# Ambivalence and Its Implications from the Standpoints of Modern and Postmodern Ethics in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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**Abstract**   The perplexing silence of Michael K continues to baffle readers. It is often argued that Michael's rejection of food and his infatuation with gardening are interpretable as forms of resistance defying absorption into prevailing discourses. My argument here will follow the same line of reasoning but I will be using a different route. In the first part of this paper, I will focus on Michael's ambivalence. In the second part, I will discuss the problematic of ambivalence in light of two conceptions of ethics and morality represented by modern and postmodern perspectives. The main difference between them, according to Zygmunt Bauman, revolves around their acceptance and rejection of ambivalence. I will argue that the conflict between modern and postmodern viewpoints ends in a crisis reflected in the medical officer's obsessional thoughts about Michael. The situation is compounded by Michael's nonsensical unresponsiveness which problematizes the relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver. My argument would deal with the nature of this challenge and its implications for the moral self which I believe result in a moral crisis symbolically depicted as the reversal of positions between Michael as the care-receiver and the medical officer as the care-giver. This final section of my paper would be premised on the term 'hostage' borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of ethics.

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**Introduction**

J.M. Coetzee's Michael K is unique but not quite without precedent in his oeuvre. In silence, reticence and inscrutability, Michael is preceded by the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and followed by Friday in *Foe* (1986) and Vercueil in *Age of Iron* (1990). Outside Coetzee's fictional world, the most familiar character that approximately resembles Michael's unyielding obduracy is Herman Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener featuring in a short story of the same name. Before I start my argument and by way of an introduction, perhaps it is better to present a succinct overview of some of the salient critical works on *Life and Times of Michael K* (1984).

The desire to unravel Michael's mystery has made critics resort to various perspectives. Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens (2007) read *Life and Times of Michael K* (heneceforth *LTMK*) through its thematic similarity with Melville's famous short story. Their reading is based on what they consider to be the problem of relationship between rule and exception based on Giorgio Agamben's writings. They explore the interdependence of rule and exception and point to their not being mutually exclusive. The exception needs the rule to mark it as intransigence. Similarly, the rule requires the exception to mark its boundary. They pose two questions: "if exception is always an exception to the rule, how can it exist otherwise than by virtue of that rule?" and "if the exception radically breaks away from the rule, then how is it possible for that rule to identify the exception and recognize it as such?" (157). Rules can be anything from the law to any other interpretative frameworks. In the context of literary criticism Buelens and Hoens equate the rule with allegorical reading and the exception with singularity. They argue that an allegorical reading fails to do justice to the singularity of literature, an idea which as they acknowledge has been discussed by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). However, they find Attridge's non-allegorical reading exceptionable. In their opinion, Attridge promotes a kind of reading which "relies heavily on a process of identification between readers and protagonists that actually amounts to a variation on allegorical theme" (159). Such identification takes place according to Buelens and Hoens only, by placing our consciousness as readers "in some sort of continuity with the consciousness of a protagonist" (162) which to their mind, is problematic. The reason is that in Attridge's account, the reader metaphorically substitutes the protagonist. What Buelens and Hoens fault in Attridge is his inability to "escape from the allegorizing/metaphorizing tendency

that he is aiming to expose in his account of the singularity of literature" (162). According to them an adequate response to characters like Michael and Bartleby lies in a syntagmatic/metonymic engagement with the text whereby "occupying a position of continuity with regard to protagonists rather than arrogating unto [ourselves] an identity that is derived from the latter's particularity" (169). This is the same as maintaining that Michael invites us to sympathize with him but we suffer from the inability to empathize. In order to empathize one needs to understand the other. Understanding the other is never complete because we always adopt a position in relation to the other which is seen from an external point of view. In other words, we never succeed in empathizating because the object of empathy is inaccessible to us. Michael's silence and Bartleby's incomprehensible willfulness enable them to "strongly resist an allegorical reading, and the texts in which they appear stage what happens when allegory gets provoked. The tendency to understand (help, empathize with etc.) gets obstructed and this very obstruction" puts an end to the desire to understand (Buelens and Hoens 169).

