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Anton Leist and Peter Singer

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Being True to Fact

COETZEE'S PROSE OF THE WORLD

Pieter Vermeulen

Introduction," *Interventions: An International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 315-20, is especially helpful. The question of Coetzee and the political is taken up in a more general way in J. M. Coetzee *and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. J. Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006). Poyner touches on *Disgrace* in particular in her introduction (see 11-12).

15. This objection was suggested to me by the two editors of this volume, Anton Leist and Peter Singer.
16. For a forceful treatment of these themes, see Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 3-6.
17. In a recent paper, Cora Diamond ("The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy", in *Reading Cavell*, ed. A. Crary and S. Shieh [London: Routledge, 2006], 98-118) develops a congenial portrait of Costello in the course of offering an account of the portrait of *Elizabeth Costello* that was originally published as "The Lives of Animals." S. Cavell, "Companionable Thinking," in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. A. Crary (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), further develops some of Diamond's claims. Both articles are reprinted in S. Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). For an insightful commentary on this conversation between Diamond and Cavell, see Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*.
18. For Coetzee's own treatments of this alternative, "wider" conception of truth, see Coetzee, *Doubting the Point*, 60, 65, and 243-44.
19. I am grateful to Cora Diamond, Nathaniel Hupert, Anton Leist, Angus Ross, and Peter Singer for constructive criticisms of earlier drafts of this chapter. I presented versions of the chapter at the University of East Anglia, Cambridge University, New York University, and University of Rome, Sapienza, and also at a seminar of Michael Fried's and Ruth Leys's at the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University. I would especially like to thank, for their helpful comments on these occasions, Jay Bernstein, Simon Blackburn, Arnold Davidson, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Michael Fried, Gary Hagberg, Ruth Leys, Stephen Mulhall, Cathy Osborne, Rupert Read, and Cara Weber. I owe a particular debt to Sandra Laugier for an insightful commentary on my reading of *Disgrace*.

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FROM PHILOSOPHY TO PAIN

At least since he won his first Booker Prize in 1983, J. M. Coetzee's novels have generated a volume of critical work the size of which is virtually unique for a contemporary literary author. One explanation for this immense critical output is certainly the remarkable fit between, on the one hand, the formal and thematic concerns of Coetzee's novels and, on the other, the issues and paradigms that have governed the study of literature in the past twenty-five years. As the study of literature has increasingly occupied itself with questions about post-colonial identity, the determining force of history, and the discursive construction of subjectivity, Coetzee has explicitly touched on these questions in his fiction. His novels are overtly informed by postcolonial, postmodern, and poststructuralist themes, and it has proven to be a productive intellectual exercise to try to identify and explain these informing concerns in the form of critical articles and monographs. Indeed, it would seem that, as two critics have remarked, "academe would have invented J. M. Coetzee had he not already existed."¹ The result of this productive fit is that especially the first five novels (*Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, and *Foe*) are, by critical consensus, approached as theoretically sophisticated works of "metafiction" that bring contemporary critical concerns into play and that are meticulously aware of the discursive and historical conditions of their own production.² The guiding assumption that the novels are first of all intensely self-reflexive and overtly theoretical rather than realist

and mimetic works has often led to the political criticism that they are insufficiently engaged with historical reality, thus the often-heard judgment that Coetzee's work is politically impotent, or even irresponsibly escapist, because it allegedly loses itself "in self-defeating discourse that fails to confront the particularity of the political conditions of oppression in South Africa."⁷³

While this prevalent understanding of Coetzee's work undoubtedly adequately captures many of the central aspects of what we may call his early "high-theory" novels, readers of Coetzee's later work will appreciate that it is manifestly insufficient as an account of much of the work after *Foe*. While *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Disgrace* are still in an important sense about other literary works (the classics, Dostoevsky, and English romantic poetry, respectively), and therefore present themselves as a reflection on their own literary status, they also foreground a more realist dimension. It is especially with the most recent works, such as *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Youth*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, that the limitations of the earlier critical consensus make themselves felt. While the more recent works should not be denied the theoretical sophistication that was central to the earlier novels, their concerns can no longer be translated into the familiar terms of critical discourse in any obvious way. Something very different is going on in these novels.

I don't believe that we must locate a radical break in Coetzee's work after, say, the first five novels. Instead, it is more accurate to say that the later work more explicitly (that is, more successfully) emphasizes an element that was already present in the early work but that was to some extent obscured by theoretical and metafictional concerns. The element that has increasingly found articulation in Coetzee's writing is, as I show in this chapter, the *undeniable fact of bodily suffering*. In Coetzee's more recent work, acknowledging the simple fact that human and nonhuman bodies suffer becomes more important than any theoretical analysis of the historical conditions and the power relations through which such suffering comes about. Of course, this is not to deny that the mutilated, tortured, or suffering body was already an important element in Coetzee's early work: think of the tortured girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the tongueless Friday in *Foe*, or the regime of medical supervision undergone by Michael K. Still, these earlier bodies could easily be understood within the terms of gender inequality, racism, and colonial violence—the terms, that is, in which the ethical and political import of the early work has generally been described. Bodily suffering signaled the disastrous effects of the violence inflicted by patriarchal and colonial power regimes. As I argue at length below, such an understanding is deliberately complicated by, for instance, the amputation of Paul Rayment's leg in *Slow Man*, by the pain that David Lurie and his daughter, Lucy, suffer during the

attack on Lucy's farm in *Disgrace*, or by the problems of old age of Coetzee's most recent protagonists. Something different from power relations is at stake here, and this different aspect has increasingly moved to the foreground in Coetzee's later work.

