

Hesitating Readers: When *The Turn of the Screw* Meets *Disgrace* in the Classroom

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“They’re here, they’re here, you little wretches,” I would have cried,
“and you can’t deny it now!” The little wretches denied it.

Henry James
The Turn of the Screw

Never yet have they been so far and so bitterly apart. He is shaken.

J.M. Coetzee
Disgrace

A FEW YEARS AGO, the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Manitoba organized a symposium on the work of Henry James. I am a postcolonialist and a Canadianist, not a James specialist, but out of deep respect for my former colleague Robin Hoople, the James scholar in whose honour the symposium was held, I turned to one of the books I most enjoy teaching, *The Turn of the Screw*. In preparation for the symposium, I began by asking myself some questions. What appeals to me about the ambiguous tale of an agitated English governess and her two possibly delinquent / possibly persecuted charges? Why am I drawn to teach a story where it is never stated explicitly if the governess is hallucinating or if the ghosts she claims to see are credible? Why do I, and the students in my

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first-year university classroom where I teach the book, relish the chance to become “apparitionists” or “anti-apparitionists”? Why are we horrified by the demise of the “little wretches” of my epigraph? The answer, at least in part, is that the story provokes debate. It is precisely the ferocity with which James sustains ambiguity in the novella that draws us as contemporary readers raised on postmodern variance to it. What I appreciate most about James’s story in the classroom is the way in which students open themselves up to the difficult possibilities of multiple interpretations and of the possible simultaneity of conflicting views. This leads me to ask what kind of pedagogical lessons might be learned from the way readers in my classroom embrace, negotiate, and explore the ambiguities within this demanding text. How can I take these lessons into my South African literature course where the subject matter is often excruciatingly difficult? And, finally, might my experience of teaching *The Turn of the Screw* add to theories of reading with important implications for spaces beyond the classroom?

With the risk of stating the obvious, I begin by noting that ambiguity persists in much postcolonial writing as authors engage multiple perspectives, leave texts open ended, and present multiple and sometimes incommensurable forms of signification. However, arresting ambiguity is tricky to teach in a postcolonial classroom. It is always a challenge when dealing with literature arising out of politically fraught spaces with a history of violence, pain, and oppression to be at once respectful of the context out of which the work emerges, to read with that context in mind, and at the same time not to let the context overdetermine readings of the literature. I teach a detailed cultural and political history of South Africa at the beginning of my South African literature course because I do not want to foreclose conversation by students worried about wading into literature, politics, and history that they do not know. Students are always open to learning such information, but I do worry that it is perceived as implicitly directive of a *necessarily* politicized methodology. If one begins with assumptions about justice and injustice, albeit understandable starting points given the racist history of South Africa, the actual complexity of both the situation and of the fiction tends to be overshadowed by assumed imperatives arising out of the location. The tendency seems to be toward solving the textual problems rather than allowing for the difficulties posed by the ambiguities within the text.

Because J.M. Coetzee is South African, for example, his 1980 novel set in an unnamed empire, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is often read as an allegory of South Africa written from an anti-apartheid perspective. While

this is arguably the case, it is not necessarily the only case. I want students to engage first with the ambiguities in a novel like *Barbarians* (particularly concerning the role of the Magistrate as both perpetrator and victim) rather than applying their politics or the politics they assume about the text to their reading. In his writing on censorship, or on blocked reading, Coetzee argues the need to relinquish what he calls the “two tired images of the writer under censorship: the moral giant under attack from hordes of moral pygmies and the helpless innocent persecuted by a mighty state apparatus” (*Offense* 118). I want students to relinquish the tired positions for readers of politicized texts as well: either as moral judges or disaffected bystanders. I take seriously Stephen Slemon’s notion that “a postcolonial pedagogy whatever its constituency, wherever it obtains, cannot do other than seek out the genuine difficulty inherent in the material it finds before itself” (523). But how do you teach difficulty?

