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Is There a K in Africa?: The Modern Parables of Kafka, Laye and Coetzee

There has been a recent resurgence of critical interest in the parable as a literary form. Most of the more recent commentators, such as Frank Kermode, Paul Ricoeur, and Theo Elm, and some of the less recent ones, such as Walter Benjamin, have tended to draw an analogy between parable and paradox.¹ The parable's customary disjunction between text and meaning has thus been interpreted as "a double function [of] simultaneous proclamation and concealment" (Kermode 47) or, alternatively, as a yoking of "Sinnhoffnung" and "Sinnverbot" which activates "die Sinnorientierung des Lesers durch Wirkungsstrategien die ihm den allgemeinen Sinn zugleich verbergen" (Elm 204). Many of these commentators have pointed to the emergence in the twentieth century of "modern parable," a literary form which, although obviously better suited to the short story (itself arguably a modern form), is by no means restricted to the short story. While the most famous examples of modern parable remain the short stories of Kafka, other examples may be found among his novels (*Der Prozeß*, for example, has been called by Walter Benjamin "eine entfaltete Parabel") or among the "Lehrstücke" of Bertolt Brecht. "Parabel," says Norbert Miller, "bezeichnet vielmehr einen, wahrscheinlich den ausschlaggebenden Grundzug unserer Epoche" (267). One may not wish to agree with Miller's claim, but it is certainly true that the parable has become a recognizable and increasingly popular literary form. The reasons for this are not hard to see: the depiction in much of twentieth-century literature of a contingent, fragmentary, and seemingly impenetrable world finds an ideal medium in the parable which, like the riddle or, to a certain extent, the allegory, poses a hermeneutic problem by at once inviting and frustrating interpretation. Kafka's parables are an extreme example of the problem in that the reader is given a riddle to solve which has no solution; the didactic intent of the Biblical parable is retained, but only within the context of an unfulfilled promise. Modern parable, in Kafka's work and elsewhere, tends to undercut the notion of interpretability and, by extension, the notion of 'truth': the emphasis has

1 See the essays in Elm and Hiebel; also Kafka's own parables and paradoxes, especially the famous "Von den Gleichnissen" (10).

shifted from product (the 'meaning' of the parable) to process (the 'effects' of the parable). This is, of course, a generalization. The dramatic parables of Brecht, for example, invite participation but at the same time offer instruction. The dialectic is solved, and the layers of false consciousness which had previously clouded the meaning of the parable removed. In this study, I shall refer to Kafka's fiction as a model (if not *the* model) of modern parable. It is not my intention to contest the surprisingly homogeneous views of Benjamin, Kermode, etc., but rather to redirect their arguments toward a consideration of the parable's structural devices and functional effects. I shall argue here that the parable has two distinctive formal features: *prolepsis* (relating to temporal structure) and cumulative *iteration* (relating to spatial structure). In a parable such as Kafka's "Der Hungerkünstler," the former consists in the prefiguration, but also the deferral, of the death of the hunger-artist; the latter consists of the repeated fastings which lead to his inevitable death. These two features are characteristic of the double function of the parable, for they not only point the reader in the direction of an intended revelation, but also delay that revelation by implementing a series of *dilatory* strategies. In the case of the short parable form, such as the short story, these strategies are necessarily limited; in the case of the extended form, such as the novel, they are manifold. The parabolic novel, such as Kafka's *Der Prozeß*, is an exercise in obstruction and diversion; the reader's view is continually obscured and his path repeatedly blocked. My focus in this paper is on the way in which these strategies of formation and deformation operate in the African novels of Camara Laye and J.M. Coetzee.² Both writers are heavily influenced by Kafka; Laye's novel *Le Regard du roi* has even been criticized for plagiarism.³ The issue of plagiarism, however, strikes me as irrelevant; what matters is not which themes or structures have been borrowed from the previous work, but how they are adapted to the new one. Laye himself has been at pains to distinguish between his own work and Kafka's:

2 Note here that I am not overlooking obvious differences between the primary influences of *African* culture (Islam/Sufism, the oral/griot tradition) on Laye's work, and of *European* culture (existentialist philosophy, the literature of the Absurd) on Coetzee's. What I am suggesting is that both writers wish to adapt Kafka's parables to a context in which European perceptions, attitudes and values are demonstrably inadequate.