My claim in this chapter is double: first, I want to demonstrate that Coetzee's ethical investment in bodily suffering is more successfully foregrounded in his later work while the reception of his earlier work mainly emphasized his reflections on power and authority; second, I argue that this development is enabled by a gradual shift in Coetzee's conception of the relation between fiction and the truth—and therefore also between literature and philosophy. While the conception of the truth that guides Coetzee's more overtly self-reflexive, metafictional literary work is that of a nonpropositional, "higher" truth that consists in more than a mere correspondence between representation and reality (*Doubling the Point*, 17), the emphasis later moves from this revelatory conception of the truth to a more minimal demand to address and to acknowledge—to be true to—the fact of suffering. This ethical demand was sidelined somewhat in Coetzee's early conception of the truth, and this can be explained if we appreciate that this early conception relied on an intertext that it shared with the literary-critical reception of this early work: Coetzee's work is mediated by the phenomenon of "French theory," which in its turn relied heavily on Alexandre Kojève's influential reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Coetzee initially deployed Kojève's conception of history as a struggle for recognition between master and slave, as well as the privileged role that Kojève's scheme leaves open for literature. Still, as I explain in the next section of this chapter, this scheme is structurally incapable of responding to the undeniable fact of suffering; an adequate response to this fact will come to require a different literary practice, which I discuss in the third section, before showing how this ethical practice is embodied in Coetzee's recent work.

RECOGNITION AND GRACE (KOJÈVE, BLANCHOT)

Coetzee expounds the relation to philosophy and to the truth that supported his early work in the interviews with David Attwell in the 1992 collection *Doubling the Point*. This book collects much of Coetzee's nonfictional work up to that time and frames it with interviews between David Attwell and the writer. Both the first and the last interview mainly deal with the question of truth. In the last interview, Coetzee comments on his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" (written in 1982–1983), an interpretation of Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky that demonstrates

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how these writers confront the structural interminability of secular confession, an impasse that can, for these writers, only be resolved by divine absolution, by the intervention of grace in the world (*Doubling the Point*, 249). Coetzee comments that he considers this essay "a submerged dialogue between two persons" who both hold to a different position about the "truth in autobiography," and, as "all writing is autobiography" (391), also about the very possibility of articulating the truth in language. The first of these two positions evinces a "secular skepticism about truth" (243) and holds that writing is "self-interested in every sense," and therefore "there is no ultimate truth about oneself . . . what we call the truth is only a shifting self-reappraisal whose function is to make one feel good" (391-92). The debate in the essay is then "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" (392).

Such a position of cynicism, or of "endless skepticism," corresponds to the familiar suspicion that human language can never attain the truth but is rather always and inescapably a partisan and perspectival instrument of power. Yet it is important to realize that Coetzee does not simply identify with this skeptical condition. While he cannot, like Dostoevsky, believe in the possibility of divine grace, neither does he think that an insight in the truth is simply inaccessible to man, or to human language. At the end of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee calls his earlier attempt (in "Confession and Double Thoughts") to confront the impasse of endless skepticism and to negotiate the possibility of an undistorted access to the truth "the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world" (394). In another interview, Coetzee takes great care to distinguish his "philosophical" practice from the work of philosophers: he insists that he is "not a trained philosopher," that he lacks "the philosophical equipment." The domain where his philosophical engagement with the truth is played out is then not that of philosophy, but rather that of the novel: "I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas" (246).

What makes this literary activity philosophical is, as Coetzee makes clear, its manifest interest in the truth, that is, its ambition to transcend the conviction that all truth claims can be seen as a cover for power interests. Coetzee remarks that this philosophical concern should be read side by side with his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

The novel asks the question: Why does one choose the side of justice when it is in no one's material interest to do so? The Magistrate [the novel's main character] gives the rather Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice. ["Confession and

Double Thoughts"], if only implicitly, asks the question: Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest? To which, I suppose I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of the truth.

(394-95)

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While it may not be possible to represent reality in an undistorted way, fiction writing is at least propelled by the ideas of truth and justice. If we take his own word for it, Coetzee's writing is motivated by a desire to move beyond the skeptical denial of the possibility of truth, and this interest in the truth, which he himself identifies as philosophical, is also a matter of justice.

This complex relation to the truth can explain Coetzee's ambiguous political position in South Africa. His awareness of the relation between truth claims and power interests, and of his own inescapable complicity with the privileged white majority in South Africa, led him to renounce the supposedly neutral position of an uninformed, totally uninterested outsider. At the same time, his suspicion that truth claims are often a mere cover for power interests, or are at least often perceived as such, can explain the fact that his work never simply identified with only one position in the struggle for power in South Africa, not even the position of the victims of Apartheid. Coetzee's early work did not naively participate in the South African power struggle, nor did it believe that it could simply transcend it. Rather than a formulation of clear and unambiguous denunciations and judgments, Coetzee's literary dedication to justice and truth took the complex literary form of what has been called "a strategy of paradox," in which every statement is "undetermined even as it is articulated."⁴

But, we may well ask, how can such a self-subverting literary strategy lead to the truth? How does a strategy of paradox lead to the truth about the work of power that it refuses to condemn unequivocally, lest it be itself considered as just one more covert expression of the desire for power? We find a clue in the first interview in *Doubling the Point*, where Coetzee again comments on the relation between truth and writing. He distinguishes two kinds of truths, the first of which is "truth to fact, the second something beyond that" (17). This second, "higher" truth only emerges in the process of writing. Coetzee carefully describes this process as follows:

It is naive to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. . . . That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago.

Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. . . . Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true. . . .

Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing.

(18)

Unlike the truth to fact, then, which consists in the correspondence of a representation to the world as it is, the truth of writing entails the creation of a new worldly reality, a new fact that can, "if you are lucky," be recognized as the true. Writing produces a new reality that cannot be understood as the result of the intention to produce that reality; only after the fact does it allow us to recognize what our initial intention appears to have been. It should be clear that a quite peculiar conception of human action is at work here. We need to understand this structure of human action and the related conception of the truth in order to gauge the philosophy of Coetzee's early work and the limits that this philosophy imposes on the ethics of the early novels.

While the paradoxical temporal structure in which a result reveals the desire that gave rise to it may not correspond to what we ordinarily think of as the intentional structure of human action, it is the very structure of action and historical change that we encounter in an important (even if indirect) source text for both Coetzee and many of his literary-critical interpreters, that is, Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, delivered in Paris between 1933 and 1939. Kojève famously interprets the Hegelian dialectic as an anthropological schema in which man makes history by creating a series of human worlds that are essentially different from the natural world with which man is initially confronted.⁵ The essential difference between the natural (and biological) world and human history consists in man's unique status as "negating desire," that is, his properly human desire to transform the given and to create "a new being by destroying the given being."⁶ Kojève explains that this human desire is essentially different from animal desire, which also raises itself above natural givens (if only by eating them) but is immediately satisfied upon consumption and soon returns to the same state it was in before the desire manifested itself. Animal desire, unlike human desire, ultimately does not transcend its given self. Human desire *does* transcend its given being, precisely because it does *not* desire another given being that can fulfill its desire but instead desires a *nonbeing*. And because desire is itself the absence of being (it is "an emptiness greedy for content"), human desire is directed toward another desire, toward "another greedy emptiness."⁷ Desire thus needs another desire that will recognize its superiority, that will recognize the first desire's "exclusive right to satisfaction" by renouncing its own right to recognition.⁸ Now, because there is always more than

one desire that desires this exclusive recognition, this situation inevitably leads to a fight of life and death, which ends when one party ultimately renounces its properly human desire for recognition and subjects itself to its opponent. This party prefers to become a slave rather than give up its biological, given condition. By deciding to hold on to its life rather than to the prospect of exclusive recognition, it cancels its distinctive humanity. This is the famous dialectic of master and slave, which for Kojève is what *makes* human history, and which is a crucial intertext for understanding what goes on between the characters in Coetzee's first five novels.⁹

Importantly, for Kojève, it follows from the conception of man as negating desire that the slave, rather than the master, makes history.¹⁰ While the slave has subjected himself to his (not properly human) fear of biological death, this fear also has a positive value: "He caught a glimpse of himself as nothingness,"¹¹ and therefore realizes that he has to transform himself into something (else). So whereas the master will forever remain what he already is, and is therefore properly excluded from the changes and progressions of human history, the slave has to change and make history through his work. Working means transforming the natural world and thereby also changing oneself: "It is only by rising above the given conditions through negation brought about in and by *Work* that Man remains in contact with the concrete, which varies with space and time. That is why he changes himself by transforming the World."¹² It is this new, unanticipated result that in retrospect reveals the slave's desire to become this new creation and gradually leave his condition of subjection behind.

We can begin to understand the structure of human action that underlies Coetzee's idea of writing in *Doubting the Point* when we note that for him, writing is one such nonintentional, transformative activity that creates new and unexpected realities for the self.¹³ In the same way that, for Kojève, the slave is moved by the abstract idea of freedom, writing, for Coetzee, is moved by the "Platonic" "idea of the truth." Before I comment on the limitations that Coetzee's debt to this scheme imposes on the ethics of his early fiction, we may well ask how writing not only offers an *example* of transformative action but even appears to be the example par excellence that can reveal the *truth* of this scheme. In his 1949 essay "Literature and the Right to Death," Maurice Blanchot explored what Kojève's work on Hegel meant for literature, and it is here that we can find an explanation for the privilege of literature. Blanchot's interpretation was extremely influential in French intellectual circles, as were Kojève's lectures; in addition to the subterranean influence this had on Coetzee's work (via the work of, especially, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault),¹⁴ many of Blanchot's phrases resonate in Coetzee's remarks on the relation between truth and literature. Blanchot observes that someone only becomes a writer if he has actually written something but that he can only write if he has the

talent to write, a talent that can in its turn only be discovered if he has actually sat down to write. He will therefore begin to write "starting from nothing and with nothing in mind."⁶⁵ In the light of Kojève's conception of human action, literature is then not just "a passive expression on the surface of the world" that must be opposed to actual work, to "a concrete initiative in the world"; instead, literature exemplifies the process in which a nothingness works on the world in order to change both itself and the world—the process, that is, that for Kojève defines history. Blanchot writes: "If we see work as the force of history, the force that transforms man while it transforms the world, then a writer's activity must be recognized as the highest form of work."⁶⁶ When a man writes, he does "everything a man does as he works, but to an outstanding degree."⁶⁷ As such, the process of writing reveals the true structure of every human action, which often remains hidden when action is thought of as a pre-given intention that produces a certain result. Literature *exemplifies* and *reveals* the fact that man is a negating desire and that he is, even if only unconsciously, motivated by a desire for recognition, and therefore ultimately for power. It is this peculiar relation between literature and truth that resonates in the remarks by Coetzee that I quoted above.