One way to approach the difficulty that inheres in contextual and textual ambiguity is by considering a story that sits well outside of postcolonial expectation. *The Turn of the Screw* works as a model text in this regard. With James’s novella, neither side is morally or ethically right.¹ There is no easy political identification if you are an apparitionist or an anti-apparitionist, regardless of how much of a passionate plea you might make for the ghosts or the hallucinations. Reading James’s late nineteenth-century novella provides a helpful reminder to contemporary readers about the value of the textually-sparked debate that emerges out of readerly unease. To be clear, I am talking *in theory* about using *The Turn of the Screw* as a model for a postcolonial pedagogical approach and a reading strategy. However, *in practice*, there are so few opportunities for students to study artistic works from South Africa, Trinidad, Sri Lanka, or Australia in a conventional Canadian English department that I would not advocate teaching this book in their stead. What I do suggest, however, is that it

1 I am not suggesting that James is apolitical: I know that gender politics, class politics, and sexual politics are prevalent in the novella and that it provides a rich context in which to read late Victorian England, but they are differently present than postcolonial concerns. Further, in his introduction to the World’s Classics edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, Timothy Lustig points to the ambiguous role of the governess in Victorian society: “[E]ither they could abuse or be abused, drain or be drained.” He continues, “the figure of the governess focused, intensified, and ambiguated these polarized possibilities. An outsider within the family, the nineteenth-century governess belonged neither above nor below stairs, neither exclusively with the children nor with the adults, neither among women nor with men” (xxiii). The ambiguity thus begins not with the presence or absence of the ghosts but with the very choice of profession for the protagonist.

is useful to exercise a text outside of one's own field to consider ways to problem-solve within it.

When I teach *The Turn of the Screw*, passionate arguments for and against the ghosts come out of some of even the most recalcitrant students in my classroom. While I can see that they *want* to solve the mystery in the stately country home, Bly, neither they, nor 110 years of criticism, can. On one hand, readers may lean toward accepting the ghosts when the governess describes the detailed appearance of the dead servant Peter Quint (whom she has never met) after she claims to have seen him through a window, and, on the other hand, they may lean toward disbelief when the governess unsteadily lies to the housekeeper about a ghostly conversation with Miss Jessel, her dead predecessor. Either way, *The Turn of the Screw* strains against the governess's univocal reading of the events within the story. Whether it is with her self-congratulation in "I know, I know, I know! [...] I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquility of the rest of the house" (149) or her self-aggrandizement, "I confess I rather applaud myself as I look back" (152), the governess is determined to read the children's actions as tainted by interaction with demonic ghosts. James makes his protagonist stubbornly adhere to her singular, narrow perspective. Such determination leads to disaster as she imposes reading after reading on the children and her spectral visions. As Timothy Lustig argues, "[W]ith extraordinary tenacity and the utmost dexterity she struggles to confirm her hypothesis that the children are in the process of being corrupted by the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel" (xii). However, the fact that both sides of the debate have been argued with vehemence effectively cancels out the plausibility of either triumphing. For instance, in Edmund Wilson's "The Ambiguity of Henry James," the critic's commitment to disproving the ghosts as figments of the governess's "neurotic" imagination equals that of the governess's attempts at proving them (quoted in Lustig viii). In turn, Robert Heilman counters Wilson's "astonishingly *unambiguous* exegesis" as he forcefully maintains the existence of the ghosts and refuses to entertain the possibility that they are figments (quoted in Lustig xiii). I contend that it is James's strength as a writer that even though he has a character (and some critics) so committed to one interpretation of events, his text can sustain opposing interpretations with tenacity. Although I realize that this sounds somewhat critically anachronistic, it is as though James is commenting on the problems of oversimplification and underexplored alternatives that can ensue from singular readings.