3 E.g. by Wole Soyinka, who in a 1963 essay deplored the "imitativeness of Camara Laye's technique," adding acerbically that the "most intelligent readers like their Kafka straight, not geographically transposed." The furor over Laye's alleged plagiarism has long since died down.

Le monde de Kafka n'est pas le mien. Si, comme Kafka et beaucoup d'autres, je crois qu'il n'y a rien d'autre qu'un monde spirituel, c'est que ce monde-là est le mien depuis mon enfance, c'est que je n'ai jamais séparé le monde visible de l'Invisible ... À la différence de Kafka et de ses personnages, jamais je ne me suis senti isolé, abandonné dans ce monde spirituel. J'y suis avec tous les hommes de ma race. (Laye DM)⁴

If Kafka's agonized world is not Laye's, what is the reason for Laye's indebtedness to Kafka? Again, Laye makes his position clear: "*Le Regard du roi*, roman écrit selon la technique de Kafka — non pas selon l'esprit, mais selon la technique de Kafka ... technique qui, à mon sens, est très proche de notre tempérament d'Africain" (Laye FM). Laye's interest is not in the spirit of Kafka's work, which he interprets as despairing and profoundly anti-social, but in its technique. It is worth considering what Laye means here by "technique." Is he perhaps implying that Kafka's symbolic presentation of a dream, or rather a nightmare world, is an ideal technical medium for his own project in portraying the 'African temperament'? Caution should be exercised here, for not only is it dangerous to make such generalizations about the 'African temperament,' but it is also clear that much of the novel is focalized through its protagonist Clarence, who projects onto an imaginary 'Africa' the antithesis of his own way of life and thinking. What Clarence presents us with in *Le Regard du roi*, in other words, is not Africa at all but a European's image of Africa and a fictional rendering of the image at that.⁵ This is a crucial point in assessing Kafka's relevance to Laye, for although Laye's use of the parabolic form in some ways closely resembles Kafka's, notably in the employment of formal devices such as prolepsis and symbolic repetition which indicate an analogy between the interpretation of *parables* and the interpretation of *dreams*, Laye is also concerned to turn Kafka's parables *against themselves*. The parables are shown in the process to belong to a Western tradition of philosophical dualism which Laye believes to be disruptive both of individual unity and of social cohesion.

4 I shall use the following abbreviations:

DM = *Dimanche-Matin* (January 2, 1955)

FM = *Fraternité-Matin* (October 3, 1972)

MP = *Le Maître de la parole*

LRR = *Le Regard du roi*. The articles in *Dimanche-Matin* and *Fraternité-Matin* are quoted in length in King (1980).

5 Clarence's Eurocentric reading of "Africa" need to be measured, of course, against recent critical readings which emphasize the Islamic/Sufi aspects of Laye's text. I do not wish to invalidate these readings (eg. by Lemuel Johnson and Kenneth Harrow in *Research in African Literatures*) but rather to show that Clarence's construction of a fictional "Africa" derives from his own, European, prejudices and misconceptions.

A distinction made by Norbert Miller may serve to elaborate this suggestion. The parable, claims Miller, can be divided into two categories, the "Lehrparabel" (didactic parable) and the "Vorgangsparabel" or "schwebende Parabel" (ambiguous parable). The former is characterized by "Eindeutigkeit des Gesagten," the latter by "unbeschränkte Schwingungswerte." Kafka's parables clearly belong to the second category; *Le Regard du roi*, on the other hand, reinstates the spirit of the "Lehrparabel" by using the technique of the "Vorgangsparabel." A didactic novel, it achieves its unity of vision (if not its unity of signification) at the expense of the ambiguities of the "Vorgangsparabel." Furthermore, by incorporating Kafka's symbolism into the framework of a quest narrative, Laye makes ironic use of a prevalent Western artform to effect a critique of a dominant Western philosophy: Cartesian dualism.⁶