This intertext for Coetzee's conception of literary truth can explain, first, the privileged relation literature holds for him as the place where truth is revealed and, second, the fact that the truth it reveals is a truth about the nature of human relations: driven by a desire for power and by particular interests, excluding others or inflicting violence on them. This makes clear why Coetzee's early novels can be perceived as self-reflexive, meticulously controlled, and neatly self-contained metafiction that investigate such relations of power and are fully aware that they cannot escape their implication in these relations. *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* can then be understood as investigations of the workings of empire and colonial power (with an explicit awareness of the writer's own status as a white man with Afrikaner roots); *In the Heart of the Country*, as an investigation of race and gender relations; *Foe*, as a reflection on the authority and power connected to the activities of writing and narration themselves; and *Life and Times of Michael K*, as, among other things, an exploration of biopolitical issues.

At the same time, some of the attributes of this larger scheme compromise the ethical thrust of Coetzee's writing, which leads even his early work to attempt to move beyond the confines of this framework. I will name the four most important of these constraining characteristics here. First, the scheme is uncompromisingly *anthropocentric*: only man is a negating desire, capable of overcoming his biological limits, and therefore only man is properly implicated in the power relations that are the central object of Coetzee's writing. It is man's distinctive, more-than-biological

desire that defines him as a subject fit for fictional treatment and attention. Second, this emphasis on a desire that is more than biological also excludes a consideration of the essential *embodiedness* of human existence. The body can only enter as the place where the master makes his power over the slave felt, or as one part of the available reality that must be transformed; our human being is not in any way essentially connected to our bodily being. Third, nonhuman others can only really enter this picture as realities to be *objectified* and transformed, as so many occasions for the subject to develop and enrich itself. In a sense, the human subject relies on this material if it wants to overcome its nonhuman origins. Fourth, this scheme considers the *confrontation with death* as, first of all, an occasion to learn about one's own distinctive nothingness and about the need to transform this nothingness and to develop one's own being. An awareness of death is, in short, merely a spur to action, and it does not inspire an awareness of our mortality, our limitations, and our finitude.

It should be clear that the different limitations of this anthropocentric framework in which Coetzee's search for literary truth operates also constitute so many constraints on our capacity to relate to nonhuman others: we cannot find a relation in the embodiedness that we share with animals, nor can we find common ground in an awareness of our finitude. It is then no surprise that animals will come to play such a central role in Coetzee's work once it begins to move beyond these limitations and to construct a different ethics. The central role of animals in Coetzee's later work thus indicates his attempt to move away from his earlier reliance on the framework that I have sketched and to make room for a more ethically attuned mode of writing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND DISGRACE (CAVELL)

Already in an interview in *Doubling the Point*, the book in which Coetzee formulates the conception of the truth that has guided his work until then, he registers the limits of that conception in no uncertain terms:

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 patry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.

(*Doubling the Point*, 248)

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"The fact of suffering" is, as this passage makes clear, not only a challenge to Coetzee's thinking but also a factor that he may not have managed to integrate successfully into his fiction. Moreover, Coetzee insists that the imperative to attend to the fact of suffering concerns him "as a person," and moreover in a way that challenges his rationality. Bodily suffering does not engage him as a rational being; it crosses the limits of human rationality and therefore also of the philosophical framework that supported Coetzee's earlier conception of the truth, as is borne out by Coetzee's further comments: the body, he notes, "is not that which is not," and the proof that it is is the pain it feels.²⁷ This is all very different from Kojève's idea that human consciousness is "what it is not," an "emptiness greedy for content." The blunt fact of a body that suffers points to the limits of the philosophical framework that informed Coetzee's meticulously self-reflexive early novels. No measure of textual paradox, of the endlessly skeptical processes of textualization, can spirit away the fact of suffering. Coetzee writes: "In South Africa, it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body . . . the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable" (248).

As Coetzee makes clear here, the fact of bodily suffering is something no proposition can deny; it is something that any ethically engaged writing project has to take into account and respond to. The fact of suffering is not one of the things that a project of endless skepticism or the infinite transformation of all given realities can cancel. For Coetzee, the analyses of the power relations that lead to suffering and pain in his early novels are "paltry, ludicrous defenses" that do not adequately respond to this suffering. Suffering is an element that does not require cognitive or practical denial or affirmation; it demands to be addressed in wholly other terms.

So how are we to understand the importance accorded here to the quasiaffable fact of suffering without turning to a mystical, even theological register? In his seminal paper on the refutation of the skeptical position on the privacy of pain (the position, that is, that we cannot know the other's pain), Stanley Cavell shows how the fact of skepticism about the possibility of knowing someone else's pain is itself an indication that pain is a problem in relation to which "certainty is not enough."²⁸ Being certain that the other is in pain does not seem to be a sufficient response to the fact of his suffering, and it is in the sense of this insufficiency that the skeptic's wariness originates. Even if we do not "know" the other's pain, the fundamental thing remains "that he has it,"²⁹ and this points, according to Cavell, to "a special concept of knowledge, or region of the concept of knowledge, one which is not a function of certainty."³⁰ Where the skeptic's doubt about the possibility of knowledge treats pain as the occasion of an "intellectual lack," of mere ignorance, he fails to come to terms with the fact that pain rather points to "a metaphysical finitude" that does not so much demand to be known but must rather be *acknow-*

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ledged.³¹ Acknowledging the other's pain means that I give voice to the fact that his suffering makes a claim upon me and also to the fact of my powerlessness, my incapacity to do more than acknowledge this pain.³² The expression "I know you are in pain" is then not an expression of certainty but rather an expression of sympathy in response to the other exhibiting his pain.