While I am particularly drawn to James's use of ambiguity, it has not always been attractive to critics. In 1971, Charles T. Samuels lamented

the very thing I find so appealing in *The Turn of the Screw* when he wrote “Unfortunately, the tale offers evidence of both readings” (11). Celebrated James scholars over the past century such as Marius Bewley, Edmund Wilson, Wayne Booth, and a score of others since then have criticized James for failing to clearly indicate whether the apparitions are meant to be accepted by the reader in the tale or not, with some of the more recent critics suggesting that they are meant to illustrate “libidinal repression” (Hafidh 2006)² or sexual instability and are therefore dangerously left ambiguous. Equating ambiguity with irresponsibility, in 1980 Susanne Kappeler posited that “the moral verdict of the moralistic critic must perforce come down heavily against ambiguity” (212) as she rather heavily-handedly elided immorality with the “unsatisfactory reading experience” that ensues from James’s refusal “to give the true and the false clearly” (212). Here, James is held accountable for narrative failure in fulfilling the expectations of the ghost story and the resulting creation of readers’ discomfort or unease. The ghost story as a genre relies on provoking what Arnold Lobel in *Days with Frog and Toad* calls the “shivers” (28), when the storyteller playfully answers that maybe it is and maybe it isn’t a true story he is telling (40). Whereas for Frog and Toad the sensation of the shivers is a “good, warm feeling,” for readers of James’s story the discomfort is far icier (41).

As Richard Dilworth Rusk describes *The Turn of the Screw*, “the terror of the story is intensified by James’s setting up two mutually irreconcilable readings, with the discerning reader trapped between them” (445). He continues: “It is intolerable—and frightening—to try to sustain both simultaneously” (445). While I do not find it intolerable, with Rusk, I want to focus less on whether or not the ghosts exist and more on the “germane question [of] why James gives us such substantial evidence for both positions, yet not sufficient evidence for either to be clear-cut” (441). A convincing response to the question of why James leaves the text unsolved comes from genre theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who cites *The Turn of the Screw* as one of only a few pure examples of the *fantastic*—the point of hesitation between the uncanny (the supernatural explained, rather than the Freudian uncanny) and the marvelous (the supernatural unexplained). The fantastic “lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion” (41).

2 This article is among the first to come up in a Google search on the novella and is thus often cited by students. I have relied on the commentary in the Lustig edition because it is the one I teach.

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So readers decide if they have just read a marvelous ghost story or an uncanny story whereby drugs/ weather/ mental exhaustion explain the moving curtain or the blown-out candle in the tale. In Todorov's theory, "at the story's end, the reader makes the decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic" (41). But for Todorov (unlike Wilson or Heilman), *The Turn of the Screw* is an exception to the theory of emergence. Indeed, for Todorov, James sustains hesitation through the end of the story so his reader never quite comes out of the fantastic. Although Todorov wrote about the fantastic over thirty years ago and I realize his theory is most likely well out of vogue in James studies, I still find the notion of internal and external "hesitation" immensely appealing.

What happens when an author like James refuses to solve his own mystery? I propose that he creates a "hesitating" reader, or a reader for whom the discomfort produced by an ambiguous text stimulates multiple considerations of the same story. *The Turn of the Screw* was first serialized in *Collier's Magazine* (27 January to 16 April 1898) and later appeared in book form. Indeed, on a very practical level, James likely sustained readerly hesitation in order to keep his original audience in suspense and to sell magazines. It seems that a salient feature of the serial suspense genre contributes to the social action of hesitation, of doubt, in order to draw readers back to the next instalment of the story.³ However, the commercial element does not undermine the original suspense in the story, nor does it undermine the pedagogical possibility such hesitation affords the contemporary reader. Although my starting point for this theory of hesitation is *The Turn of the Screw* and Todorov's reading of James's story in particular, ultimately the "hesitating reader" might do well to travel into contemporary classrooms as well.

Although I want to extract Todorov's notion of hesitation from the genre of the fantastic, it is still useful to consider the effect the fantastic has on readers in evoking fear. Sometimes the terror resident in the fantastic comes out of a knowledge of transgression.⁴ Indeed, *The Turn of the Screw* turns on the psychological nature of the governess's engagement with the ghosts and the terror elicited. Imagined or real, the ghosts have been read critically as transgressing boundaries of class and sexuality. Although much has been written on the sexual repression of the governess and her

3 Thanks to Kathryn Grafton for suggesting this point about genre.

4 See the articles collected in *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*, eds. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009) for further discussion of postcolonial transgressions.

vilification of the cross-class love affair in the story, I focus on what James does to his readers in making us stop to think about the “dreadful—dreadfulness” of the ghost story (116). This is where the transgression lies for me. James leaves the reader in between the apparitions and the explanations for the apparitions. It is crucial to read the tale precisely for the unease its irreconcilability creates in its readers.