The quest narrative in *Le Regard du roi* has three stages: the first two closely resemble K's in *Der Prozeß* and, particularly, *Das Schloß*; the third, however, works toward a resolution of the dialectic posed in the first two and a refutation of the alleged uninterpretability of Kafka's parables. The three stages, which correspond roughly to the three sections of the novel, can be characterized according to their dominant formal strategies: *inversion*, *division*, and *unification*. In the first stage, Clarence's impression of "Africa" is as of a dream world in which images are inverted. In the novel's opening scene, in which Clarence finds himself jostling amongst a crowd waiting to see the King, he notices that the taller ones stand not at the back, but at the front:

À mesure que Clarence progressait, les noirs devenaient plus grands, se transformaient insensiblement en géants; ce qui était proprement stupide, et à l'inverse de ce qui aurait dû normalement se passer. Puisque ces géants du premier rang auraient pu, sans beaucoup se gêner eux-mêmes se retirer à l'arrière-plan et offrir ainsi aux plus petits une chance de voir. (Laye LRR 12)

Clarence's first impression of the King is contrary to his expectations. The King is helped off his horse, suggesting that he is heavy, whereas in fact he is light:

Cette façon inattendue de descendre de cheval donnait l'impression d'une extrême pesanteur. Mais apparemment n'était-ce qu'une impression, et assurément une impression fautive, car tout dans la personne du prince donnait à l'inverse l'impression

d'une merveilleuse légèreté; la première impression persistait parallèlement à la seconde. (Laye LRR 22)

Clarence expects the King to be an adult, but he is an adolescent; to be strong, but he is frail: this systematic inversion of expectation forms the pattern for the first section of the novel. Clarence's problem, explains the beggar who accompanies him on his journey, is that he thinks he knows everything: "Ne jugez pas dans l'absolu," he advises, "il n'y a que le relatif" (Laye LRR 97). Clarence's perception and quality of judgement, however, are limited by his way of thinking and as a result, like the European traveller in Kafka's related story *In der Strafkolonie*, he finds his new environment indecipherable. Clarence's bewilderment, suggests the beggar, is due to the fact that he attaches too much importance to the product, and too little to the process of interpretation. Interpretation, explains the beggar, is contingent, since for every signified there would appear to be an infinite number of signifiers. Moreover, all these signifiers seem to point to one signified, the King, and he remains an enigma: "Il n'y a qu'un roi et il y a une infinité de sujets. Ne le savez-vous pas?" (Laye LRR 55). The principle of inversion controverts Clarence's attempts at logical deduction. Deductive thinking is further frustrated by the principle of interchangeability, symbolized in the twins Nagoa and Noaga: "Il aurait voulu dire 'Nagoa' ou 'Noaga', mais après tant de jours passés ensemble, il n'est pas encore parvenu à les distinguer l'un de l'autre. Et qu'importe! Ne sont-ils pas interchangeables?" (Laye LRR 104). Clarence's perception of an inverted, interchangeable, and contingent environment are similar to K's in *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß*, or to the traveller's in *In der Strafkolonie*. On the other hand, the beggar's (largely unheeded) advice indicates that Clarence's perceptions are limited, if not misconceived. Clarence mistakes the act of perception (seeing as *looking*) for the process of cognition (seeing as *attempting to understand*);⁷ he is consequently unable to see beyond the appearance of things and, like K, is caught on the outside looking, but unable to see, in. The model of perception (and its corresponding epistemology) is that of the "Vorgangsparabel," as Frank Kermode describes it:

7 Cf. The distinctions between "regarder" and "voir" made by Clarence (LRR 100) and Nagoa (LRR 211). On the other hand, it is not possible to see without looking, on the other, it is not possible to "see" (understand) without being ready to learn and, in particular, to learn about oneself. The 'role' of Dioki (Clarence's mentor) is crucial here: "Elle ne dit jamais tout, dit Nagoa. Elle découvre et on ne les voit à son tour que si on prend la peine de les bien regarder" (LRR 211).

6 The shortcomings of philosophical dualism and particularly, of exclusivist rationalism, are thematized by the Negritude writers of the 1930s. Laye's parody of Negritude in *Le Regard du roi* suggests, however, that the Negritude writers were guilty of the same dualisms they sought to impugn.