For Cavell, such expressions of sympathy are not a matter of course but something that we can all too easily fail to bring off: once we have been addressed ("overwhelmed" is Coetzee's term in the passage I quoted) by the claim of another's pain, our failure to acknowledge it is "an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness."³³ Sympathy, in other words, is something we have to afford and something that we fail to deliver when we rely on rational argumentation as a way to "make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal"³⁴ or, in Coetzee's terms, when we erect fictions as ludicrous defenses against the claim of suffering. By referring to his fictions as meager defenses, Coetzee's acknowledgment of this claim in *Doubting the Point* also recognizes the inadequacy of his fictional response to it. Coetzee's later work can then be understood as an attempt to acknowledge the claim of the irreducible fact of bodily suffering. This attempt to "be true to fact" must also recognize its own incapacity to do more than acknowledge the fact of suffering, its inability to actually intervene and change it. It must concede that pain and suffering are an irreducible limit to what Kojève saw as the unlimited human capacity for transformation. This recognition moves us, in the words of a recent commentator, from "the ironic, skeptical, tauntly cerebral voice" that is dominant in parts of Coetzee's early work to "a voice that insists, with a more visceral urgency, on the direct, factual, and compelling reality of bodily suffering and death."³⁵

This new demand to be "true to fact" also implies that the association between truth and justice that Coetzee sketched earlier no longer holds. While I have here mainly been concerned with the intrinsic limitations of this association that made it necessary for Coetzee to revise it, we should also note the effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was active in South Africa in the aftermath of Apartheid from 1995 on. While this is not the place to discuss this institution at any length, I yet want to remark that the commission's explicit ambition was the promotion of national unity and reconciliation after the devastations and atrocities of Apartheid. As the name of the commission indicates, its crucial working assumption was, first, that "the publication or voicing of truth will lead directly to reconciliation" and, second, that exposing the truth "brings not only reconciliation but also a sort of justice."³⁶ Still, in practice the desire to bring about reconciliation at any cost often meant that the perpetrators' simple willingness to confess their past misdeeds was sufficient to be granted amnesty. In spite of the commission's lofty ambitions, reconciliation became, in the words of one commentator, "a fetishized claim

that both devalues and displaces the experience of those who were wronged.²⁷ The revelation of the factual truth, then, far from leading to justice, in fact ended up perpetuating the violence and injustices of Apartheid.²⁸ And while the TRC offers a particularly strong instance of the dissociation of the search for truth and the ambition to further justice, I think it is possible to see it as symptomatic of a broader set of ethically relevant phenomena in which the attempt to get something right, to learn the truth about something, can contribute little to the effort to promote justice. Whether it is true or not, to name only two widely mediated instances, that the war in Iraq was initiated on false premises or that both Israel and the Palestinians have been less than fully dedicated to achieving lasting peace, the effort to find out the truth about these issues can hardly begin to address the real pain and suffering involved in the facts *about* which they attempt to discover the truth. Something more is required in order to address these phenomena in a way that is in the least adequate. Coetzee's emphasis on these facts and on the obligation to acknowledge them implies that by limiting ourselves to a search for truth and certainty, we also fail to be true to the undeniable claim that this suffering has on our attention.²⁹

THE ETHICS OF COETZEE'S LATER WORK

In the last section of this chapter, I briefly try to show how Coetzee's later work sets out to overcome the limitations of the framework within which his earlier fiction operated, limitations that we can also consider as so many failures to be true to the undeniable fact of suffering. These failures derived from the exclusive definition of man as a negating desire, which, as I showed in the previous section, threatened to silence the claim of the body and of nonhuman others, as well as the possibility of confronting our finitude in the face of death (a confrontation that, as we will see, can itself provide an occasion to relate to the finitude of others). The movement from these restrictions to a more successful acknowledgment of suffering is perhaps best exemplified in the development of David Lurie, the protagonist of Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*. Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old professor of literature, is introduced as a man carrying a "desiring gaze" (*Disgrace*, 12), and he later in the novel emphatically invokes "the rights of desire" to justify his actions. (69, 90) The point of view of the desiring gaze³⁰ and his self-understanding as a creature of desire blind Lurie to the perspective of Melanie, one of his students, whom he forces into a sexual relation.

The novel's exposure of the interestedness of human action and of the violence it does to others is of course reminiscent of Coetzee's early novels. Yet the remarkable thing is that *Disgrace* does not just diagnose these power relations but instead follows up this diagnosis by tracing the development of Lurie's character when he is

forced to abandon a domain organized by power and desire and moves to a place that can no longer be analyzed in these terms and thus requires a new approach. After his disgraceful dismissal from the university he moves to his daughter's farm, and here the central role of desire makes way for what the novel repeatedly calls "despair" (108). During an attack on the farm, Lurie is humiliated and set on fire by the attackers: "He throws himself about, hurling out shapeless bellows that have no words behind him, only fear. He tries to stand up and is forced down again" (96). It is no coincidence that it is two of the features that were often supposed to distinguish the human from the nonhuman—language and bipedalism—that begin to fail Lurie when he is suddenly confronted with his embodied state (that is to say, with a body that is more than a mere instrument to achieve sexual gratification).