Recent theorists of affect like Sara Ahmed might say that contact between two contradictory forces within the story keeps the reader proximate and engaged in the narrative. I would extend this notion to argue that such proximity provokes debate as the hesitating reader attempts to gain distance from the terror within the text. The difficulty that inheres in the story leads precisely to the concomitant desire to be distanced from it.⁵ If, as Ahmed argues, emotions are affected by contact with objects, moving us toward or away from the object, then it is interesting to consider what comes of the fear induced through sustained ambiguity and its affective counterpart, ambivalence.

Fear and terror have often been recognized in James’s novella. In a 1950 issue of F.R. Leavis’s journal *Scrutiny*, for instance, critic Marius Bewley pointed to the terror induced by James’s novella, “I believe that the effectiveness of *The Turn of the Screw*, its haunting and disturbing quality, arises from the fact that the reader uneasily suspects that he is aiding and abetting the governess in her persecution of the children” (quoted in Cranfill, Clark 9). Infused with uncertainty about what the governess’s “mere infernal imagination” might contain (*Turn*, 184), Bewley’s new critical approach to literary “effectiveness” points to a decontextualized complicity as readers consider if they are assisting the governess in, as he says, nothing less than persecution of children. What happens when we, post–New Critics, step out of the text into Victorian England? Further, what might we make of the fear evoked from the burden of the recognition of complicity in a well-defined contemporary context like the one I establish to teach South African literature?

What comes of a text’s evocation of fear, anxiety, unease? What do fantastic ghost stories and postcolonial literary works that engage the difficult issues of contemporary civil society have in common? Both provoke a sense of discomfort. The unease that arises out of an ambiguous situation elicits a visceral response. The heightened level of agitation you are left with in reading *The Turn of the Screw* makes you hesitate and

⁵ See Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and her *Queer Phenomenology* for a detailed discussion of proximity of objects and others. For Ahmed, emotions are intentional or “directed” toward objects.

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consider the sensation of discomfort generated by the text even as you intellectually engage with its issues. Nigel Thrift reminds us that such a bodily response is a form of thinking, often indirect and non-reflective, but thinking all the same (60). The agitation makes you think. It makes you hesitate. Such can also be said of the affective nature of our response to works that provoke discomfort out of ambiguity in more conventional postcolonial venues than a novella by Henry James: books like Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Before I make this argument too neat, I should point out that I recognize the dangers of considering James beside Coetzee.⁶ I think the reactions of Coetzee's readers differ from the responses to *The Turn of the Screw*. It is partially a question of genre. Coetzee leaves the reader in a state of hesitation without the unsolved mystery of a fantastic ghost story. But it is also a question of context. The Victorian England of *The Turn of the Screw* and the postapartheid South Africa of *Disgrace* have to be read with distinction. Whereas England is a background setting for James's predominantly psychological story, Coetzee makes South Africa a fraught location that plays a central role in his novel. He spends considerable time describing the university in Cape Town and the farm in the Eastern Cape, and he repeatedly alludes to the atrocities of the nation's past and present. However, Coetzee also goes to great pains to complicate the expectations that might come with the setting as he has Lucy Lurie refuse to read the brutal attack against her as an abstracted national allegory where her white body is raped by black men in an act of revenge for centuries of discrimination. In anger at her father's desire for her to break her personal silence about the rape and report it to the authorities, she explains "What happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone."⁷ When David Lurie replies "This

6 I also wonder how much affect is constructed and how much is socially determined. If we think about this argument in light of the long debate between the privileging of the subjective in social constructionism and the privileging of the objective in factual or scientific accounts, perhaps a focus on the benefits of ambiguity allows for the possibility of mediating both.