Along with Michael's streak of adamancy and nonconformity another distinguishing characteristics of him is his glaring political and historical passivity. Stephen Watson (1986) argues that Michael's elusiveness can be explained in terms of a resistance to colonization. He writes that Michael K intends to be free from "colonization whether it be the colonization of the body (through labour camps) or the colonization of the mind (through charity)" (370). Coetzee's characters are distinctively resistant to any kind of totalization. Different readers have different ideas of the totality against which Coetzee pits his characters. Obviously, Michael is dismissive of his social and historical positioning. Maintaining silence and leading a nomadic-cum-subterranean life signify his reluctance to participate in the socio-historical dynamics of his times. Michael's reclusion and impenetrability are triggered by the "unspoken wish of the white authorities in the novel" to disenfranchise the blacks "from human existence on the earth's surface" (Wright 437). Michael seems to be determined to minimize his dependence on human beings by adopting a subterranean life which limits his needs to Mother Earth.

Michael's atavistic yearning for staying close to earth and nature, according to Anthony Vital (2008), enables Michael to savor a "full sense of being" (96). This is the freedom which is obtained by escaping the oppression of modern institutions. From the beginning of his life, he has been subject to oppressive domination of patriarchal disciplinary institutions to the extent that lacking a biological father he acknowledges that: "My mother was the one whose ashes I brought back, he thought, and my father was Huis Norenius. My father was the list of rules on the

door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules" (104-5). Vital argues that Michael like others has the kind of idea of nature which is the product of the discourse of modernity and colonial adventure: "K's relishing of isolated reverie in nature leads him into collision with the determining fact of life, that bodies, their birth and daily renewals, exist only in time" (Vital 98).

But while Vital sees Michael's negligence of his bodily needs as problematic, Jane Poyner (2009) argues that Michael's willful refusal to take food and the resultant atrophy are forms of defying colonial discourse. Poyner, however, agrees that Michael craves to stay "outside the time of camps, of apartheid and of South African's bleak history-in-the-making" (83). Michael's insistence on insubstantiality both physical and textual (that is in terms of historiography), is achieved via hunger and silence. As Poyner argues, Michael's intention to constitute his identity without regard for any prevailing discourses indicates his desire to "author his own body, a body that colonial and apartheid discourse have sought to inscribe, define and regulate" (88). Michael's impenetrable silence represents his resistance to be embedded in the discursive historicity of apartheid. This wish for overtaking humanity and history is clearly reflected in the novel:

> Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to fine me; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost (66).

### Michael K and Ambivalence

As 'the other' in the discourse of apartheid, who has been marginalized and denied a voice, Michael's withdrawal from human community and his desire to outdistance history seems self-defeating. Ironically, much to Michael's dismay, his retreat to no-man's land and his disregard for human community are still considered threats by the state. The reason is that Michael's uncanny nonconformity and benign noncompliance problematize apartheid's hegemonic control over meaning and identity. Apartheid embodies a highly rationalistic system of governance based on modern intellect's dependence on the binary opposition of the same and the other. Apartheid, like his German and Russian predecessors, inherited from modernity the epistemological penchant for disambiguation and categorization. As Zygmunt Bauman (1991) has argued the acceptance and rejection of ambivalence constitutes the criterion for distinguishing postmodernity from modernity.

One of the important issues of modernity is the problem of ambivalence. Modernity equipped with the rigid rationality and scientific objectivity of enlightenment developed an intolerance of the ambiguous and the unknown. Its mission was to create order through conceptualization and demystification. Such an epistemological venture more often than not functioned at the expense of violating the other. Bauman's characterization of postmodernity as tolerantly inclusive of difference and ambiguity indicates a drastic change for the establishment of a new relationship with 'the other' which departs from "individual rational capacity of synthesis, conceptualization and organization" (Morgan 88) to welcome the reconsideration of the self's relation to the other.

Imposing order and creating conceptual harmony are part and parcel of modern intellect. That is why for Bauman (1991), "the other of modern intellect is polysemy and cognitive dissonance" (9). Polysemy and cognitive dissonance pose a major threat to modernity's predilection for order-making and the establishment of binary divisions. Bauman explains that the struggle for order is a battle raging between "determination [and] ambiguity . . . semantic precision . . . [and] ambivalence, transparency . . . [and] obscurity, clarity . . . [and] fuzziness" (*Modernity* 7). This urge to purge the world of the ambiguous, and the unknown was the legacy of enlightenment whose objective was to evoke a sense of freedom and autonomy in the Cartesian subject. Bauman was influenced by Emmanuel Levinas whose dissection of western philosophy was an attempt to reveal the self's propensity for autonomy through the reduction of the other to the same.

