separate from the importance these works have in the ethico-political realm, but rather that it constitutes that importance. . . . Coetzee’s handling of formal properties is bound up with the capacity of his work to engage with – to stage, confront, apprehend, explore – *otherness*” (1994: 244). Elsewhere Attridge has succinctly examined the notion of trust with respect to the figure of Vercueil.²⁶ Paradoxically, it is in the nature of trust that uncertainty be presupposed:

Trust is a relation to the future that is based on no rational grounds; to entrust a task to someone in the certainty that it will be done is not to trust, but merely to act on the basis of advance knowledge; trust, like a pure decision, is born of uncertainty and uncertainty alone. It fully emerges only in the case of

someone who, like Vercueil, cannot be trusted even to carry out the most trivial of tasks.

(1994a: 64-65)

One might ask, though, whether it is ever possible “to entrust a task to someone in the certainty that it will done”, as Attridge claims it is. Vercueil might be particularly untrustworthy, but it is nonetheless impossible to know with *certainty* that *anyone* will in actual fact carry out a set task. This is so because the other (indeed, *all* others) exceeds the knowledge of the self. The other is unpredictable to a greater or lesser extent precisely because s/he is other. Similarly, it must be said that the notion of “advance knowledge” is a convenient fiction on Attridge’s part to draw a clear line between the untrustworthy Vercueil and the untrustworthy other: no knowledge of the other is ever advance knowledge for the reason that such knowledge would have access to the future. This is not to reject Attridge’s broader argument, but merely to say that the other (any other, including Vercueil) must be trusted because the other *cannot* be trusted. Attridge does tend in this direction when he states further on that “Another way of putting this is that there is only one kind of trust that truly deserves the name: trust in the other” (1994a: 65) and that “to write is therefore to trust the other who will read – other because unknowable and unfixable in advance” (1994a: 66). It is just this unknowability and unfixability of *any* other which calls in question Attridge’s clear demarcating line between the figure of Vercueil and other others (including readers), while also making problematic Attridge’s claim that “otherness is always *perspectival* and . . . is always *produced*”, that “there is no transcendent other”, and that “the other does not come from elsewhere, but is a product of the identical constituting act that produced the self/same” (1994a: 65). Even though Attridge claims to be drawing heavily on Levinas’s notion of otherness (cf. 1994a: 78 note 7, 80 note 17; 1994: 256, 262 note 17), such statements would seem to be antipathetic to Levinas’s notion of otherness. For Levinas, as I showed in Chapter 3, the other *does* come from elsewhere and *is* transcendent in always exceeding just the kind of “identical constituting act” of the same to which Attridge refers. On the contrary, if one were to follow Levinas in claiming that the other is unknowable in advance (as Attridge correctly claims), then this would already put paid to the notion that it is possible “to act on the basis of advance knowledge” (1994a: 64). If the other is “unknowable and unfixable in advance”, then the other is transcendent to the self

despite the implication of Attridge's claim that the other may be known subsequently. Attridge's (1994a: 69) later claim that "to apprehend the other as a general phenomenon is to take away its otherness" is quite correct: the singularity of the other is enigmatic and resists all reduction towards being a phenomenon. But, as Attridge also notes parenthetically, "At the same time, of course, no concrete instance can exhaust the issue" (1994a: 69). The implication of these statements is that the other, even though unique, specific and singular, is necessarily, as enigma, transcendent and therefore cannot be thematised.

Despite this demurral on my part with respect to Attridge's appropriation of Levinas's conception of otherness, his important point that the formal innovation of Coetzee's work is tied to his exploration of otherness nonetheless remains. Indeed, as Attridge (1994: 249) states (after having argued that there is "an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification"), there is "a sense in which the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand". This is at least partly the case because the literary text, and in particular the "formally innovative", challenging literary text, resists being reduced to the flattening narrative of analytic explanation (cf. Attridge 1994: 250). That is, it *disrupts* the reduction of its own otherness and enforces ever closer scrutiny as a result of its uncertainty. This is only to say that such a text is *enigmatic* in resisting reduction (whether phenomenological or otherwise). The uncertainty which I argue characterises *Age of Iron*, with regard to the issue of confession and absolution as much as with regard to that of trust, thus appears as its trace of otherness.²⁷ This enigmatic quality is the result of uncertainty, itself consequent upon the deferral and interruption of its reduction to the same.

Excursion B: Etymologies

Associating 'crab' with writing in terms of otherness, as I have done here, is of course not to exhaust the rich semantic field of 'crab' and words related to it in the novel. Marais (1997: 280-281) notes that the Latin word 'cancer' means crab, which serves to relate the words 'crab' and 'crabbed' to cancer. Since the association of 'crab' and 'cancer' rests on a false etymology, however (seeing that neither word derives directly from the other, and that non-classicists might be unaware of the link between the

words in Latin), this association must be linked with the many instances of false etymology in the novel and must be treated with suspicion. It is significant, in fact, that the novel advertises its reliance on false etymologies. Thus Mrs Curren tells Vercueil that the word 'charity' comes "from the Latin word for the heart" (20), but in an aside immediately admits that this is "a lie: charity, *caritas*, has nothing to do with the heart. But what does it matter if my sermons rest on false etymologies?" (20).

One might ask, with Mrs Curren, what it matters if she uses false etymologies. And the answer to this question, I would venture, is that such overt falseness serves at once to assert and to subvert Mrs Curren's authority.²⁸ Indeed, Mrs Curren's *modus operandi* suggests a waywardness similar to that of the 'crab's-walk' in terms of which she finds direction in indirection. For the direction *vis-à-vis* the derivation of words she posits in her implicit assertion of her authority (in this case, as classicist, which imbues the entire novel with its references and debts to the classics),²⁹ is an *indirection*. Her procedure is thus ironic: her authority, as it is posited, is interrupted.

This statement could also be inverted: Mrs Curren, in interrupting her positing of her own authority, posits that authority again. As much as Mrs Curren's authority is disavowed in being asserted, it is also asserted in being disavowed. To state that an etymology is false is also to state that one *knows* that it is false. Some truth is to be found at the core of each of the etymological lies Mrs Curren tells: "There is no lie that does not have at its core some truth. One must only know how to listen" (171). This is, of course, not to suggest that lies are true, but that the distinction between lies and truths are not clear cut. Apparent truths might have to be viewed with suspicion. Authority is never beyond doubt. Mrs Curren thus takes a position which subverts its own positionality. Her play with etymology is a play with the authority of her position: she does not take her position seriously, but attempts to locate its position beyond the confines of right and wrong. Mrs Curren's attempts to sow suspicion of etymology (while paradoxically asserting its importance) in the mind of the reader force the reader to treat with wariness not only her various etymological expositions (cf. 26, 51, 68, 78, 103, 119, 176) but also her entire letter. At the very least, the reader is warned not to take these expositions (or the letter) at face value.³⁰

One might also in this regard note the motif of anagrams and Mrs Curren's attempts to relate apparently unrelated words to one another as if they were anagrams (cf. 126, 157-158, 171) and her various translations (and mistranslations), especially

from Latin (cf. 150 , 168, 173, 176, 179). Latin plays an important role in this text. Most if not all of the etymologies expounded upon by Mrs Curren are based on Latin. In addition, Mrs Curren as classicist explicitly characterises herself in terms of prosopopoeia. She calls Latin “A dead language . . . a language spoken by the dead” and says her job was “Giving voice to the dead” (176). Latin etymology is used in order to connect shame, as mortification, with death: “Death in life” (78). Shame is defined as “The name for the way in which people live who would prefer to be dead” (78).