7 In "The Work of the Censor: Censorship in South Africa," Coetzee's discussion of the ways in which privacy is cited as a right being protected by censorship further complicates Lucy's "private matter." Coetzee argues that the defense of "control of the arts" by the South African Publications Appeal Board Chairman, J.C.W. van Rooyen, in his 1987 book *Censorship in South Africa*, rests in part on "respect for the privacy of the sexual act [and] for the privacy of the nude human body" (van Rooyen 3, quoted in Coetzee 191). Coetzee notes that this is basically to view "privacy in a metaphorical sense" because "to assert one's

place being what?," she responds unequivocally, "This place being South Africa" (112). Lucy's argument with her father rests on the notion that he keeps "misreading" her and that "guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (112). While David wants to control the problem of his daughter's rape by naming it and Lucy refuses to become an abstraction, both are left "shaken" by their opposing perspectives (112). Since this conversation comes on the heels of our reading about David's own quiet rape of his student Melanie—that he refused to name—earlier in the novel and his accompanying lack of contrition, his position here is made suspect. And, later in the novel, perhaps because we see her through David's biased eyes, Coetzee's description of Lucy's pregnant blooming body suggests an abstraction in a rainbow-coloured garden that is sorely tempting to read as a romanticized new "rainbow nation." While Coetzee has Lucy point explicitly to the dangers of misreading, of imposing an overarching narrative on an individual story, he also foregrounds David's view of the story in a stark counterpoint that privileges the figurative over the literal. Coetzee renders his readers "shaken" between reading literally and figuratively but he also has the characters hesitate to rest well-aligned with one interpretative strategy. In the end, Coetzee makes it difficult for a reader to emerge from her own hesitation.

On a broader plane, consider how Coetzee anchors himself in the physical world as he registers the materiality of bodies in his fiction. Critic Rita Barnard reminds us of the significance of the body in Coetzee's writing, of the "bitten ear of the Hottentot child and the (unforgettable!) anal carbuncle of the explorer in *Dusklands*, the broken feet and bloodied backs of the prisoners in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the harelip and bony frame of the starved Michael K., and the cancer that is slowly destroying Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*," to which we can add the raped bodies of Melanie and Lucy and the burnt body of David in *Disgrace*. At least some of the discomfort experienced by readers comes from experiencing the relentlessness of Coetzee's depictions of bodies in pain.⁸ Still, some of the

privacy has been disturbed by words or images in a book [as censors might assert in justification of a banning of a book] requires that the notion of private space be extended to cover the space of language, images" (191). He goes on to note that "unless it is conceded that the extension of privacy from the physical to the conceptual is metaphorical, defining obscenity or indecency as a form of violation of privacy makes no sense" (191). Perhaps Lucy's call for private space is an opaque form of self-censorship, in an ironic way using the very terms of South African censorship laws as she controls her own silence.

8 Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* is another novel relentless in its depictions of physical pain.

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discomfort comes from the fact that Coetzee also refuses to answer the questions (ethical, moral, social, political) his novels pose. The problem in a Canadian classroom, however, is that being so “shaken” or discomfited might end up curtailing discussion. The question is, when teaching Coetzee’s fiction, how do you acknowledge the discomfort provoked by relentless representations of pain and moral ambiguity and still have energy left over for debate? One answer, at least, is to take time to hesitate, register the discomfort and then try not to solve the problems in the text but consider entertaining incommensurable possibilities.

There are odd parallels between the discomfort created when reading *The Turn of the Screw* and that achieved by Coetzee in both *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. By positioning their readers as engaged witnesses and forcing them to weigh conflicting options, James and Coetzee make readers consider their own complicity and responsibility in the acts of reading and misreading. Ambiguities and conflicting silences leave the stories within the fiction as potentially unknowable and unspeakable, but they also help raise doubts about curtailed conversations. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee probes the “limit to sympathy” of his character David Lurie and of David’s classroom interpretation of Lord Byron’s poetic Lucifer in “Lara” (34). By extension, by having a story that tests a range of victimization, perpetration, and forms of atonement, Coetzee also probes the limits of readers’ sympathy. Todorov’s idea that a reader and a character may share a common state of indecision or hesitation is interesting to consider here, but there is a distinction to be made. Coetzee does not align his reader with any one character in a novel like *Disgrace*. And, as with *The Turn of the Screw*, Coetzee does not make it easy for readers to move beyond their hesitation. Coetzee has created a suspended state of discomfort for readers who witness characters acting in ethically suspect ways without overt textual recompense. Coetzee stretches the sympathy of his characters and his readers in order to make reading in a narrowly symbolic way untenable and render moral judgment impossible.⁹