Contrary to modern intellect, postmodernity allows for plurality and calls for the recognition of 'other' voices and identities. As the theoretical and political praxis of postmodernity, postmodern thought lends itself more easily to the restoration of suppressed histories, voices and identities. It has also contributed to the emergence of minority discourses which struggle to dispute the center by pursuing counter-hegemonic politics. While modern intellect, seeking to reduce plurality to uniformity, tended to relentlessly compartmentalize the world into meaningful and familiar entities, postmodernity with its "plural and pluralistic world" accepts "every form of life. . . on principle" (*Modernity* 98).

In *LTMK*, Michael emblematizes ambiguity and ambivalence. The desire to know Michael--'the other'--and to unravel his mystery is the dominant theme of the novel. Michael is an embodiment of ambivalence through whom Coetzee seems to be striving to expose the faulty and restricted outlook of modern thought manifested in its most extreme form in the exclusionary policy and dualistic worldview of apartheid. Apartheid in its political sense means "separate development of each race

in the geographical area assigned to it" (Cornevin 25). This kind of governance rests on an absolute organization and engineering of society with every race and ethnic group classified and assigned a specific place in the system. Anything which cannot be accommodated within the existing conceptual divisions purportedly jeopardizes the integrity of the system. Seen in this light, Michael is a major problem for such an exclusionist system of control as he switches from one mode of existence and identity to another. It is this freedom to remain ontologically or better yet semantically ambiguous and politically indeterminate that encourages me to read the novel from a postmodern perspective. If, as Bauman argues, modern state rests on a rational dichotomization of the inside and outside of its territory under the name of friend and enemy (*Modernity* 24), then Michael's transitions from a secondary civilian to a nomad and finally to a subhuman challenges the cognitive assumptions of the modern state. His interstitial vagrancy exasperates apartheid more particularly in the volatile times of war when preserving the monopoly on meaning and identity is crucial for a rigorous obliteration of polyphony. Under such circumstances apartheid cannot permit a sign to remain in abeyance.

Michael's ambivalence is maintained by circumventing mutually exclusive categories such as the friend and the enemy. This is not tolerable for any totalitarian modern state power. As Bauman argues modernity has a strong aversion to the ambiguous and the ambivalent because it relies heavily on conceptual understanding of the world within predefined categories. According to Bauman friends and enemies "exhaust the *possibility* of being with others. Being a friend and being an enemy are the two modalities in which the other maybe recognized as another subject. . . . If not for the opposition between friend and enemy, none of this would be possible" (*Modernity* 54; emphasis in original).

The problem with Michael is that he cannot be categorized neither as a friend nor an enemy. Of the two categories of other-definition recognized by the state, that is, insurgency (like guerrillas) or subordination (like camp inmates), Michael defies both and remains categorically undefinable and politically noncommittal. As a result, his story cannot be subsumed under any prevailing narrative. Not only does Michael problematize this dichotomous view by evading the imposition of identity and meaning but also challenges rationality and logic: his behavior cannot be accounted for in terms of any familiar cognitive paradigms as it is incongruent, illogical, and irrational. In other words, Michael is apparently devoid of the will-to-power, will-to-life and will-to-know: a human with no claim on humanity.

Throughout the novel Michael is subject to attempts at interpreting him. Such intrusive acts of interpretation are usually met with disappointment because he

remains elusive, impervious and unresponsive. The urge to demystify Michael is particularly in full swing in the mid-section of the novel and is epitomized by the medical officer. He represents modern intellect whose search for signification and the removal of ambivalence has taken on the gloss of care and concern. However, by the end of the midsection his authoritative and professional concern for Michael gives way to a submissive enthrallment to him. Interestingly, this transformation comes about when the medical officer reaches the end of his cognitive tether. Before this change transpires, he strives incessantly to explain for his inscrutable silence and inexplicable self-immolation. His desperate attempts at understanding Michael's resolution to go unheard and unremembered in history simply indicate his uneasiness with the contingent and the indeterminate. As Bauman explains modern intellect is intolerant of contingency: "Since the sovereignty of modern intellect is the power to define and to make the definitions stick" therefore it is at variance with "polyvalent definitions [and] contingency" (*Modernity* 9). Also, as an embodiment of modern intellect, the medical officer is disposed to teleological and totalizing thinking which is exemplified by his wariness of the imminent unfolding of historic events which is set off by Michael's inattention and indifference to what is happening around him as he continues "living in a pocket outside of time" (60). The medical officer's pontification about the gravity of the situation and his Hegelian projection of history as it tends "towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning" (158) is similarly offset by Michael's localized perspective and liminal positioning. Michael does not even deign to be a casual observer let alone an enthusiastic participant in the revolutionary times.