This definition, which takes its cue from etymology and must thus be treated with suspicion (yet seriously), *names* shame. The issue of names is central in *Age of Iron*. The status of names seems suspect: names are uncertain, often unknown.³¹ Mrs Curren’s daughter remains nameless, while the real names of Vercueil, Bheki/Digby, Florence’s children Hope and Beauty, Florence herself, her husband William and ‘John’ remain unknown. Mrs Curren assumes that ‘John’ is a “*nom de guerre*” (155) and questions whether Johannes “was . . . his true name” (155; cf. 34, 35, 40, 93, 108, 134). The uncertainty surrounding names may be linked to Mrs Curren’s general lack of authority and suggests the limits of her knowledge of others (cf. Attridge 1994a: 62, 78-79 note 8; Marais 1997: 301). Her discourse is not clear cut: it is a mode of “indirection”. She is aware that her writing, its deviousness, is considered with suspicion by the “new puritans”, who are said to be “Suspicious of devious discourse, like this” (75). The link between Mrs Curren’s lack of authority and naming is also suggested when Mr Thabane asks Mrs Curren, in her confrontation with the criminal violence of the State at Site C, “What is its name?” (90).

An important implication of this association is that the reader, who after all *reads* and thus attempts to make sense of, unravel and disentangle the novel, thus reducing the otherness of the text, and who is made suspicious of the text through the instances of false etymology, uncertain anagrams, (mis)translations, and unknown names, is cast in the position of the “new puritans” who want things to be clear cut and are suspicious of “devious discourse”. This association is confirmed by Marais (cf. 1997: 305, 313), who notes that the reader of the novel may be related to the reader *in* the novel, namely Mrs Curren’s daughter who, it will be remembered, is also described as being “like iron” (68). The implication for Marais is that the relationship of the reader to the text is suggested in the text to be one which “forecloses on the

otherness which the text endeavours to 'intimate'" (1997: 305). Not only does the issue of Mrs Curren's (lack of) authority therefore serve to strengthen the self-subversive nature of the novel, but the role of the reader also involves ontogenetic anxiety because of the reader's tendency to flatten out narrative and reduce the otherness of the text (that is, the tendency not to respect the otherness of the text). At the same time, the text may be said to *encourage* the suspicion with which the reader must view the novel, a suspicion in turn linked to its ontogenetic anxiety (cf. Marais 1997: 345). The reader must be suspicious of the novel – something implied by Mrs Curren's relativised authority – in order to do it justice by respecting its otherness, which entails its recognition as other (as an entity which is other and therefore resistant to being reduced in being understood: to the realm of the same). The reader must respond responsibly to the text, which entails respecting its otherness. This is encouraged in the text by the interruption of Mrs Curren's authority as narrator, as classicist, and as liberal, even as that authority is posited.

6.4.2 *Confession: Cancer, Shame and Pain*

After these brief excursions into the respect that the otherness of the text commands and into the link of uncertain (indeed absent) etymology and names to Mrs Curren's lack of authority, I would like to return to my consideration of Mrs Curren's 'crabbed' writing. In view of the (quasi-)etymological association with cancer, this writing may refer to her cancer-ridden body, especially in view of the fact that, as noted above, self and text are associated if not identified in the text.³² What is more, Mrs Curren explicitly relates her cancer to *shame* by metaphorising shame as cancer: "I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life" (132).³³ She explains to 'John' that cancer comes about as a result of "consuming yourself in shame and loathing" (132) and causes the body "to eat away at itself" (132). And this consuming oneself in shame and loathing is of course the stuff of confession, which is why it should not be surprising that Mrs Curren associates her cancer with her story.³⁴ She imagines 'John' thinking "What is the point of consuming yourself in shame and loathing? I don't want to listen to the story of how you feel, it is just another story, why don't you *do* something?" (132).³⁵ It is clear from this that Mrs Curren assumes her story is a consequence of her shame, which eats away at her like her cancer. Seen

in this light, Mrs Curren's "crabbed" writing, her cancer-ridden writing, is her shameful writing, her confession. In this regard, it is significant that Mrs Curren associates truth with the pain caused by her cancer and the pain of the death that will inevitably follow:

There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me when, in an unguarded moment, a vision overtakes me of this house, empty, with sunlight pouring through the windows on to an empty bed, or of False Bay under blue skies, pristine, deserted – when the world I have passed my life in manifests itself to me and I am not of it. My existence from day to day has become a matter of averting my eyes, of cringing. Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth.

(23)

Mrs Curren here admits to not being able to face death. It is unbearably painful to conceive of the absence of the self. Because of its irreducible alterity, death *cannot* be properly thought. Yet it *must* be thought, because it is truth. Death here appears as the transcendent unthought which, nonetheless, cannot be avoided. Avoiding thinking death is avoiding thinking truth. In view of the discussion above of 'looking away' and 'averting' the gaze towards the other, it is significant that Mrs Curren makes clear that she tries to avoid the absolute alterity of death by "averting my eyes". Death, in its absolute alterity, cannot be represented and contained. Instead, in looking at death one cannot but look away, a paradoxical process again reminiscent of Mrs Curren's 'crab's-walk'. Mrs Curren can face death only by, quite literally, not facing it.

It is also significant that "averting my eyes" is here juxtaposed with "cringing". Mrs Curren cringes, presumably in fear and trembling, from the truth of death. Yet there is also the suggestion here of shame. If *Age of Iron* is a confessional narrative, it is, by equal measure, an attempt at coming to terms with otherness. This much can be inferred from Mrs Curren's various confrontations with otherness, as noted above with reference to various critics' categorising of *Age of Iron* as a novel which 'stages' otherness, be it the otherness of other humans (such as Vercueil, 'John' and Bheki, suffering in the townships) or of cancer and death. In the novel, Mrs Curren must come to terms with and learn to bear the truth of her death. Given the importance of the confessional nature of this narrative, with its various expressions of shame, the word "cringing" suggests not only shame but also a link between otherness

and confession. It seems there is something shameful about the averting of eyes, the cringing in the face of otherness.