Such stretching is not limited to *Disgrace*. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* hesitation occurs as a reader recognizes her own complicity as witness to the atrocities of the empire alongside those of the Magistrate within the text. I argued earlier that James makes a point about the dangers of a character limiting herself to a singular version of her own story. Coe-

⁹ See also Coetzee’s own argument in “Into the Dark Chamber” about the complexity of Nadine Gordimer’s depiction of her protagonist in *Burger’s Daughter* watching a “black brutalized man” beat a donkey and his discussion of “torture without torturer.”

tzee seems to make a similar point as he details the consequences of the adherence of the Magistrate, David, and even Lucy to a single version of their own stories. The Magistrate is brutally questioned by Colonel Joll; David is interrogated by university administrators about other possible interpretations of the “love” story (“governed by Eros”) he has chosen to tell of the violation of Melanie; and Lucy forcefully opts to guard her privacy and tell a partial story to the police. Unlike with James’s governess, however, Coetzee’s characters realize the consequences of their adherence to singularity. To their accepted detriment, none of them give in to the possibility of multiple readings of their own narratives in their quiet acts of self-censorship. Although the positions of Lucy and the Magistrate may evoke more sympathy than that of the libidinous professor, their acts of self-limitation force readers to stop and ask the same questions we asked of the governess. What is lost in a singular telling? What happens when we fail to acknowledge the complexity of ambiguity? These are the questions I want to bring into the classroom.

Ambiguous texts often point to the impossibility of reaching a clear answer to the complex of problems they raise. They are novels that refuse to be prescriptive even as they may engage with highly political ideas. I am talking about open-ended narrative ambiguity as a kind of literary indeterminacy that sustains discussion of unresolved/irresolvable political and moral issues. It is also vital to point to a practical, and materially grounded, element that may drive sustained ambiguity as well. In South Africa, the threat of censorship loomed large for decades after the passing of the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) and the Publications Act (1963, amended in 1975 and again in 1978). In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, Coetzee attempts to understand acts of silencing and censoring that police the arts (vii). In so doing, he notes that “censorship is not an occupation that attracts intelligent, subtle minds. Censors can and often have been outwitted” (vii).¹⁰ One form of outwitting, of writing to an audience who knows how to read between the lines, can come in writing allegories. Another is to write with ambiguity. Frequently writers strategically resist closure in their novels in order to highlight the complexities of the production and reception of their texts. Three South African works written in pre-democratic South Africa textually illustrate my point about the need for a debate about the ambiguity of endings and

10 One need only recall that Anna Sewell’s book about a horse, *Black Beauty*, was banned in South Africa because of the perceived connection to the “Black is Beautiful” movement to prove Coetzee’s point here. See also Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s “License to Write: Encounters with Censorship.”

the role of readerly hesitation. Miriam Tlali in *Between Two Worlds* (first published as *Muriel at Metropolitan*), Nadine Gordimer in *July's People*, and Mongane Serote in *To Every Birth Its Blood* provide open-ended and ambivalent conclusions to their novels that criticize *apartheid*. The authors avoid closure, perhaps, because closure could mean a symbolic end to the discussion about overcoming systemic barriers before an end to the oppression. A pessimistic ending might imply the failure of resistance and the victory of *apartheid*. Conversely, explicit optimism might imply the victory of the resistance and the failure of *apartheid* but it would also, almost certainly, result in the censorship of the text. Gordimer concludes her narrative: “she runs” (160), Serote ends his novel: “push, push, push” (206), and Tlali finishes her text: “Thanks for everything” (222). The possibilities implied in running toward the future, a regenerative birth, and leaving an exploitative job suggest a movement beyond *apartheid*. Yet the closing sentences could also be seen as ironic. Maureen, Gordimer’s protagonist, flees the constricting elements of her life; the community of characters in Serote’s text may be seen as the objects of the “push” rather than the subjects; and Muriel, in Tlali’s novel, may politely but ironically thank her employer for the opportunity he has given her to see the defects in the system he personifies. So even if writing with ambiguity works to outwit the censors who may fail to hesitate, the ambiguity also importantly highlights the degree to which texts written in a state of censorship can be non-prescriptive in nature.