The apparently perspicuous narrative yields up latent senses to interpretation: we are never inside it, and from the outside may never experience anything more than some radiant intimation of the source of all these senses. (45)

This is a complicated way of saying that the parable is necessarily obscure, as Kermode says, following Paul Ricoeur, "a parable ... is a fiction capable of redescribing life; its sense can never be fully closed, or this process of redescription would not be possible" (44-45). Clarence, on the other hand, is unable to decipher the meaning of his experience because he *wishes* to remain an outsider; the parable is obscure because he has chosen to obfuscate it. He thus demonstrates his unwillingness to "solve the riddle" of Africa in terms other than the projection of his own misfortunes.

Il était comme un homme qui se serait attendu à se trouver enfin ailleurs, loin du hourvari et loin de sa propre ruine, loin du hourvari et de la ruine où sa mauvaise chance victorieuse de la barre l'avait comme pour toujours précipité. (Laye LRR 63)

This pattern of willful misunderstanding continues in the second section of the novel, in which Clarence's experience of village life in Aziana is conditioned by habitual dualism. His rationalistic education has trained him not only to distinguish between mind and body, but also to repress his bodily instincts. As a result, "il lui était impossible de réunir deux idées, et ... c'était trop déjà d'aller au bout d'une" (Laye LRR 133).⁸ The parable gradually unfolds, however. Clarence awakens to the realization that "il avait un corps [mais] il était résolu à ne plus se laisser conduire par ce corps qui se comportait comme une bête immonde" (Laye LRR 193-4). The 'revelation' of the parable is still delayed by Clarence's refusal to recognize and take responsibility for his actions: he begins to 'see,' but as yet he still does not wish to 'see.' Irony is compounded upon irony: Clarence still believes himself to be an outsider with little or no connection to Aziana, whereas in fact he has impregnated half the women of the village. Despite the oburgations of the master of ceremonies, Clarence is unwilling to confess: "[q]ue pourriez-vous faire, sinon avouer? Tous ces petits sang-mêlé, dans la cour du séraï, ne sont pas tombés du ciel!" (Laye LRR 179). It is not until the final section of the novel that Clarence makes the transition from "Vorgangsparabel," interpretable as a form of false consciousness or obfuscation of self-consciousness, to "Lehrparabel," the revelation of an authentic self-consciousness. The transition, as I have implied in my choice of terms, is existential; it also signals a movement from parabolic *repression*, a use of the parabolic mode to hold at bay the 'inadmissible,' to a form of mystic vision

in which parable becomes instead a proclamation of the 'ineffable.' The key figure in the existential transformation is the blacksmith Diallo,⁹ his counterpart in the parabolic transformation the enchantress Dioki. Dioki, like the beggar and the pimp Samba Baloum, Clarence's previous "guides," fulfills an ambivalent role similar to that of Kafka's "doorkeeper."¹⁰ Even more ambiguous than the beggar's words of advice or Samba Baloum's gestures of encouragement, Dioki's oracular pronouncements are perplexing in the extreme. For example, when Clarence asks when the King will arrive in Aziana, this is the answer he receives:

— Un après-midi parmi les après-midi. Un après-midi comme tu n'en connaîtras qu'un, indicible, plus radieux que le soleil au zénith, plus vaste et plus profond que le ciel même. Un après-midi sans pareil.

— Ce n'est pas une réponse!

— Ta question était-elle une question? (Laye LRR 219)

The encounter is farcical,¹¹ but it has serious overtones: by turning Clarence's questions back on himself, Dioki suggests that the "lesson" he wishes to learn cannot be divined from an external source, but rather resides in an acceptance of self. Clarence is granted an audience with the King once he has learnt the lesson that "je n'ai que mon bon vouloir ... un bon vouloir qui me condamne beaucoup plus qu'il ne me disculpe" (Laye LRR 251). The thirst for knowledge is replaced by the wish to love; Clarence and the King become one, and the parable's 'meaning' is sublimated in desire.