Yet this leaves one with the question of just *how* otherness is to be faced. If eyes are to be 'averted' in order to preempt the gaze of possession and control, but such a procedure is simultaneously shameful, as is suggested in the passage above, then the self is, indeed, caught in an ironic double bind. This point would, possibly, further substantiate my earlier claim that the representation of otherness cannot be forgone. In short, the suggestion here seems to be that the gaze at the other must continue while not continuing, that the confrontation with otherness entails a looking at *and* looking away at one and the same moment. This impossible procedure could, in terms of my consideration of irony in this thesis, be characterised as *ironic*.

In practical terms, Mrs Curren's answer to the quandary of facing the other without reducing its otherness seems not to be to forgo representing that otherness, but to represent it without representing it. In Marais's terminology, "through 'writing with eyes shut', Coetzee seems to suggest that it is possible to *draw* the other in fiction without foreclosing on it" (1998: 51). Coetzee's is an "aesthetic that draws the other and thus attempts to expose the reader to alterity during the literary encounter" (1998: 56). This 'drawing' of the other, which I take to be the representation of the other without representing it, without making it present and thus attempting to reduce its otherness, is enabled, if at all, in *Age of Iron* by means of the various self-reflexive othering strategies to be found in this novel, one of which I have attempted to discuss at some length (the expressions of shame and shame about shame).³⁶ Of course, this 'impossible' attempt to represent and not represent otherness is painful in the extreme. It is no simple solution: facing the other (or rather, being faced by the other) is an extremely disturbing event.³⁷

It is therefore highly significant that Mrs Curren associates writing with pain (that is, the pain caused by her cancer, something vividly described in the course of the novel [cf. 9, 66, 169]) or, put even more strongly, acknowledges that writing and pain go together: ". . . without pain no writing: a new and terrible rule" (159). Mrs Curren has to experience pain in order to write because she cannot write when she has taken pills against the pain. Only when she has taken pills can she escape the pain associated with her condition, yet "when I have taken the pills, nothing is terrible any more, everything is indifferent, everything is the same" (159). The pills, that is, have

the effect of reducing otherness. It is not only the otherness of invasive pain which is reduced, but otherness as such. When she has taken pills against the pain, Mrs Curren experiences the 'indifference' she associates with the 'ordinary' (cf. 109ff.). This indifference is, quite literally, against difference: it reduces "everything" to "the same". The pills which result in this indifference are "like smoke-flares. I swallow them and they release a fog inside me, a fog of extinction. I cannot take the pills and go on with the writing" (159).

One might note, however, that there is also another kind of writing presented in the novel, a writing which makes no sense and of which Mrs Curren cannot recognise herself as the author. The pills not only reduce otherness by making "everything . . . the same", but also enforce a confrontation with otherness for the reason that they cause Mrs Curren to hallucinate. The hallucinations she experiences, as a result of the Diconal she takes, on one occasion result in a new kind of writing which Mrs Curren explicitly associates with otherness: "Once I came to myself facing the wall. In my hand was a pencil, its point broken. All over the wall were sprawling, sliding characters, meaningless, coming from me or someone inside me" (167).

The point here is not only that, ultimately, there is no escaping otherness. On the one hand Mrs Curren's writing is rendered impossible by the pills, while, on the other hand, the kind of writing which does result from them is a writing without sense. This is to say that the "sprawling, sliding characters" produced by Mrs Curren "or someone inside me" – in itself possibly a reference to the otherness of cancer within her, as suggested in the novel by means of comparisons of the cancer with, for instance, "a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me" (75) – is an absolutely other writing. This would tie in, of course, with the Levinasian notion that the other 'is' transcendent, unknowable and meaningless. Such a writing is an other writing, a writing which does not allow its otherness to be reduced. It does not mediate meaning. But it also does not enable commerce with the other because it falls outside the economy of the same. If *Age of Iron* consisted of such writing, it would be unreadable. It might have offered otherness, but one would not have read it. Instead of such a writing, what we do find in *Age of Iron* is representational discourse which can make sense and offers otherness yet which attempts *ironically* to disrupt that sense of otherness. The novel

is at once constituted by the attempt to render otherness and the attempt to render that rendering problematic.

In terms of my argument in this chapter, that confession is the nexus of irony and otherness in *Age of Iron*, one might claim that Mrs Curren's confessional narrative offers a face to otherness and simultaneously de-faces that face by drawing attention to the problematic nature of the confession, including the possibility of absolution subsequent to a completion of the confession which remains deferred. In order to deal with her shame, her cancer, her pain, Mrs Curren must write and confess. To this extent, as I have argued, her shame and cancer enable the existence of the novel. But the fact that there is always more shame to confess, prolongs the confession and therefore the possibility of confessing more, and so on. This sideways nature of confession is its 'crab's-walk'.

This notion is related to the idea with which this chapter commenced, namely that Mrs Curren lives on in the text of the novel. I would therefore now like to turn to the final section of this chapter, in which I more closely consider the status of Mrs Curren's textual survival *vis-à-vis* confession. If Mrs Curren does survive textually, in *Age of Iron*, one might ask oneself whether this is as a result of her confession having been completed, thus leading to an afterlife in absolution, in a state of grace. If this is the case, then those critics who consider the novel to end on a positive note, with Mrs Curren's salvation, will have been correct in their assessment of the novel.

Writing in this novel is associated not only with cancer and shame (as indicated), but also with life. Not only does Mrs Curren associate her life and her afterlife, as I argued above, with the text she is writing, but with reference to her contemplated suicide she makes the point that, "For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I have not gone through with it: a rule, another rule. Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death" (106).

6.5 *The Confessor(s) and the End of Confession*

As noted above (6.3), otherness is part and parcel of the confessional project, if only for the reason that confession makes a totalising demand on the confessant's compulsion to confess *everything*. As a result, as Coetzee (1992: 291) notes *vis-à-vis*

Dostoevsky, "the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception". But otherness is also an important component of the confessional procedure on another level: the confession of the confessant requires an other to whom the confession is made. Every confession requires an auditor:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. . . . [The] agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know. (Foucault 1980: 61-62)

The figure of the confessor thus presupposes a power relation. If the subject of the confession subjects herself to herself, and thus enacts the doubling of consciousness discussed above, then s/he also subjects herself to the power of the other to whom the confession is addressed and who would be empowered "to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile". The various figures who may act as confessor(s) to Mrs Curren therefore bear closer scrutiny.

At least two figures are explicitly identified as confessors in *Age of Iron*. The first of these is Vercueil, while the second is Mrs Curren's daughter. The fact that *Age of Iron* is presented as a letter addressed to her daughter, and that the novel is a confessional narrative, places Mrs Curren's daughter in the position of confessor to her mother.

If the addressee of this text, namely Mrs Curren's daughter, is implicitly placed in the position of the confessor, then this means that, by extension, the reader of the novel is also placed in this position. This point bears on Marais's view, discussed above (6.4), that the reader becomes involved in the text and in a sense 'co-authors' it in constructing its end. As I argued there, the text demands respect for its otherness. But this respect for the otherness of the text also entails the subversion of the authority of the reader: the reader *cannot* impose her reading on the text, and thus loses a degree of authority and autonomy herself. That is, as necessarily lacking competence the reader *cannot* be in the position to grant Mrs Curren absolution and

redemption. The implication of this is that the reader, as a confessor to Mrs Curren, lacks the competence to absolve her, an idea which would tie in with the infinite responsibility the self has to and for the other (be the other the text, Mrs Curren, Vercueil, Bheki, or 'John').