In the rest of the novel, Lurie gradually comes to terms with the limitations of his mutilated, aging body and learns to accept "disgrace as [his] state of being" (172). This process goes hand in hand with the ever closer connection that he feels to the fate of the dogs he nurses on the farm and in the animal clinic where he helps out. While Lurie first notes that animals accept "their lot, waiting their turn" (85), and thus denies them a sense of anxiety in the face of death, he later feels that "they too feel the disgrace of dying" (143). It is then because he experiences and acknowledges that "suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126) that he can ultimately accept disgrace as also *his* state of being. Death, then, is no longer, as in Kojève's framework, an occasion for human transformation, but it now instills an awareness of our mortality that forges a link to human and nonhuman others who are equally aware of their finitude.

The sense of mortality has the power to establish a connection to others, and near the end of the novel Lurie takes it upon himself to incinerate the dead dogs instead of just letting them be processed "unmarked, unmourned" (178), by men who "use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (146). Lurie takes care of the body parts of dead dogs that "can neither be sold nor eaten" (145) as his way of acknowledging an absolute limit to restless transformation. It is because animals, too, have "foreknowledge of impending death" that their lot becomes important for Lurie and demands his acknowledgment,³¹ which involves a growing recognition of the body as the site of suffering and of death.

This anticomaternal scenario, in which the main character of the novel is evacuated from the realm of desire to a situation in which he or she must cope with the demand to acknowledge death, the body, and suffering, returns in all of Coetzee's novels written since *Disgrace*—in *Elizabeth Costello*, in the autobiographical novel *Youth*, in *Slow Man*, and in *Diary of a Bad Year*. As *Youth* is overtly modeled on the life of the young Coetzee himself, and as it describes the development of the ambitions of a young artist, the way the scenario takes shape here has a particular

relevance for the question how we are to understand Coetzee's own artistic practice. At the beginning of the novel, the ethic of the young poet consists in his "readiness" to be "transformed," "to be rid of his own self and revealed in his new, true, passionate self" (*Youth*, 93, 111). Writing literature is then one way to "transfigure" reality—it is "a flame that consumes yet paradoxically renews all that it touches" (25, 30). Still, the confrontation with "all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious" does not leave the young poet "enriched and strengthened" (66), as this aesthetic ethic would lead him to believe, but rather brings him to the realization that this framework based on desire and transformation is no more than unconvincing sophistry (164). The insight that his ethic of progressive self-transformation is incompatible with the sobering facts of life ultimately makes him abandon poetry altogether and turn to prose, which, unlike the gratuitous and abstract embellishments of poetry, "seems naggingly to demand a specific setting" (63). This attention to the specifics of a particular situation, an attentiveness that gives these particulars their due and that does not immediately consider them as so many "given realities" to be transformed will henceforth inform the young artist's work. Where Coetzee, in *Doubling the Point*, characterized his early position as "a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world," the perspective that emerges in the course of *Youth* and that is embodied in Coetzee's later fiction can better be described as a dedication to "the prose of the world," to what Hegel described as "a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw."²³ For Coetzee, the fact that these particulars do not contribute to the discovery of philosophical truth is no reason to devalue them; it is because they are senseless and worthless that they demand to be acknowledged in his prose.

The refusal to consider particular incidents and facts of suffering and loss as occasions for personal development and worldly transformation is also central in Coetzee's novel *Slow Man*. The main character, Paul Rayment, at the beginning of the book loses a leg after a traffic accident. But just as David Lurie in *Disgrace* directs his attention to the dogs who will otherwise "be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourning" (*Disgrace*, 178), Paul Rayment refuses a prosthesis to replace the leg that has been "dropped in the refuge for someone to collect and *toss into the fire*" (*Slow Man*, 10, italics mine). And just as the processing of the dogs conjures the word "*Lösung*," meaning "sublimation . . . leaving no residue, no aftertaste" (*Disgrace*, 142), the word "*Prosthese*" suggests to Paul Rayment the restless completion of an unstoppable progression: "Thesis, antithesis, then prosthesis" (*Slow Man*, 62). Both Lurie and Rayment will dedicate their disgraced lives to symbolic gestures that resist the restless completion of the work of transformation. Instead of replacing the lost leg, Rayment will learn to accept that his body is incomplete, that "never is he

going to be his old self again" (53), that he is "a man not wholly a man . . . a half-man, an after-man" (33–34). He will learn to embrace himself as a figure "beyond anger and desire" (224) who has "entered the zone of humiliation" (61), where he will live out the remainder of his years.

The shift from self-reflexive form toward an outright acknowledgment of the fact of suffering is also central to Coetzee's 1999 book *The Lives of Animals*. While the book, which originated in Tanner lectures Coetzee presented at Princeton University, has been criticized for its refusal to present clear arguments and conclusions about the momentous topics it deals with, an awareness of Coetzee's relation to philosophy should warn us not to confuse this indirectness with a strategy of evasion. The book consists of two parts, the former entitled "The Philosophers and the Animals," the latter, "The Poets and the Animals," and both use fictional devices to register the insufficiency of either a philosophical or a "poetical" approach to animals (the latter is the approach that Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's *porte-parole* in the book, advocates). In the first part of the book, Costello takes to task philosophy's failure to acknowledge "suffering animal bodies" (*Lives of Animals*, 40) because of its unqualified insistence on reason. Philosophy can only approach animals in its own image, and this attempt to "humanize" the animal forces it "toward the humbler reaches of practical reason" where it cannot but fall short of human standards (33, 37). Philosophical reason, for Costello, is a "system of totality" that takes itself to be the self-evident standard of thought and action and so ends up reasserting its power over the nonrational other (46). The one thing that reason cannot do is "dethrone itself"; "reasoning systems, as systems of totality, do not have that power" (30). Philosophy, in other words, not only fails to acknowledge the suffering of animals but also fails to recognize its own limits, its own finitude, its incapacity to adequately address that suffering.