The ending of *Le Regard du roi* has been criticized as unduly sentimental, but if it is seen within the context of a "Lehrparabel" (as an act of *faith*) which transcends "Vorgangsparabel" (the frustrated attempt to acquire *knowledge*), its idealism is justified. The privileging of "Lehrparabel" over "Vorgangsparabel" has further implications when we consider *Le Regard du roi* in its African context. I have already suggested that we should be wary of making naive judgements of what is or is not 'African' in Laye's novel; his tendency to polarize the European and the African ('non'-European) is ironized in any case in the characterization of Clarence. I would argue

9 See the role played by Laye's father, also a blacksmith, in the autobiographical novel *L'Enfant Noir*. The shaping or "forging" of essence is a standard existentialist motif found in Sartre and Camus (both of whom influence Laye's writing); the blacksmith is also an important symbol of creativity in Greek and African mythology. For this conjunction, see the early chapters of *L'Enfant Noir*.

10 See the famous parable of the doorkeeper in *Der Prozess* which continues, and will probably always continue, to attract new interpretations.

11 Cf. Adele King's distinction between the light-hearted humour of *Le Regard du roi* and the grotesquerie of Kafka's novels and stories.

8 This impossibility is symbolized in the circular windows of the huts at Aziana, just big enough to contain a head (but not, of course, a body, which remains unseen).

nonetheless that Laye's use of the parabolic form is attributable at least in part to the structure of traditional African folk-tale and, in particular, to what Laye himself describes as the two "truths" of African oral performance. Discussing the role of the "griot" (praise-singer) within the wider context of the African oral tradition, Laye remarks:

Il y a toujours dans le conte, dans le chant, dans la légende deux vérités: la vérité première sciemment créée et périphérique, destinée à amuser l'auditoire; mais au revers de cette vérité première, il y a une vérité seconde, profonde, autrement plus proche de la vérité, de la réalité, difficile à déceler par le profane: c'est la vérité historique. (Laye LMP 22)

The griot's performance expresses *both* truths:

[s]a transposition le conduit à une exagération des faits — ou déformation de la vérité — qui d'abord accuse et accentue l'expression, la spiritualité, et qui ensuite, par voie de conséquence, commande d'autres exagérations ... destinées à faire équilibre à la première et à l'accomplir. Il crée ainsi un système de discours qui amuse les profanes ... et profite aux personnes initiées, avides de connaître l'histoire. (Laye LMP 22)

Laye's frame of reference, however, is not restricted to Africa: "[c]e n'est pas une question de continent," he claims, "on les entend [les griots] prononcer en Europe" (Laye LMP 23). "En bref," concludes Laye,

Le griot ... vient ... à l'ineffable; à cette patiente et infinie recherche où tous les êtres — Blancs, Jaunes, Noirs, Rouges — sont de l'ineffable ... à ce qui est notre destin même, notre mystérieux destin: celui du voyageur qu'est chaque homme sur la terre. (Laye LMP 23)

This is stirring rhetoric, but how useful is it in assessing the parabolic intent of Laye's fiction? The postulation of a *double* function of the African tale certainly bears comparison with Kermode's "double function" of parable as "simultaneous proclamation and concealment." Moreover, it suggests that Laye is consciously using a double narrative structure in *Le Regard du roi* which is *itself internally* doubled. The Western form of the "Vorgangsparabel" articulated by Clarence is set alongside the narrator-griot's folk-form, which in turn closely resembles the form of the didactic "Lehrparabel." In the first form revelation is denied (as in Kafka's parables); in the second, it is granted, but *to initiate only*. Clarence's accession to the King depends on his passage through a series of initiation rites which correspond to the griot's "déformations de la vérité." The transition from deformation to revelation is made, but are we (the readers of Laye's novel) allowed to understand what this 'revelation' entails? The ending of the novel, as Eric Sellin has pointed

out, is certainly manifold.¹² Its interpretation, however, cannot be reduced to a 'meaning' or even to a plurality of 'meanings.' Rather, it rests on the *good faith* in which it is interpreted.¹³ The lesson of *Le Regard du roi*, then, like the lesson of the Biblical parables, becomes a reminder of the necessity of faith. At another level, it can also be interpreted as a celebration of the shared value of the (African) oral tradition which, in contradistinction to Kafka's parables, affirms the socializing role of the artist.