With the passage of time, the medical officer's passion to resolve the obscurity of Michael shows no sign of abatement leading to the development of a fixation on him and his life. He believes that there is some "sense of a gathering meaningfulness" about Michael arguing that Michael "means something, and the meaning is not private to me" (165). He admits that it is not "a mere craving for meaning that sent me to Michaels and his story" (164). He feels that he has been singled out because Michael has a mysterious meaning hidden to everyone except him: "I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be" (164). The medical officer firmly believes that Michael is definitely "more than what he seems to be" or he (the medical officer) would have retreated "to the toilets" and put "a bullet through" his own head (165). Confronted by an unresolvable enigma, the medical officer aches to find out Michael's motives. He tries to explain away Michael's obsession with his mother by falling back on myth:

> And — if I may be personal — you should have got away at an early age from that mother of yours, who sounds like a real killer. You should have found yourself another bush as far as possible from her and embarked on an independent life. You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside. Because when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all the other feats of filial piety you no doubt performed, I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death. And now that she is gone you are plotting to follow her. (150)

Attributing Michael's disregard for his wellbeing to a death desire inflicted by his mother, the medical officer paradoxically resorts to mythology to rationalize Michael's inscrutability. This is a serious intellectual relapse undercutting his credibility as an embodiment of modern intellect. It also betrays the cognitive bankruptcy of reason by laying bare its reversion to mythology. The medical officer discredits the sovereignty of rational thinking by revealing the inability of reason to account for Michael's eccentricity. It is reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer's famous statement: "Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (xviii). Adorno and Horkheimer diagnosed the real cause of the recidivism of enlightenment in its antipathy to truth and self-inspection. Enlightenment sought to disenchant the world by going on a myth-busting rampage which paved the way for scientific knowledge and rationality. This was a disappointing turn for those who had invested hope in the ideals of enlightenment which had promised the deliverance of "the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error" (Roy Porter 1). Instead, what came to pass was the enslavement of humanity to a totalitarian system of thought revealing the fact that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (Adorno and Horkheimer 6).

The other important implication of the above passage is that, unbeknownst to him, and boggled by Michael's conundrum, the medical officer fails to see that he is reading meaning into Michael. Perhaps through Michael, Coetzee is testing the readers' tolerance of the unintelligible and the different. The text beckons at the reader to be aware of the pitfalls of reading meaning into the unknown. From a postmodern standpoint, one needs to be reminded of the fact that understanding is not an absolutely objective but rather a productive act. Simply put, understanding shades into interpretation. Adorno and Horkheimer have expressed the same point

by arguing that "the intelligibility which subjective judgment discovers in any matter is imprinted on that matter by the intellect as an objective quality before it enters the ego" (64). In other words, the perception of reality and the conception of truth are heavily influenced by pre-given assumptions.

The other area in which Michael problematizes modern intellect concerns its impersonal and foundational attitude toward ethical issues. Camps and medical centers represent the impersonal and rule-guided mode of relating to "the other". The interpersonal perspective which will be discussed in details later entails a face-to-face and non-relational manner of addressing the moral phenomenon. In short, the interpersonal is the disruption of the impersonal, but before I elaborate more on this point, it is necessary to discuss the flaws of the impersonal perspective.

In this novel (and I do not mean to generalize) the setting up of camps and medical centers dissimulate the real intent of the state behind the façades of conscientiousness and care for the other.[1] The state is facing a moral plight which needs to be alleviated, or alternatively, covered up through palliative measures such as camps and medical centers. There are on the one hand, the white people who wish to keep the misery of 'the other' out of sight and, by extension, out of mind (Coetzee 92). On the other hand, the state is striving to put up a legitimate front and gloss over its incompetent management. Rehabilitation centers and camps are makeshift state apparatuses working to ameliorate the pernicious effects of poverty, discrimination and deprivation. Both utilize instrumental rationality relying on means-end reasoning. Camps and rehabilitation centers address the question of 'the other' based on *a priori* knowledge and through the implementation of *calculated* decisions and effective measures.