The reader must be responsible for the other: for the text s/he reads, but also for Mrs Curren herself. Marais thus implicitly casts the reader in the role of confessor to Mrs Curren for, as he puts it, the self-reflexivity of the text amounts to "a transferral of authorial responsibility to the reader" (1993: 23). This has the consequence of placing the responsibility for Mrs Curren's salvation (in textual terms) on the reader, who must co-determine the ending of the novel. Marais (1997: 301) notes that the epistolary mode of the novel foregrounds its performative dimension and continues by pointing out that the relationship between Mrs Curren and her daughter, the "writer-surrogate in the novel and the reader-surrogate in the novel[,] mirrors the actual relationship between Coetzee and his reader". But Mrs Curren's relationship with her daughter also "reflects her relationship with Vercueil" (Marais 1997: 301), which means too that the absence of Mrs Curren's daughter is stressed.³⁸ Indeed, according to Marais, Mrs Curren's daughter "increasingly assumes the status of an absence in the novel" (Marais 1997: 301). The confessor is not only, nor necessarily, Mrs Curren's daughter (the apparently intended reader), but also *any* reader of the novel. As such, the text figures alterity in the absence of the confessor as reader. But even if this alterity is, by implication, figured, the text does not allow for it to be figured finally for the reason that such alterity is potentially infinite. The text figures as many others as will read it. Moreover, the text performs a doubling movement which figures the alterity of the self who reads: as such, *Age of Iron* confronts the reader with her otherness, thrust as s/he is into the role of confessor to Mrs Curren.

If one investigates more closely the role of the confessor in *Age of Iron* it becomes clear that doubt is cast on the ability of the confessor to grant absolution which would lead to salvation (in textual terms or otherwise). At any rate, the point for which I would like to argue in concluding this chapter, is that the undecidability which I claimed above characterises this novel, and which is implicit (but to my mind not articulated fully enough) in Marais's characterisation of readerly responsibility, is necessarily a function of the novel's attempt to respect otherness. Part of this attempt

lies in the way attention is self-reflexively drawn in the text to the problematic nature of Mrs Curren's confessional narrative, as I have spent the bulk of this chapter arguing. Another problematic part of her confession pertains to the status of her confessor.

This much is clear in the portrayal of Vercueil, as discussed above (cf. 6.1, 6.4). This character is not only analogous to the text (as I have indicated Marais convincingly shows) but is also a confessor figure. In a passage discussed at some length above (6.4), Mrs Curren casts Vercueil as confessor to her when she says "this is the one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with last things" (74). The relation between Mrs Curren and Vercueil becomes ever closer, even to the extent that Mrs Curren calls this "Mr V" (75) her "shadow husband" (174) and herself "Mrs V" (174). She has, of course, from the start entrusted the "Private papers" (28), the text of the novel, to him; that is, she has entrusted her confession to him, which makes him not only the bearer of the confession but, as she acknowledges, the confessor too: "He, Mr V, to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write" (75). Seen in this light, the phrase "last things" refers not only to the delivery of the letter to her daughter, but also to the very important last thing to be done before death, namely to confess (cf. Coetzee 1992: 284).

If Mrs Curren is to confess to Vercueil, and gain absolution, then Vercueil must be a competent confessor. But this is a matter of some uncertainty in the novel. In an important passage Mrs Curren engages in a confession directly addressed to Vercueil, but also to her daughter and therefore, by extension, to the reader:

'It is a confession I am making here, this morning, Mr Vercueil,' I said, 'as full a confession as I know how. I withhold no secrets. I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough! . . .

A deep groan came from Vercueil's throat. I craned over, but all I could see was the stubble on his cheek and a hairy ear. 'Mr Vercueil!' I whispered. He did not stir. Asleep? Pretending to sleep? How much had passed him by unheard? Had he heard about goodness and heroism? About honour and shame? Is a true confession still true if it is not heard? Do you hear me, or have I put you to sleep too?

(150-151)

Apart from being an important passage in terms of relating confession and shame, this passage also, crucially, casts Vercueil as confessor. Moreover, the authority of the

confessor is cast in doubt, as he has fallen asleep. The result is that the status of the confession as truth is also made uncertain, as indicated by Mrs Curren's question: "Is a true confession still true if it is not heard?" And most importantly, the figures of Vercueil, Mrs Curren's daughter, and the reader overlap in Mrs Curren's question: "Do you hear me, or have I put you to sleep too?"

What this passage suggests is not necessarily that Mrs Curren's confession is invalid, but that its adequacy is uncertain, indeed undecidable. There is the possibility that the confession may be adequate (and that it may therefore lead to the truth, to absolution, and to salvation), but there is also the possibility that the opposite may happen.³⁹ It is this undecidability which I think must be maintained in *Age of Iron*, as is suggested by the explicit putting in question of the confessor figures in the passage above, something which strengthens the argument made in this chapter that Mrs Curren's confession might not be adequate as articulated in her expressions of shame and shame about shame.

The consequence of the uncertain status of Mrs Curren's confession is simply to disrupt the face it posits for the other. That is, the prosopopoeia that is *Age of Iron* cannot but offer a face to what has none, but this face is self-consciously, self-reflexively disrupted. The disruption of this face, as it appears in this confessional narrative, suggests that the face is *posited*, that it is given, and that it must not be taken *as* the other. It is a representation of the other which conceptualises that other and therefore must be interrupted continually, ironically.

Considered in these terms, the enigmatic ending of the novel *must* remain enigmatic if the otherness of the text and indeed of Mrs Curren and Vercueil, is to be respected. The enigma may not be reduced to a particular reading with its particular stance with regard to the novel's 'optimism', Mrs Curren's 'salvation', or Vercueil's 'angelic' nature. One can *perhaps* infer that Mrs Curren gets Vercueil to kill her: just before the end she says it is high time "to put an end to this sorry story" (179), the story of and as her life. She adds: "Not that I doubt Vercueil would help". That Mrs Curren makes a decision to end her life with Vercueil's help is, furthermore, suggested by her calling up her daughter "to say goodbye" (180). But such a reading is subject to *uncertainty*: it is possible that Mrs Curren simply feels that the end is nigh, that when she implies Vercueil will help her put an end to the "sorry story" she

simply means he will help with “last things” (179) in general. Possibly Mrs Curren gains absolution from the angelic Vercueil. On the other hand, possibly she does not.