Like Laye's novel, J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* features a parabolic quest. The quest narrative of *Le Regard du roi*, I suggested, deliberately takes its protagonist off course: all roads eventually lead to the King, but it is not immediately apparent where *any* roads lead. Like the parable, this particular type of quest narrative is both proleptic (in looking forward to final revelation) and dilatory (in delaying and/or obstructing access to that revelation). Coetzee's novel is structured along similar lines. On the one hand it begs its own explication, more specifically the explication of why Michael K refuses to eat, but on the other it frustrates any such explication by providing *analogies* rather than *answers*. Like Laye's novel, Coetzee's is heavily influenced by Kafka's parables. In this case, the most obvious is "Der Hungerkünstler," in which the hunger-artist fasts to his death not for want of something to eat but for want of the "true food" (Coetzee 164). Coetzee is a more eclectic writer than Laye, however; references can be found in the novel to *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß*, but also to Brecht's dramatic parables, particularly *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (for Michael K is one of Mother Courage's children)¹⁴ and to certain Biblical parables, notably the parable of the sower. My focus, however, is not on specific intertextual references but on the wider issues of parabolic form and intent. Here, as in *Le Regard du roi*, a tripartite structure can be located. In the first stage (which, as in Laye's work, is also the first section of the novel) the dominant function is *nomination*; in the second, *explication*; and in the third, *affirmation*. Each of these functions comments in some way on the wider function of parable. Let me explain further. In the first stage of Michael K's

¹² See Sellin's article in *MLS*.

¹³ The distinction between "bonne" and "mauvaise foi" is, of course, another standard existentialist motif. I do not think, however, that Laye distinguishes (as Sartre and Camus clearly do) between good will and (religious) faith. Laye's work can be seen as an attempt to reconcile an eclectic belief in man with an equally eclectic belief in God.

¹⁴ The early scenes of *Life and Times of Michael K* cannot help but call up memories of Mother Courage defiantly rolling her pram across the battlezone in Brecht's play. Michael K's continuation of his mother's struggle is a homage to Brecht and to the 'lesson' of Brecht's most famous parable.

"quest," he finds himself in a war-torn world which is relentlessly categorized, but whose categories are not explained or, alternatively, are no longer relevant. There is reference, but no meaning; at the hospital in the Cape, Michael K is given a parcel containing clothes and

a shiny metal badge reading ST. JOHN AMBULANCE. He held out the clothes to the girl at the desk. ... "Why do you give me this?" he asked. 'Don't ask me,' said the girl. 'Maybe someone left them behind.' (33)

Everywhere are the signs of war, but nowhere is evidence of what war *itself* signifies. Robbed by a soldier on his way to Prince Albert (or is it Prince Alfred? he asks), Michael K remonstrates: "What do you think the war is for?" ... "For taking other people's money?" ... "What do you think the war is for," said the soldier, parodying the movements of K's mouth" (37). War, simply, is war: it cannot be 'explained.' Michael K's interrogative question is repeated — and parodied — as a rhetorical one. Like Clarence in the earlier stages of his quest, Michael K strives for a meaning which remains unattainable. Like his mother, he cannot understand "why they don't let me know anything" (17). Similarly, when he is arrested and sent to work at a labour camp, K's question "Why have I got to work here?" receives the overseer's answer: "Just do what you're told" ... He raised his stick and prodded K in the chest. K picked up his shovel" (Coetzee 42). Michael K reads his life and times as *parable*, hypothetical and interpretative: "He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the story ground, he thought" (48). His life and times are *told* to him, on the other hand, as *commandment*, categorical and unquestioning, like the rules of the internment camp: "JAKKALSDRIF RELOCATION CAMP/BATH TIMES/MALES 6:00-7:00 A.M./FEMALES 7:30-8:30 A.M./BY ORDER/SAVE WATER/BE SPARING" (75). K's brief stay at the Visagies' farm promises an unfolding of the parable of his life:

This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator ... It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature ... The impulse to plant had been reawoken in him; now, in a matter of weeks he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there. (59)

These epiphanies, however, are invariably followed by "a sense of pain that was obscurely connected with the future" (59); the parable has no sooner begun to unfold than it is interrupted, shifted to another level of discourse. "There is no 'parable,' it seems, only 'parables,' each as obscure as the others.