Hiding its duplicity under a humanistic veneer, the medical center is a rehabilitating facility whose primary function is to restore health and strength to those who have already suffered under the oppressive regime so as to make them fit enough to be reused as labor force. According to this logic, profitability determines the value of everything and everyone. Based on this utilitarian tenet, as the subject ceases to be profitable, she or he becomes a liability, hence expendable. Michael's lamentation about his mother's fate clearly corroborates this point:

My mother worked all her life long,' he said. 'She scrubbed other people's floors, she cooked food for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their

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1   I have already elaborated on the importance of camps in "Place and the Politics of Space in J.M.Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*", *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies* – Vol 22(1): 29 – 38.

dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forgot her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, 'Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us.' (136)

The unjust treatment of the heterogeneous non-white population creates an irresolvable moral dilemma because the white ruling minority depends heavily on the active heteronomous population, more than half of which reside in white areas (Cornevin 26). The white community benefits from the labour of the black majority but the latter has no right to self-determination and well-fare. Such inconsistency betrays the moral hypocrisy of the town-dwellers and their pervasive desire to sweep the squalor and misery of the unwelcome 'other' under the carpet. Robert, one of the camp inmates, points to this moral squeamishness when he explains the real attitude of the town-dwellers toward camps:

They don't want a camp so near their town. They never wanted it. . . We breed disease, they said. No hygiene, no morals. A nest of vice, men and women all together. . . What they would really like — this is my opinion — is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean (81-82).

The state struggles to conceal its moral duplicity and depravity through the implementation of perfunctory actions such as the setting up of camps and medical centers. Once this 'other' resists assimilation into the same and evades the systematic categorization and boundary-drawing of the state, its alterity is disconcertingly accentuated shattering the moral complacency of the self. This resistance to assimilation constitutes the breaking point of the impersonal conception of modern ethics. My argument here will turn to postmodern ethics expounded by Zygmunt Bauman.

**Michael K and Postmodern Ethics**

Bauman (1993) warns us against the complexity of being responsible for the other and how this might lead to the imposition of one's will on the other. The case that Bauman illustrates is pretty similar to the moral dilemma facing the medical officer.

Bauman argues that the relationship between the other and the self engenders meaning for both. This creation of meaning is founded on reciprocity between me and the other: "I am I who is responsible, he is he to whom I assign the right to make me responsible" (*Postmodern* 86). In this relationship the priority is given to the other as if I am always summoned and commanded by the other. But since the other is silent his silence compels me to speak for him and this entails having knowledge of the other. The command is not clear so I am responsible for decoding or reading it. The result is that my reading fails to do justice to the truth of the command because the process of reading recreates and represents the other based on my knowledge which according to Bauman "sets a distance between the Other as she-may-be-for-herself and the Other I am for"(*Postmodern* 90). In Bauman's opinion the command is rephrased as the command to follow my interpretation which equals divesting the other of autonomy (*Postmodern* 91). The response that I may receive in return for this presumption is either silence (in which case I can never learn of the veracity of my assumption) or the breach of silence and disagreement. The outcome in both of these cases is that "I feel obliged to include in my responsibility also the duty to overcome what I can see as nothing else but her ignorance, or misinterpretation, of her own best interest" (*Postmodern* 91).

The medical officer's well-intentioned concern for his patient is obviously motivated by a sense of responsibility which exposes the complication and intricacy of speaking for the other. This is an important issue since it involves the ideas of authority, representation and justice, which are key terms in the politics of postmodernism. Bauman, conscious of the pitfalls of caring for the other, warns that the relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver is potentially a slippery slope as care-giving tends to border on the exertion of power and responsibility on oppression (*Postmodern* 91).

Michael's abstinence from food and the consequent delay in his recuperation disrupt the medical officer's complacent attitude to his duty as a care-giver. This is closely related to the question of ethical principles formulated in modernity. Michael's anarchic silence creates an irresolvable moral conflict which cannot be resolved by adherence to universalizable reason and its rule-bound laws. Bauman (1993) explains that ethics in its modern sense is sustainable only under the aegis of states or communities. Ethical codes are conceivable only in the impersonality of organizational procedures and prescriptions. Bauman enumerates three characteristics for this kind of ethics which includes purposefulness, reciprocity and contractuality and argues that calculability is the backbone of all these (*Postmodern* 59). His analysis of these features points to the fact that the ethical perspective of