Against the philosophical attitude, Costello asserts the power of the sympathetic imagination, which is a faculty "that allows us to share at times the being of another" (48). According to Costello, we can counteract our indifference and our contempt for animals through the capacity to "think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (49). For Costello, "there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" because fullness of being counts for more than a difference in form of being, "being fully a bat is like being fully human" (45–49). While this "fullness, embodiedness" reads like an explicit denial of the conception of man as "negating desire," and therefore may initially seem to correspond to Coetzee's own position (as is indeed often assumed), I want to argue that there are vital differences between Costello's firm assertion of the grandiose capacities of the sympathetic imagination and the more minor and humble ethics that takes shape in Coetzee's later fiction.

It is important to realize that Coetzee has surrounded Costello's argument with enough markers to raise doubts about her belief in the possibility of "the experience of full being" (45). First, Costello's vocation of sympathy is part of a story in which her relation with especially her daughter-in-law is marked by irritation and resentment. While these characters seem capable enough of imagining each other's point of view, this does not automatically manifest itself into a caring attitude, which suggests that more is at stake in ethics than the capacity to imagine ourselves in the place of another.³⁴ Second, take Costello's central argument that "if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?" (44). In the light of the rest of Coetzee's recent work, the conditional clause here seems to remain sadly unfulfilled: the confrontation with one's own death is, for Coetzee, not so much a moment of empowerment, of insight into our human capacity for transformation as it is rather a moment in which we are forced to acknowledge our finitude. For Coetzee, and following Cavell, acknowledging the pain of the other is precisely also the acknowledgment of a "sense of incapacity,"³⁴ a certain powerlessness, and *not* a boundless capacity to think our way into the other. Such a strong capacity precisely disowns the crucial fact of our fearful separateness from the other's suffering. Third, Costello's example of the bat is itself less straightforward than she seems to think. She recognizes that the capacity to feel one's way into another being is distinctively human; there is no sense in saying that a bat can know what it is like to be human. What we are asked to imagine, then, is a situation (the being of a bat) in which we are paradoxically incapable of imagining such a situation, that is, of imagining the situation we are in fact imagining. Considered in this way, Costello's example does not illustrate the unboundedness of the sympathetic imagination but rather formulates the demand to imagine an absolute *limit* to the imagination. In the light of Coetzee's contemporary production, I take it that this insistence on human limitation is closer to his own position.³⁵ As one critic has recently remarked, Coetzee's fiction is not the celebration of an unbounded imagination but instead consists in acts "of sympathetic imagination that continually encounter their own bounds."³⁶ Instead of relying on imaginative projection, Coetzee's ethics are grounded "in the acknowledgement of one's ignorance of the other, on the recognition of the other's fundamental alterity" (120). Instead of Costello's sympathetic imagination, then, Coetzee enacts "a singularly unimaginative sympathy" (130).³⁷

Coetzee's critique of the sympathetic imagination can only be uncovered when we are willing to read his works (and especially *The Lives of Animals*) as works of fiction that do not aim to present a logically sound argument, say, for or against animal liberation. Every argument that is presented by Costello is in principle hers only, which does not mean that we can simply dismiss it—indeed, the point of

presenting her statements in a fictional frame is that this makes them all the more *undeniable*. We are not asked to agree or disagree with her argument, but we must at least register it. In the words of one commentator, "Coetzee employs the power of fiction to suspend disapproval and disbelief: he compels us to regard the truth that obsesses [Costello]."³⁸ It is this obligation that the reader cannot resist, and this powerlessness is, I argue, the place where Coetzee's ethics makes itself felt.

In fact, there is one part of *The Lives of Animals* that is not filtered through a fictional screen: the notes that accompany the two parts of the book. Whereas Costello's speech is to be attributed to her rather than to Coetzee, there is no such reason to attribute the notes, which are not part of the speech she delivers, to anyone other than the author of the book, J. M. Coetzee. Most of the twenty-three notes contain only bibliographical references, but I want to close this chapter by turning to one footnote that stands out. The eighth note to the second part of the book, which is printed on the last page, refers to Michael Leahy's infamous anti-liberation polemic *Against Liberation*. Coetzee's footnote goes as follows:

Leahy elsewhere argues against a ban on the slaughtering of animals on the grounds that (a) it would bring about unemployment among abattoir workers, (b) it would entail an uncomfortable adjustment to our diet, and (c) the countryside would be less attractive without its customary flocks and herds fattening themselves as they wait to die.

(125)

Coetzee does not choose to offer a refutation of Leahy's arguments, but the note of sarcasm and indignation in the dry enumeration of these arguments will not be lost on any careful reader. This is as explicit as Coetzee's ethics becomes, in *The Lives of Animals* or elsewhere. Even if Coetzee does not transmit this ethics in clear arguments and propositions, the claim that his fictions make on their readers is yet properly undeniable. Even if we do not recognize this as philosophy, its claim remains ours to acknowledge.