This would seem to be suggested by the chilling final sentence: “From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (181). Vercueil’s embrace seems to suggest, if anything, damnation rather than deliverance. One might further speculate what it means that Mrs Curren says “For the first time I smelled nothing” (181). It would, for instance, be possible to relate this enigmatic sentence to the text’s meta-representational consideration of aesthetics, especially because the absence of sense implies an-aesthesia. If aesthetics implies awareness and perception, as its etymology suggests, then Mrs Curren’s pills are literally anaesthetics which blunt the senses and lead to indifference. As I showed above (6.4), significantly the pills are shown to oppose writing because they desensitise Mrs Curren. At one point Mrs Curren speculates, in terms of the pills she takes to lessen the pain, about what it would feel like to die: “Must one die in full knowledge, fully oneself? Must one give birth to one’s death without anaesthetic?” (129). The fact that Mrs Curren smells nothing would suggest that one may in fact die ‘with’ anaesthetic, that death anaesthetises: incomprehensibly, at the moment of death it would be possible to smell *nothing*. This nothing might be the nothing that is death, which in itself would suggest that after life there is nothing, that no absolution and certainly no redemption or resurrection is possible.

Whatever plausible ending one might construct, the novel culminates, as Attridge (1994: 252) notes, “in a final sentence that is beyond all letter-writing”. This would also apply to the penultimate sentence, which would seem to be a description by the self of the death of the self: “He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush”. Elsewhere, Attridge (1994a: 69) elaborates as follows on the final sentences of the novel: “. . . we cannot be sure whose allegory this is, Mrs. Curren’s in a letter to her daughter or Coetzee’s in a sentence that abandons the conceit of the continuously written letter, nor exactly what is being allegorized in the final, hardly triumphant coldness”. That Mrs Curren dies just prior to the end of the novel is, textually speaking, problematic and in itself should underscore that any attempt at determining the ending of the novel must be questionable. As Attridge points out, it is not possible to determine whose this last sentence is. It might be, impossibly, Mrs Curren’s, for it forms part of her letter. Yet,

after all, in the previous sentence the breath has gone out of her “in a rush”, which would seem to indicate this is not her sentence. It might be Coetzee’s, or some other narrator’s sentence, but there is no unambiguous indicator in the novel which would allow one to decide once and for all to whom the sentence belongs.⁴⁰

The ending of *Age of Iron* is an enigma and, I would claim, must remain so. This means that this ending must remain unread even as it is read, and that any account of it must be unread, as I have attempted to do here.

6.6 Notes

- 1 Numbers in brackets refer to Coetzee (1991).
- 2 Very little critical work has been done on the confessional status of *Age of Iron*. Apart from scattered observations, only two studies have appeared which devote more than cursory attention to this aspect of the text (see Robinson 1992, Whittick 1996). However, neither of these studies considers confession in terms of the approach I follow in this chapter: as constituting the nexus between irony and otherness. This is an approach to the text which has not to my knowledge been followed.
- 3 The word ‘election’ here is ambiguous, as it might connote both *being chosen* (the reading Gallagher seems to favour in terms of election as predestination) or *choosing*. It would be possible to argue that Mrs Curren and Vercueil mutually elect or choose each other. But, equally, one might argue that a ‘mutual election’ – in being mutual – complicates the notion of choice: one elects as much as one is elected. That is, the ambiguity of ‘election’ allows for a reading of the relation between Mrs Curren and Vercueil as being an ambiguous one in which it is not possible to decide, finally, who has chosen and who has been chosen. As my argument below should make clear, I prefer this latter approach.
- 4 In this regard, see Marais (1997; 1998), who argues in Levinasian terms that “Mrs Curren is unable to metamorphose Vercueil because she is possessed by his alterity. Her attempt to transform him is *interrupted* by her encounter with the infinity of his otherness, and this enables love, that is, a movement of infinity from same to other” (1997: 297; my emphasis).

I need, at the start of this chapter, to acknowledge my indebtedness to Marais’s work. His Levinasian reading of Coetzee, in particular of *Age of Iron*, is exemplary. If I reach different conclusions it is because my focus is different: this study is not engaged in an attempt to read Coetzee (or other novels) in Levinasian terms, but to approach irony from within a Levinasian conception of otherness, and to investigate the way such an approach may be used to examine the novelistic staging of otherness. Where I disagree with Marais’s understanding of Levinas this is perhaps as a result of my greater insistence on undecidability, uncertainty and unpredictability, something

which is apparent in an understanding of irony as constituting an infinite interruption, an interruption also of interruption which offers no univocal grace or absolution but, on the contrary, serves to disturb the self and the same without disturbing them. Similarly, my focus is more on the disruption of systems of cognition – including of reading – than it is on presenting a cogent framework such as a ‘Levinasian aesthetic’ from which to approach Coetzee’s work. In short, Marais throughout suggests a quite deliberate effort on Coetzee’s part to stage otherness in Levinasian terms (cf. 1997: 289; 1997: 295-296; 1997: 307-308; 1997: 324; 1997: 328) in order, as he puts it elsewhere (1998: 48), to allow the novel to ‘rival’ rather than ‘supplement’ history and thus to “inscribe a relation to the other that falls outside the sphere of mastery”. This leads Marais to the crucial insight that Coetzee, by means of a ‘Levinasian aesthetic’, “in all of his novels, endeavours to represent not otherness, but the way in which otherness is routinely foreclosed upon by attempts to represent it” (Marais 1998: 48). My approach here, on the other hand, does not suggest a conscious (authorial) deployment of irony in *Age of Iron* (nor, for that matter, in *Life at Home* or *Kikoejoe*). This is of course not to put in question either the validity of Marais’s *modus operandi* or his conclusions, but to indicate their difference from mine.

- 5 This seems to me to be a worthwhile, indeed urgent, point to explore, but one which I cannot pursue here at great length as this thesis is not primarily concerned with ‘embodied’ – for instance gendered or ethnic – others (see Chapter 3 note 3). Despite this proviso, I do below touch on Parry’s concerns in terms of my consideration of authority and representation. See Brink (1996) for a consideration of the problematic nature of the idea that the self cannot and should not write as (or about) the other. According to Brink, a prohibition on the “presumption” to speak in the voice of another “would impose on the writer the literary and existential equivalent of the politics of apartheid” (1996: 13). Brink further justifies his position by arguing for a “faithful” rendering of the lives and utterances encountered. In addition, the suppression of voices “would have been yet another form of betrayal – that of history itself” (1996: 17). History calls for the responsible rendering of the other. In this respect, my position in this thesis would seem to approach Brink’s: that the responsible representation of the other is called for, that the ‘presumption’ of attributing thoughts and words is inevitable in fiction. The point I make in this chapter is precisely that such representation at once takes place and is interrupted ironically in Mrs Curren’s confession. Brink does qualify the position sketched above by noting that the appropriation of voice involves issues of power “in a society where women are denied a voice, a male speaks ‘on behalf of’ the silenced, or when in a racist context a white appropriates the voice of a black” (1996a: 9-10). See also note 7, below.
- 6 See Coetzee’s comments on “anti-illusionism” and realism in an interview with David Attwell (1992d: 27ff.).
- 7 See note 57, Chapter 4 (above), for a consideration of the attribution in fiction of thought, as well as speech, to others, in particular through free indirect

discourse. In terms of my consideration of Mrs Curren's attribution of thoughts to 'John' ("In his lap he holds the pistol that, for this interval, keeps the hunters at bay, *that was his and Bheki's great secret, that was going to make men of them. . . . His mouth is dry but he is not afraid*" (159; my emphasis), an attribution which is interrupted as it is posited, one might argue that van Heerden's strategy of interrupting his conceptualisations of otherness is less clearly evident, and perhaps less successful than Coetzee's in *Age of Iron*.