Michael K is not the only person to read his life and times a parable, however; the doctor of the internment camp also attempts to 'read' K's life

for him. In this second stage, the primary function is explication by analogy and contrast. To the doctor, K is:

[l]ike a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. (135)

The doctor contrasts K's 'interior life' with the crudely materialistic lives of the soldiers; he cannot 'explain' K's behaviour, however, *other* than by recourse to contrast or analogy. Thus, while it is obvious to the doctor that "Michaels means something" and that his story has the "sense of a gathering meaningfulness" (165), he refuses to admit that the origin of this meaning is

no more than a lack in myself, a lack, say, of something to believe in, since we all know how difficult it is to satisfy a hunger for belief with the vision of times to come that the war, to say nothing of the camps, presents us with. (165)

The irony is clear: the doctor's attempt to impose a meaning on K's life by explicating his story is a means of compensating for the lack of meaning in his own life. K is a *symbol* for the doctor; he stands for *something else* (the doctor, like the soldiers, refuses to believe that K's name is Michael, not Michaels, literally 'someone else'). The doctor's reading of K's life as parable is therefore always a misreading: "'Did you notice,' he asks, 'how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?' ... 'Michaels ... you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take off my hat to you!'" (166).

In the last section of the novel, however, K's parable seems finally to be allowed to unfold. As in *Le Regard du roi*, it does not appear to be a question of what the parable 'means,' but rather of the spirit in which it is interpreted. As in Kafka's "Der Hungerkünstler," K's fasting cannot be understood as a concept; it can only be accepted as a gesture. Walter Benjamin makes this point when he distinguishes between the "Lehrgehalt" and the "symbolischer Gehalt" of Kafka's parables. Benjamin postulates that

Während der Lehrgehalt von Kafkas Stücken in der Form der Parabel zum Vorschein kommt, bekundet ihr symbolischer Gehalt sich im Gestus. Die eigentliche Antinomie von Kafkas Werk liegt im Verhältnis von Gleichnis und Symbol beschlossenen (158),

and he concludes that "die gestischen Dinge sind die entscheidenden; und zwar wandeln sie sich immer mehr zum außerordentlichen, unverständlichen" (159). I would prefer, however, to reinterpret Benjamin's contrast between "Gleichnis" and "Symbol" as a *conjunction*. This leads to the paradox that the meaning of the parable resides in its lack of meaning; or, more

usefully, to the paradox that the gesture of interpreting the parable is itself the parable. These paradoxical notions may not 'explain' Kafka's parables, but they certainly inform Coetzee's. The doctor, for example, craves for *meaning* without recognizing the importance of his *gestures*. In the final stages of his 'quest,' Michael K comes to the alternative realization that the 'meaning' of his story will always be inaccessible: "It struck him ... that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else he simply did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive" (176). Instead of searching for the meaning, or looking for the 'lesson' of his life, K realizes that it is the gestures involved in the search which count. "The truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being" (182). K's final experience of negation, (which, as in *Le Regard du roi*, may also be seen in existential terms as a confrontation of the void¹⁵) thus leads not to the revelation of meaning but to the affirmation of gesture. The final gesture of the novel is symbolic (in Benjamin's terms) but also parabolic in that it illustrates the *process*, rather than the product, of parable:

If the old man ... complained, saying, "What are we going to do about water?," he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string He would lower [the teaspoon] down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (184)

Parable is 'revealed' as a temporal construct, not so much the lesson of a life as the lesson of its living: "If there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything (is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything?)" (183). The moral cannot be deduced from the workings of the intelligence; instead, it comes "unbidden, in the course of events" (183). Similarly, the parable cannot be explained through a process of rational inquiry (channelled through the unreliable agency of language); it can only be interpreted in the light of an act (or acts) of faith.