modernity promoted a universalizable blueprint for the enactment of the ethical codes. Such ethical codes are predicated on the belief in the rectitude and soundness of its rules. Furthermore, these codes are delivered as a package of universally applicable injunctions. But Bauman argues against the universalizibilty of ethics because he believes that such a trend leads to "the annihilation of the autonomy of the Other, to domination and oppression" (*Postmodern* 11). He avers that modernity is self-deluded in that it advances the idea of the functional universalizibilty of its ethical codes. Bauman also asserts that "morality is incurably aporetic" and postmodernity is the awareness of this truth and the acknowledgment of the fact that there is no hard and fast rules to show us the way thus "postmodernity . . . is modernity without illusions" (*Postmodern* 11, 32). In short, "moral phenomena", from the postmodern standpoint of Bauman, "are grounded in the essentially ambivalent (neither good nor bad) character of human beings" (James Porter 559). The confusion and frustration that the medical officer experiences, is the result of his inability to appreciate this point. He finds himself at a loss because he has been taught to dutifully follow the procedures endorsed and prescribed by rule-bound ethics of care. These ethical rules have a temporarily sedative effect guaranteeing that we have conscientiously (if not perfunctorily) fulfilled our task.

Michael's rejection of medical assistance helps to stir up the nullified feelings of guilt and shame and delays the restoration of normalcy. The medical officer's confession to being weighed down under Michael's burden of responsibility[1] evidences the uneasiness of the incipient moral awareness based on an interpersonal relationship that negates the impersonality of systematic ethics whose goal is to create complacency for the moral actor. The mediation provided by heteronomous rule-guided ethics shields the moral agent from the pangs of conscience that inevitably arise out of interpersonal responsibility.

Michael rejects assimilation into the ideological discourse of apartheid through his resistant singularity. By taking recourse to silence and food abstinence Michael problematizes the ethical codes of modernity which are based on the foundational and universal ideas of ethics. He brings this universalism and foundationalism into discredit by revealing its faulty discursive strategy and precarious foundation. In my opinion, *LTMK* casts the ideological workings of the medical center into sharp relief. Drawing on Giddens triple major forms of ideology namely the naturalising process, representing special interest as general ones, and the transmutation of contradictions,

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1    He likens Michael to an albatross hanging from his neck: "You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you" (146).

Robert Cohen explains how apartheid as an ideologically manipulative system of governance utilizes these to inculcate the belief in its legitimacy (9-11). Cohen argues that the existence of the general feeling of naturalness and the absence of anxiety among the white minority "constitutes one of the most important attributes of apartheid as an ideology" (11). Interestingly, Cohen, discussing the prevalence of the feeling that everything is normal, cites the case of a survey done to determine the level of stress among English, Colored and Afrikaner nurses. Surprisingly, the results showed that there was abnormality in the personality profile of the Afrikaner nurses which was due to the insufficient degree of anxiety in them. The point is that the presence of a certain degree of anxiety is necessary in order for a person to be considered normal (10). It is exactly Michael's singularity, his refusal to be assimilated into the hegemonic discourse of the recuperative health system that enables him to deepen the cracks on the seamless surface of normalcy. He does not recover thus his incorporation into the system is indefinitely deferred.

## Conclusion: Levinas, Sensibility and Hostage

I have discussed the problematic presence of Michael as a figure that embodies ambivalence. His vagrancy and his reckless disregard for spatial restrictions imposed by the state and his inattention to his corporeal needs pose a challenge to the restrictive and order-creating tendencies of modern totalitarian thought. Michael's behavior cannot be rationalized or simply explained away. His mind-boggling devotion to his clandestine farm and his mindless negligence of his own well-being and subsistence urge us to view Michael not in terms of rationality but in a totally different light. With the failure of reason to provide an answer to the enigmatic existence of Michael, I turned to ethics. As a radical figure of alterity (both in literal and figurative senses: different skin color, a disfigured face and his adamant noncompliance), Michael manages to stand out and capture the attention of the medical officer.[1] There is something in Michael that fascinates the medical officer. Being inapprehensible, Michael frustrates the cognitive maneuvers of the medical officer and awakens him to the fact that responsibility "is not a cognitive act, that is, an identifying re-presenting, recognizing act. It is effected in expressive acts by which one . . . exposes oneself to the other" (Lingis xiii). This exposure is not an intentional act but a birth of sensibility: "exposure as sensibility . . . reverts from grasping to being grasped . . . .. It reverts from the activity of being a hunter of

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1    The medical officer tells Michael that "You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing" (149).

images to the passivity of being prey" (Levinas 75).