- 8 Marais's claim relating to the absolution of the self seems problematic, framed as it is in Levinasian terms. His argument is that "the writing self is liberated from ontological solitude by the replacement of the 'I am I' with the 'I am for'" (1997: 303). Even though Levinas's philosophy as regards freedom is not of prime importance in this thesis, I did indicate (Chapter 3, 3.2.1, 3.2.2.1) that Levinas suggests a link between on the one hand Western philosophy understood as ontology and, on the other hand, freedom. When writing that "the writing self is liberated from ontological solitude", Marais seems to be suggesting that the self is liberated from freedom itself. But, as his next sentence confirms, ethical responsibility is all but liberatory: "Structured as responsibility, he [the writing subject] is now *subjected* to the reader-as-other" (Marais 1997: 303; my emphasis). The infinite responsibility of self to other can *never* be transcended, thus binding the self to her or his responsibility for the other into all eternity (cf. Llewellyn 1991: 22). The death of the self does not end the responsibility of the self for the other (cf. Llewellyn 1991: 54). Put in simple terms, the supporter of apartheid (whether as leader – such as Verwoerd – or follower) *still* bears responsibility towards others for apartheid. Death does not absolve one of responsibility.
- 9 Even if one were to argue that delivery has indeed occurred – after all, here the novel is, in the reader's hands – this delivery is nonetheless veiled in uncertainty *for Mrs Curren*, which means that she has to *trust* Vercueil. This must imply, in turn, that the outcome of her trust is uncertain. I discuss the importance of the notion of 'trust' in *Age of Iron* below (6.4.1). See also note 17.
- 10 See Robinson (1992) for a useful theoretical introduction to confessional narrative.
- 11 Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that I draw on Coetzee's essay on confession ("Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky") for two reasons. The first reason is that it is, in its own right, an incisive, scholarly consideration of confession, in particular of secular confession. Secondly, of course, though one cannot draw parallels too closely in this regard, the essay does suggest a degree of continuity with regard to Coetzee's fictional work, something underscored by the discussion of *Age of Iron* by Coetzee and Attwell in the interview in *Doubling the Point* which immediately precedes "Confession and Double Thoughts". On a terminological note, I follow Coetzee's usage in his essay. As Coetzee

explains, "I use the term *confessor* to denote the one to whom the confession is addressed and the term *confessant* for the one who confesses" (1992: 419 note 5).

- 12 This is a point already broached in the two preceding chapters (see 4.4, 5.8) but which, nonetheless, bears repeating here. Otherness is an inherent part of autobiography as narrative for the reason that narrative can never be total. Even though narrative exhibits a totalising *tendency*, and tends to 'flatten out' infinity by attempting to 'contain' it within itself, this tendency does not imply the successful negotiation of the truth. Rather, it amounts to suppressing the inherently fragmentary nature of narrative, in other words, that narrative does not *tell* the truth for the reason that it *posits* the truth. To this extent, truth is precisely that which eludes language. Similarly, I argue that narrative inevitably, and necessarily, posits a face for otherness. But this face, because it is posited, is not a face: it is a mask. Narrative as *prosopopoeia* thus does not reveal the other. This should not be taken to suggest that truth is equivalent to otherness. Nonetheless, to the extent that the other, like truth, always exceeds my representation of it, there does seem to be a certain analogy between these terms.
- 13 I am assuming without further ado that *Age of Iron*, if it is a confessional narrative, is a *secular* confession. In this regard (and at the risk of being facile) one could cite Mrs Curren's view of heaven as entailing nothingness (cf. 22, 27). This point could, in addition, be argued with reference to Coetzee's parodic rewriting of Dante (cf. Hoegberg 1998).
- 14 For the purposes of my argument I accept Foucault's distinction between a *scientia sexualis* and an *ars erotica* without examining in greater detail its feasibility. Even if the distinction were to be problematic, I do not believe that my point here *depends* on this distinction. It seems to me that the essential point Foucault makes is that a secularised Western society attempts to exercise control over the subject by means of, among other things, the injunction to talk about sex. On the face of it the distinction seems to be rather straightforward. Whether Foucault is historically or culturally speaking correct is a matter of documentary evidence. He does mention (1980: 70) that an *ars erotica* has always been part of the tradition to which he ascribes the practice of *scientia sexualis*. Here he refers to 'mystical' experiences (possession, ecstasy). Another way of thinking about it is that *scientia sexualis* might actually function as a kind of *ars erotica* in the West, with the "production of truth" creating its own "intrinsic pleasures" (1980: 71). I am indebted to Herselman Hattingh for some of these points.
- 15 Foucault does qualify this *everything* by noting that the *terms* in which the confession was rendered might be said historically to have become more limited. After the Council of Trent, the Catholic pastoral prescribed an avoidance of the kinds of intimate details which had earlier been called for so as to render a full confession, such as "description of the respective positions of the partners, the postures assumed, gestures, places touched, caresses, the

precise moment of pleasure – an entire painstaking review of the sexual act in its very unfolding” (1980: 19). Foucault notes that, while “Discretion was advised” and “while the *language* may have been refined, the *scope* of the confession . . . continually increased” (1980: 19; my emphasis).