Notes

1. G. Huggan and S. Watson, introduction to *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Huggan and Watson (London: MacMillan, 1996), 6.
2. Perhaps the clearest example (and certainly one of the most impressive) is Teresa Dovey's monograph on these five novels (T. Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* [Craighall: Ad. Donker, 1988]). Dovey considers the development of

- these different novels as so many allegories of the novels' own relation to (and critique of) different traditional subgenres of South African literature, such as the journal of exploration and the liberal humanist novel. This resolute emphasis on the novels' awareness that the story they tell also applies to their own status is typical of the line of reception I am sketching here. For other prominent examples of the "metafictional" line of reception, see G. Huggan and S. Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee* (London: MacMillan, 1996).
3. S. Kossew, introduction to *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 3.
 4. M. Marais, "Places of Pigs: The Tension Between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*," in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 236.
 5. A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. A. Bloom, trans. J. Nichols (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 32.
 6. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
 7. *Ibid.*, 40.
 8. *Ibid.*, 40.
 9. This was first noted by Menán Du Plessis ("Towards a True Materialism," in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew [New York: G. K. Hall, 1998], 117-25) and has been extensively demonstrated by, among others, D. Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1989); S. Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. G. Huggan and S. Watson (London: MacMillan, 1996), 13-36; and T. Dovey, "J. M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice," in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 18-28).
 10. Kojève's claim to intellectual fame derives mainly from his emphasis on the theme of the end of history. In the terms of his own framework, the end of history also means the end of man proper and man's return to the status of an animal "of the species homo sapiens." It is an indication of Kojève's anthropocentrism (on which I comment below) that, in subsequent editions of his lectures, he takes great pains to resist the animalization of man. For this, see G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. K. Atwell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5-12.
 11. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 47.
 12. *Ibid.*, 51-52.
 13. Teresa Dovey refers to this as Coetzee's "middle voice," following Coetzee's own reflection on the relation between writing and the grammatical middle voice, which is different from both the passive and the active voice (see *Doubling the Point*, 94-95).
 14. These influences are documented in *Doubling the Point*. See especially J. Butler, *Sub-*

jects of Desire: Reflections of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and J.-M. Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), especially chap. 1, for the afterlife of Hegel in French theory; and M. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) for the wider intellectual reception of Hegel in France, with special attention to Kojève's role as a mediator.

15. M. Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire* (1949), trans. C. Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 300-43, 304.
16. *Ibid.*, 313.
17. *Ibid.*, 314.
18. S. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *The Cavell Reader*, ed. S. Mulhall (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 64.
19. *Ibid.*, 53.
20. *Ibid.*, 64.
21. *Ibid.*, 68 and 69.
22. *Ibid.*, 68.
23. *Ibid.*, 69.
24. C. Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. A. Cray and S. Shieh (London: Routledge, 2006), 102.
25. L. Tremaine, "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee," *Contemporary Literature* 44, no. 4 (2003): 588.
26. T. Urquhart, "Truth, Reconciliation, and the Restoration of the State: Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 52, no. 1 (2006): 1.
27. H. Grunbaum, "Talking to Ourselves 'Among the Innocent Dead': On Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Mourning," *PMLA* 117, no. 2 (2002): 308.
28. For a discussion of *Disgrace*'s critique of the TRC, see my article, P. Vermeulen, "Dogged Silences: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Ethics of Non-Confession," *BELL New Series* 2 (2004): 185-97.
29. It is in the light of this insistence on the facts of suffering and injustice (at the expense of certainty and truth) that Coetzee's later work leaves us, in David Simpson's words, "with the sense of having been evacuated from the comfortable space in which we can turn to our writers to tell us how to live, but with a searing sense that some way must be found" (D. Simpson, "Neither Rushdie nor Nabokov: J. M. Coetzee on Censorship and Offense," *Pretex: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1 [2001]: 126).
30. The figure of the gaze in Coetzee's work always indicates the position of empire, of power, a position with which the framework of desire as I sketched it is inescapably implicated. For the figure of the gaze in Coetzee, see M. Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-Colonial Metafiction," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed.

G. Huggan and S. Watson (London: MacMillan, 1996), 71; and Coetzee, *White Writing*, 163-67. See my article mentioned in note 28 for the development of the figure of the gaze in *Disgrace*.

31. Tremaine, "The Embodied Soul," 595.
32. This quotation is used as the motto of M. P. Ginsburg and L. N. Nandrea, "The Prose of the World," in *The Novel*, vol. 2: *Forms and Themes*, ed. F. Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 244-73, which outlines the essential relations among prose, the novel, and the everyday in a way that is relevant for my discussion of Coetzee's literary ethics.
33. That there is a difference between being able to identify with someone and feeling (and acting) sympathetic toward them is also suggested when Costello says that "despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another" (48, italics mine).
34. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 68.
35. We can compare this to J. Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 396, where he develops the question whether animals "can suffer": "[asking] 'Can they suffer?' amounts to asking 'can they not be able?'" For Derrida also, this inability, this vulnerability is a crucial moment in our relation to the animal. Cora Diamond, whose approach to *The Lives of Animals* parallels mine on more than one point, similarly foregrounds the importance of our "exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability" (Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality", 11-12). While Diamond sees the sympathetic imagination (105) as conducive to this exposure, I want to insist that Coetzee's work also warns us that the capacity for sympathetic identification, as Costello conceives it, can disown the sense of limitedness that this vulnerability implies.
36. S. Durrant, "I. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. J. Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 119.
37. For Coetzee's critique of the sympathetic imagination as Costello conceives it, see also O. De Graef, "Suffering, Sympathy, Circulation: Smith, Wordsworth, Coetzee (But There's a Dog)," *EJES* 7, no. 3 (2003): 31-3; and Laura Wright, *Writing "Out of All the Camps": J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (London: Routledge, 2006). And for a good discussion of the paradoxes generated by Costello's opposition to reason, see D. Head, "A Belief in Frogs: J. M. Coetzee's Encluring Faith in Fiction," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. J. Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 110-14.
38. G. Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature," *EJES* 7, no. 3 (2003): 273.

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