Responsibility means approaching the other in a sacrificial gesture. That is why, according to Bauman, it is not characterized by reciprocity and self-interest. For Levinas, the relationship between the self and the other can be described as persecution, obsession and being a hostage. The medical officer's fixation on Michael can be discussed in terms of bondage in an ethical sense which can be explained in terms of his failure in winning Michael's acquiescence to medical procedures and in view of his frustration at incorporating him into a rational explanatory mold. The problem is that the prescriptive ethical codes — premised on the belief in the irrevocable authority and indisputable efficiency of the all-embracing and encyclopedic laws — cannot resolve the medical officer's professional predicament. Michael's case reveals the conflict that exists between the responsibility for the other as a non-negotiable, non-transferable moral concern on the one hand and on the other, the adherence to ethical rules specified by heteronomous moral reasoning. For Bauman, the latter proves woefully imperfect when seen from a postmodern perspective. Unlike its predecessor, postmodern perspective construes genuine responsibility as asymmetrical and non-relational.

Trapped by the gravitational force of Michael's weakness and vulnerability, the medical officer faces the enormity of moral responsibility for the other. No matter how much Michael receives medical care and attention, his presence demands more than the usual, more than what has been stipulated by impersonal laws. Fulfilling his commitment to Michael does not bring "the complacency and pleasure of contentment" because "being exposed to the other is being exposed to being wounded and outraged" (Lingis xviii). The medical officer's reliance on principle-based care-giving procedures proves insufficient because moral issues are related to sensibility and not rationality: "Sensibility as exposedness to the other. . . reverts from being an intellectual act of apprehension to an obsession by another who does not manifest himself" (Levinas 75). This reversion occurs gradually. At first he defines his interest in Michael in terms of his professional obligations: "Felicity and I are the only people in the world who care enough to help you. Not because you are special but because it is our job" (145). Yet with the passage of time he feels increasingly concerned for Michael's vulnerability as if persecuted for emaciated body. Though he has spared no effort to talk Michael into saving his life, the medical officer finds himself in a hostage-like situation where he feels inexplicably responsible for Michael. In Levinas's words, this obsessive responsibility is an "obsession despite oneself" (55). Disarmed by the weakness of the other, the self becomes a hostage to the other, that is, the self "is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the

responsibility of the other" (Levinas 117).

The emergence of this hostage-like relationship reaches a peak toward the end of the mid-section of the novel. After Michael escapes from the rehabilitation center, the medical officer lost in his hallucinatory ruminations, imagines following Michael, while imploring him to take him to a place beyond the camps to uncharted areas where no one "finds it worth their while to live" (162). Mistrustful of maps, he has chosen Michael as his guide. This desire to venture out of one's comfort zone is not unprecedented in Coetzee's fiction. It is also expressed by the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), when he encounters the mute and unresponsive barbarian girl whom he voluntarily brings into his quarters to look after. The Magistrate develops sexual and mental obsessions with the barbarian girl and her mutilated body. Similar to the medical officer, the Magistrate becomes involved in the act of reading meaning into the torture scars on the girl's body. This unmediated encounter with 'the other' has a particular outcome: the wish to get away from the reductive discourse of modern thought. Like the medical officer who rejects the monopoly on meaning, identity and space, the Magistrate yearns to "live outside history. . . that Empire imposes on its subjects" (206). In short, both of these dissident colonizers, conscious of the repressive discourse of modern intellect, desire to disentangle themselves from its totalizing manifestations, namely, nationalism and historiography. I believe this yearning can be interpreted as a symbolic desire to transcend the totalitarian discourses. It also implies the acceptance of a perspective which decries the effacement of the singularity of the other in the face of totalizing concepts such as history, nation and ethics.

To be an ethical subject in its Levinasian sense entails sensibility. Only sensible beings have the capacity to feel pain and pleasure. The acknowledgment of the de-sensitizing effect of rule-guided ethics highlights the self's non-reciprocal and asymmetrical moral responsibility to the other. It is only on the basis of this acknowledgment that Bauman renounces universal and foundational modern ethics. For him postmodern ethics is the recognition of the irreducibility of the other. In my opinion, Michael problematises ethics in its principle-based modern conceptualization and thus points to the precarious and inexhaustible nature of moral responsibility as demonstrated by Bauman and Levinas.

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