- 16 In addition, in keeping with Coetzee’s extended discussion of confession (and with this thesis as a whole), my use of the phrase ‘consciousness of non-consciousness’ (rather than, say, ‘consciousness of the unconscious’) constitutes a further attempt on my side to steer clear of psychoanalytic terminology.
- 17 This uncertainty is surely a crucial element of *Age of Iron*, and may be linked to the question of trust, which I discuss in much more detail below. Mrs Curren must trust Vercueil because she cannot trust him, and the author (whether the fictional author, Mrs Curren, or the real one, Coetzee) must trust her text because she cannot trust it. Trust is conditional upon uncertainty.
- 18 This claim could be substantiated initially with reference to Marais’s (1997: 280) argument that “there is a very close analogy, even identification, between self and text” in *Age of Iron*. Marais relates this identification to Mrs Curren’s desire to redeem herself, which link, I would claim, confirms the “meta-representational debate” (Marais 1997: 280; cf. 300ff.) as well as the confessional status of the novel. Marais discusses the importance of Mrs Curren’s attempts at self-redemption, the first of which is her plan to set herself alight in front of the Houses of Parliament. As an attempt at self-redemption this act suggests a confessional undertone.
- 19 In this regard, it might also be significant that Mrs Curren is, on the most literal level possible, shamed by street children (in their way also children of iron) when they grope at her, searching for valuables, while she urinates where she lies (144-145).
- 20 That it would not achieve anything or make any difference, is suggested by Mrs Curren’s dream of Florence’s indifference to her act (cf. 163-164). See Marais’s discussions of this dream (1993: 9-13; 1997: 281-284).
- 21 This claim is similar to Attridge’s (cf. 1994: 244; 1994a: 69) contention that Coetzee’s work stages otherness, and that an important strategy in this regard is the degree to which his texts, and in particular *Age of Iron*, resist the reduction of their otherness (cf. 1994: 250). One needs to distinguish carefully between Attridge’s claim that otherness is *staged* or *performed* in Coetzee’s work (a claim with which I agree, and on which I elaborate below *vis-à-vis* the text’s interruption of itself and consequent excession of the reader’s attempt to comprehend finally and thus reduce the otherness of the text), and his claim that “the other is thematized” in Coetzee’s work (Attridge 1994: 249; cf. Attwell 1998: 167). The latter notion is problematic because the other cannot be thematised. On the contrary, the other escapes any attempt at being thematised.

One might note that the phrase “By indirection I find direction out” constitutes a reference to *Hamlet* (II.i.66): “By indirections find directions out”. The line is spoken by Polonius in an exchange with his servant Reynaldo, advising the latter on how to go about gathering information about Laertes’ activities in Paris (that is, by means of circumlocution). Polonius’ injunction to Reynaldo to spy on Laertes is echoed in the King’s later request that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy on Hamlet (II.ii.10-18). The reason for this request is “Hamlet’s transformation” (II.ii.5), which is a result of his grief at his father’s death, his anger at his mother’s all too quick marriage to his uncle, the encounter with the Ghost (who asserts that Hamlet’s uncle is his father’s murderer), and his subsequent decision “To put an antic disposition on” (I.v.180). These references to *Hamlet* suggest a link between that play and *Age of Iron*, a link strengthened by further references to the play. Hamlet, in a confrontation with Polonius in which he appears mad, invokes the metaphor of a crab’s-walk: “For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am – if like a crab you could go backward” (II.ii. 202-204). In a confession to Vercueil, Mrs Curren says “I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence” (149), alluding to Hamlet’s dying words: “. . . the rest is silence” (V.ii.363).

Apart from the potentially rich suggestions with regard to authority and death, each of these characters (Hamlet and Mrs Curren) may be characterised as ‘mad’. Mrs Curren imagines her daughter “poring over this letter, this confession, this madness” (178). It is striking that Mrs Curren here characterises her letter not only as a confession, but as “madness”. Mrs Curren is elsewhere in the novel characterised as mad by a policewoman: “*Sy’s van haar kop af*” (143) (“She’s out of her mind”). This link between Mrs Curren’s confession and madness is, arguably, strengthened by the references in the novel to *Hamlet*.

It might be of interest to note here that Coetzee, via Foucault and Lacan, has recently published an essay on madness in Erasmus. Significantly, in this essay Coetzee considers *The Praise of Folly* as a “monologue of Folly [in which] Erasmus rehearses a well-established political role: that of the fool who claims licence to criticize all and sundry without reprisal, since his madness defines him as not fully a person and therefore not a political being with political desires and ambitions” (1996: 84). Coetzee claims that *The Praise of Folly* “sketches the possibility of a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether, a *nonposition*” (1996: 84). One might thus argue that what both Hamlet and Mrs Curren, each of whom is referred to as being mad (whether or not they consciously assume “an antic disposition”), attempt to do, is to transcend the politics of rivalry. In fact, politics is here characterised, via Girard, as a particular kind of madness, the madness of rivalry (cf. 1996: 93ff., 106). In this regard, it is significant that Mrs Curren is shown to have severe misgivings about the implicitly rivalrous discourse of politics in her rejection of the injunction to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, to choose for one or the other position. Her position, as a confession which is ‘madness’, is explicitly characterised as an attempt to move beyond the positions implied by ‘Yes’ and ‘No’: “I meant to go through with it: is that

the truth? Yes. No. Yes-no. There is such a word, but it has never been allowed into the dictionaries. Yes-no: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man. ‘Are you going to do it?’ asked Vercueil, his man-eyes gleaming. ‘Yes-no,’ I should have answered” (106). Later, in a long monologue addressed to ‘John’, Mrs Curren decries the injunction to utter the ‘Yes’ (in response to ‘John’s’ presumed rejection of Mrs Curren’s story – see below, note 35). There are many other words, words which are suppressed when one is only allowed to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ (132-133).

Coetzee’s essay is of further interest because of its self-conscious examination of the ironic double bind within which one finds oneself – as Foucault does – when attempting to speak on behalf of madness (cf. 1996: 85ff.). In addition, the essay is notable for its hesitancy in characterising Erasmus’s *Folly* as ironic (cf. 1996: 84, 97). Only in so far as irony might be characterised as implying a hierarchy of knowledge – a position I have argued in this thesis is problematic – would I go along with Coetzee’s hesitation: “To attribute irony to her [Moria], to call her *o eiron*, the dissembler, is to put her back in the position of the subject supposed to know. . . .” (1996: 97). As Coetzee himself writes in a subsequent endnote (1996: 249), “In the notion of the key that will unlock Erasmus’s irony or paradox I detect an ambition to freeze it in a single, locked position”. Irony, as I have argued in this thesis, does not amount to a nonposition. It is not possible, whether through madness or otherwise, to escape from the politics of rivalry (as Coetzee also notes: cf. 1996: 84). However, even if it is not possible not to take positions, it *is* possible not to take positions seriously. Not taking any particular position seriously does amount to taking a position *vis-à-vis* the politics of rivalry, and this position is one of (apparent) madness, a madness against the madness of rivalry (cf. 1996: 93ff.). On irony and positionality, see Chapter 3 (in particular 3.3.2, above).

- 23 Marais is here alluding to Coetzee’s “The Novel Today” (1988f.), in which he argues that the novel should ‘rival’ rather than ‘supplement’ history’. See also note 22 (above).
- 24 See Chapter 3 (3.2.3, above).
- 25 I have discussed some of the notions which follow in an earlier part of this thesis (5.3). My consideration of them here forms part of an attempt to link otherness to the singular text that is *Age of Iron*, in particular with regard to the problem of trust as it appears both *in* the text and *with regard to* it. While my discussion here thus considers the otherness of the literary text with regard to the trust of the reader, the earlier discussion attempted to make more general points about the link between strangeness and form.
- 26 According to Attridge, Vercueil, because he is “outside any of the normal codes that govern interpersonal relations (which is also to say, outside the codes of the realist novel)”, would seem to be “the least appropriate repository for anyone’s trust” (1994a: 62).