15 Note, for example, an emphasis throughout the last section on imagery of evacuation.

Coetzee, as his commentators have pointed out, is well versed in the existentialist theories of Sartre and, particularly, in the earlier metaphysical critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is worth noting, however, that the "void" (emptiness/wasteland) is a psycho/topological motif throughout the history of South African literature. Notice the progression, for example (well charted by Stephen Gray) from Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* through to Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*. Michael K's journey into the wilderness has existential and Biblical parallels, but also (literary) historical ones.

Coetzee's choice of the parable form in *The Life and Times of Michael K* has obvious political resonances. Michael's story is equivocal and incomplete; it remains obscure to those, like the soldiers, who have little interest in it, or to those, like the doctor, who misappropriate it for their own ends. The 'lesson' of Michael K's life, implies Coetzee, will remain *hidden* from the South African authorities — thereby escaping the South African censors — but accessible to those who, like Michael, choose to make a stand against a régime they find as absurd as the authorities find Michael. The stand Michael makes is hardly subversive; as Coetzee has said in an interview, "a mere effort of will is not enough to overcome centuries of cultural and spiritual deformation" (*Kunapipi* 7). Michael's speech impediment, like his parabolic life and times, is a symbol both of the cultural and spiritual deformation Coetzee sees in contemporary South Africa and of muted — because suppressed — political resistance to the régime which has caused that deformation. Coetzee stresses, however, that Michael's response is symbolic rather than politically defined; it would be ill-considered to look upon Coetzee's parable, as upon Laye's, as a form of restricted socio-political allegory. In fact, both Laye (explicitly) and Coetzee (implicitly) give us to understand that their respective parables have wider application. For both Laye and Coetzee, the nihilistic tendencies of Kafka's parables are themselves made into parables. But the confrontation of their apparent 'meaninglessness' does not engender an act of despair. On the contrary, it leads to an *overcoming* of despair. It is possible to locate this affirmative gesture within the context of the African oral tradition, which disseminates wisdom for those who choose to seek it (the case of Laye); or within the context of the South African political situation, in which freedom of expression is curbed to the extent that only through the agency of the parable, which remains obscure to the uninitiated, can a plea for faith be made (the case of Coetzee). Yet it is also possible to interpret the gesture universally: Laye accordingly pins his faith to a kind of religious syncretism, Coetzee to a kind of secular Humanism. Both worldviews are similar in consequence: literary parable highlights the problem of interpretation (as a sign of the times) while underlining the necessity of belief (as a sign, perhaps, of better times to come).

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L'Originalité et la convention de la rupture: Hubert Aquin

"Dans la littérature tout existe: le problème est de savoir où." Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue*

Dans *Le Nez qui voque* de Réjean Ducharme,¹ le jeune scripteur Mille Milles compose un journal intime qu'il entend être un "chef-d'oeuvre de la littérature française" (44). En même temps, il entreprend une lutte vigoureuse contre les notions de beauté et de vérité en art, projet que l'on pourrait caractériser comme une théorie pragmatique de la littérature. Selon lui:

[j]l y en a qui sont dépourvus de sentiments assez forts pour les projeter, pour les imposer aux choses. Ceux-là, pour ne pas mourir d'indifférence, s'imposent les sentiments que leur désignent les canons, non les canons de l'artillerie, mais les canons de l'art. Ceux-là, si l'art dit que c'est beau, ils se mettent à pleurer tellement c'est beau. Ceux-là, si l'art dit que c'est laid, ils se mettent à rire, tellement c'est laid. (163)

Une approche pragmatique de la littérature interrogerait la relation problématique qui existe entre l'écriture et la "littérature" canonique; elle chercherait, autrement dit, la logique qui lierait la consécration de formes comme littéraires et l'ensemble de présupposés actifs dans la communauté interprétante qui participerait à cette consécration. C'est le présupposé de l'originalité comme critère fondamental de l'oeuvre d'art qui fournirait le prétexte à cette recherche dont le but éventuel mais toujours différé se dessine comme l'explication du phénomène littéraire.

Si on adoptait le point de vue de Mille Milles, l'art n'existerait pas: il ne serait qu'un effet imposé par les canons qui nous font accroire à l'existence, c'est-à-dire à la vérité de ce qui s'y conforme. Or, cette illusion de son existence constitue une tautologie qui informe l'essence même de la

1 Paris, Gallimard, 1967.