For some scholars who may no longer consider themselves to be postcolonialists, scholars who work on human rights issues, legacies of colonialism, diasporic studies, or globalization, it is often suggested that it was the lack of direction embedded in the definitional and conceptual ambiguities of postcolonial theory that caused them to disengage with it. In 1997, at the apex of postcolonial theory, E. San Juan Jr. argued that postcolonial theorists should focus more on activism and less on what he saw as the characteristic indeterminacy of postcolonial theory. Such a view, however, did not take into account the activism of postcolonial pedagogy, not to mention the continued relevance in the classroom of questions of complicity, responsibility, history, power, audience, and memory—all central issues that have sat under the umbrella of postcolonialism. It also neglects to account for the power of ambiguity in provoking debate. Frankly, I milk the much-lamented definitional problems of postcolonialism in order to get students to engage with the foundations and the history of the field from the beginning. I am not talking here about encouraging a postmodern open-endedness where there are no facts, where everything

is open to interpretation, and all interpretations are equal. I am talking about hesitating in interpretation between opposing explanations and entertaining the possibility of both, acknowledging that neither may hold, or reconsidering explanations along a continuum. Such complex cognitive processing is a very practical and grounded skill to learn, and the notion of the hesitating reader points us toward such critical literacy.

In *Inventing "Easter Island"* Beverley Haun joins John Willinsky's notion of "postcolonial supplementation" from *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* with Roger Simon's "pedagogy of remembrance" from *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* to arrive at the notion of a "postcolonial immersion" where the student reads the world through a historicized contextual framework (257). With postcolonial immersion, Haun argues that it is the "individual subject's conscious act and continuing engaged practice that leads to a personal transformation and changed way of participating in and understanding the constructed world" (278). For Haun, this creates the "opportunity for a pedagogical process of altered historical memory and future transformation of personal subjectivity and response" (279). It seems to me that locating the hesitating reader in the postcolonial classroom makes such a form of postcolonial immersion a possibility. It assists the teacher with her role as devil's advocate in class discussion.

As a postcolonial specialist, I think that it is unethical for me to use my position at the front of a classroom as a soapbox. If there is a box in the room, I'd like it to be a toolbox of interpretive strategies. The classroom should be a place to hesitate and think laterally and creatively. We can engage critically, analytically, and responsibly with the absolutes that works of fiction sometimes probe.¹¹ Tapping into the hesitation caused by ambiguity might be one way of advancing past a point of inconsolable mourning, or unfocused anger, or guilty complicity: the points that sometimes stop postcolonial discussions from progressing constructively.

When I originally turned from teaching a novella as part of a larger literary conversation to a deeper appreciation of its pedagogical implications, while honouring a distinguished colleague, I had no idea that I would find a model for a non-prescriptive postcolonial pedagogy or realize the value of irresolvability for a classroom. However, now I see real possibility in linking fantastic hesitation with explorations of ambiguity beyond James

11 Donna Bennett makes this claim of literature in general acting as a foil to the binaric thinking of public policy: "The fact that official policy must, by simplifying issues, construct or reconstruct binaries is why every culture needs literature."

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interpretive
strategies.

to a writer like Coetzee. A postcolonial reader (among others) has always needed to be aware of her role as interpreter of texts—to read with what both novelists Erna Brodber and Chinua Achebe call an “awareness” of the time and place / production and reception of a work of fiction. Emphasizing hesitation as a model for postcolonial reading helps to mediate the process one step further. Instead of having the reader ventriloquize an imagined subject position, the reader pauses in the act of engagement with the text. Although I stumbled across *The Turn of the Screw* in this context by accident, some accidents seem meant to happen.

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