- 27 As Attridge (1994: 250) notes, this is the case even though *Age of Iron* is Coetzee's *apparently* most 'realistic' text to date, as some critics have claimed, seizing on aspects such as its clearly specified locale and realist narrative techniques (cf. Gallagher 1991: 193; Macaskill and Colleran 1992: 68; Attwell 1993: 120; Norris Easton 1995: 586, 596).
- 28 On Mrs Curren's lack of authority, see Attwell (1993: 121-122).
- 29 The novel is saturated with classical references, and this footnote merely directs the reader to significant discussions of some of these references: Thucydides (cf. 73ff.), Hesiod (cf. Marais 1997: 277, 312), Virgil (cf. 176; Gallagher 1991: 193, 196-197; Marais 1997: 321; 1998: 51) and Dante (cf. Roberts 1996; Hoegberg 1998). The Orpheus myth has received a full treatment *vis-à-vis* Blanchot from Marais (1997, 1998).
- 30 That the issue of etymology is treated far from unambiguously by Coetzee should serve to support my argument here (that etymology enacts the positing and interruption of authority). Coetzee has expressed his suspicion of, if not disregard for, etymology, flatly claiming "Words do not bear their histories with them as part of their meaning" (1988b: 126). Yet, in an interview with Attwell (1992d: 340), he has himself employed etymology to discuss the novel.
- 31 See my consideration of names in terms of prosopopoeia (4.3, above).
- 32 In view of my discussion of etymology, this association of writing and cancer too would have to be treated with suspicion.
- 33 Significantly, Mrs Curren also associates cancer with power, as is suggested in her following words to Vercueil: "Power is power, after all. It invades. That is its nature. It invades one's life" (107). Like cancer, power creeps into everything and takes over one's entire life. The fact that Mrs Curren associates power with cancer would strengthen the association between cancer and shame: it is precisely, the novel suggests, the political power of apartheid which is a major cause of Mrs Curren's shame.
- 34 Mrs Curren not only associates her cancer with her writing, but also with language generally: "My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body" (36). She also associates it with reading. As she explains, she tries to avoid the word when reading: "When I read I read warily, jumping over lines or even whole paragraphs when from the corner of an eye I catch the shadow of the word waiting in ambush" (37).
- 35 One might note that story here itself becomes a marker of otherness ("*another* story"; my emphasis). This is borne out by Mrs Curren's claim that, when one is only allowed to say 'Yes' or 'No', otherness is suppressed in that "all the time you feel other words stirring inside you like life in the womb" (133).

- 36 This point would also reiterate that, as I noted, Marais (1997: 346) is correct in dismissing the possibility that the novel's ontogenetic anxiety may "simply be explained in terms of the tired, postmodernist trope of self-subversion through which the text draws attention to the conditions of its own impossibility". While indeed drawing attention, if not to its own impossibility then at least to the problematic nature of the possibility of its existence, then this serves self-reflexively to cast doubt on and thus relativise its status as representation of otherness.
- 37 Of course, as noted above (4.4), the other disturbs *without* disturbing. This is because the disturbance of the other is transcendent and cannot be brought within the purview of the self and her representing act: it *escapes* the gaze of the self even as the self gazes at the other. Such a disturbance, one might suggest, is even more disturbing than disturbance, for a disturbance which does not disturb disturbs even disturbance.
- 38 This absence is explicitly figured in the novel through the namelessness of Mrs Curren's daughter, as I indicated above.
- 39 In any event, the possibility of salvation and absolution is already radically put in question if confession is secularised, that is, in the absence of faith and grace (see my discussion of secular confession, above, 6.2).
- 40 Similar uncertainty would, by implication, affect the dates quoted after (or at?) the end of the novel.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

It remains briefly to summarise the most important points made in this study.

It became apparent, in the course of Chapter 2, that there is little agreement on the politics of irony in critical discussions. Nevertheless, it also became clear that there is a definite link between irony and otherness.

Chapter 3 attempted to offer a consideration of Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics in terms of his understanding of the other as *face* and *trace*. In this chapter, I attempted to situate Levinas's work with regard to phenomenology and, in this way, to offer a summary of his view of otherness. The dilemma of respecting the other appeared of particular importance here. The tendency of language to foreclose on otherness by reducing it must be interrupted, while otherness must, nonetheless, be Said. The chapter concluded with an attempt to relate Levinas's conception of otherness – as the interruption of conceiving of otherness – to Paul de Man's conception of irony as permanent parabasis. This attempt is marked by the consideration of the relation between irony and otherness in terms of the tropes of prosopopoeia and catachresis. If the other has no face (because the face would have been posited), then the face of the other would amount to a mask, a reduction of the other by the same. This face-as-mask must be interrupted if the other's otherness is to be respected. That is, any *representation* of the other must be interrupted continually. Any representation of the other is a prosopopoeia of otherness (in that it gives otherness a face) and therefore a catachresis (for the other has no face and must be *given* one). This last section of Chapter 3 concluded with the acknowledgement that it is not possible *not* to have a position, *not* to position oneself *vis-à-vis* the other and, in the process, that it is *not* possible not to give to the other, prosopopeically, a face. But the task with which the self is faced is ironic in that it consists at once of positing and interrupting the face given to the other.

In Chapter 4, van Heerden's *Kikoejoe* was read as an attempt to do justice to the absolutely other by fragmenting the prosopopoeia of otherness. The novel was, that is, read as an allegory of the refusal to narrativise otherness and as being caught in the double bind of irony.

Chapter 5 attempted to offer a reading of Matlou's *Life at Home*, a text which formally disrupts the conceptualisations of the (South African farm) novel. This text

also exceeds the determinations evident in Njabulo Ndebele's celebration of it as a 'rediscovery of the ordinary'. In its strange 'datedness', *Life at Home* involves the transportation of the reader and results in an 'alterity within' the reader. This alterity is also evident, if on a different level, in the depiction of the protagonist of the text. While the protagonist is lent a face where he – as black other on the farm – had none, this face is ironically disrupted in the refusal to close off the narrative. *Life at home* intimates an otherness at the heart of domesticity and exposes an otherness within the reader.

The final chapter of this study considered J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, a text which is explicitly a prosopopoeia in that, in terms of the fictional contract, the narrator is dead. Here confession was postulated as the nexus of the relation between irony and otherness. The chapter attempted to indicate that any critical attempt to categorise *Age of Iron* as 'positive' or 'negative' is misplaced in that the novel's status is undecidable. The otherness of the text must be respected: its ending must be unread in being read.

This study has attempted to indicate that there is, indeed, a clear link between irony and otherness. It has attempted to bracket the political in order to examine this relationship from the vantage point of Levinas's 'conception' of the other. If this study has considered irony in terms of Levinasian ethics, it is nonetheless not a study of the ethics of irony. The task remains to consider whether it is possible to approach irony ethically, or ethics ironically. And it would also be important to consider the political ramifications of the relation between irony and otherness postulated in this study.

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