

An Absent Presence: Intertextual Appropriation in *Michael K* by Nthikeng Mohlele

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Summary

Taking as point of departure Frenkel's notion of contemporary, post-transitional South African writing as palimpsestic, and Genette's theory of inter-/hypertextuality in terms of palimpsest, the article examines Nthikeng Mohlele's novel *Michael K* as an intertextual appropriation of Coetzee's *Life & Time of Michael K*. Employing theories of intertextuality from Kristeva to Genette, Riffaterre, Frow and Hutcheon, it shows how Coetzee's novel, which is inscribed, in turn, as hypertext over earlier source texts, or hypotexts, by Kafka and Kleist, presents the problem of textual inscrutability and resistance to authority in the intractable figure of K. Mohlele addresses this textual conundrum by appropriating K and giving him two afterlives in his own novel: first as fictional character, and secondly as metafictional subject. Mohlele's reader is left with the final image of his eponymous Michael K as a figure who, like his fictional precursor(s), resists appropriation, escapes from authority, and whose presence is paradoxically predicated on absence.

Opsomming

Die artikel neem as uitgangspunte Frenkel se argument dat hedendaagse post-oorgangsfiksie in Suid-Afrika palimpsesties van aard is, en ook Genette se beskouing oor die palimpsestiese aard van inter-/hipertekstualiteit. Die artikel bespreek die intertekstuele toeëiening van Coetzee se *Life & Times of Michael K* deur Nthikeng Mohlele in sy roman *Michael K* deur gebruik te maak van die werk van intertekstualiteitsteoretici soos Kristeva, Genette, Riffaterre, Frow en Hutcheon. Daar word getoon hoe Coetzee se roman – wat op sy beurt weer as hiperteks geskryf is óór vroeëre hipotekste van Kafka en Kleist – die probleme van tekstuele onpeilbaarheid en weerstand teen outoriteit hanteer in die hardnekkige figuur van K. Mohlele pak hierdie tekstuele raaisel aan deur K vir homself toe te eien en in sy eie roman te laat herleef as fiktiewe karakter, wat dan verder onderwerp word aan 'n metafiksionele diskoers. Die finale beeld van Mohlele se gelyknamige karakter waarmee die leser gelaat word, is dié van 'n figuur wat, soos sy literêre voorganger(s), toeëiening weerstaan, van outoriteit ontsnap, en wie se teenwoordigheid paradoksaal op sy afwesigheid gebaseer is.

In an article on South African literary cartographies, Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie identify three main stages in the development of modern and contemporary South African writing. They describe the features of the

predominantly realistic, resistance-style literature of the apartheid era as being preoccupied with race, morally earnest and predictable (2010: 2). The literature of the South African transition to democracy, in the decade after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, corresponded to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In a spirit of decolonisation, this transitional writing focused on recovering, in the aftermath of resistance, histories that had been buried and identities that had been suppressed, and on rediscovering nuance and the ordinary in South African life after the crudely spectacular writing of apartheid (4). For the new wave of South African writing after the turn of the century, however – the phase for which Michael Chapman has proposed the term “post post-apartheid” (2009: 2) – Frenkel and MacKenzie have suggested “post-transitional” (2010: 2). They argue that the newly invigorated writing of the present no longer dwells on the racial issues of apartheid, but either complicates or ignores them; instead of excavating buried histories it often disregards the past, its concerns being less locally than transnationally oriented (2-3). The term “post-transitional” is not only a temporal marker; quoting Ashraf Jamal, Frenkel and MacKenzie argue that the prefix “post” denotes “not a negation or surpassing but a *zone of activity*” (4, original emphasis). They further maintain that post-transitionality is “Janus-faced” since it “signals a broadening of concerns and styles that reach both backwards and forwards” (7).

Developing this idea of post-transitional doubleness yet further in a later article, Frenkel proposes, importantly, that the post-transitional can be read as a palimpsestic concept “in that it enables a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it” (2013: 27). A palimpsestic reading of post-transitional fiction shows “how one transitional experience is already present in another” (26) and how, “[b]y inscribing one discursive act over another, the ruptures and continuities between textualizations reveal a wealth of imaginaries that ... define the idea of post-transitional South African literature” (27).

In *Palimpsests*, his study of transtextuality, which is the term that he uses for the “relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts”, Gérard Genette (1997: 1-2) proposes the same trope of the palimpsest as Frenkel for what he calls “hypertextuality” (5). By hypertextuality Genette means any relationship between a text (the hypertext) and an earlier text (the hypotext) on which it has been grafted, and which therefore invites “a kind of double reading” (Macksey 1997: xv). According to Genette, such grafting of a newer text on an older one includes all forms of imitation, pastiche and parody. Hypertextuality – or intertextuality – is a distinctive feature of many post-transitional South African novels that are palimpsestically inscribed over a specific canonical Western text or else a modern “classic”, thereby necessitating a double reading. For example, Eben Venter’s novel *Trencherman* (2008) closely tracks the narrative trajectory and figures in Joseph Conrad’s

Heart of Darkness (1902). In *Invisible Furies* (2012), Michiel Heyns self-reflexively inscribes his contemporary South African-Parisian story over Henry James's late masterwork, *The Ambassadors* (1903). In *October* (2014), Zoë Wicomb presents her themes of home and belonging in a comparable metafictional vein in dialogue with two major and similarly named contemporary American works of fiction about home and homecoming, Toni Morrison's novel, *Home* (2012), and Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Home* (2009). In his novel, *Imitation* (2017), Leonhard Praeg pays homage to Milan Kundera's *Immortality* (1992). Fiona Snyckers's novel *Lacuna* (2019) provides an explicitly feminist, metafictional riposte to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). And in *Michael K* (2018), which is the subject of this article, Nthikeng Mohlele appropriates J.M. Coetzee's now classic 1983 novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*.

The theory of intertextuality, beginning with Julia Kristeva, postulates that texts do not exist as hermetic or self-sufficient wholes, and so do not function as closed systems (Still & Worton 1990: 1). This is for two obvious reasons, as Judith Still and Michel Worton explain: first, "the writer is a reader of texts ... before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind" (1); and secondly, since "a text is available only through some process of reading", the text so produced is influenced by all the texts that the reader brings to it at the moment of reading. Intertexts, therefore, enter a text along two axes of intertextuality, via authors and via readers. Intertexts are realised by authors as well as readers through conscious recollection and identification of other, earlier texts, and, as Linda Hutcheon says of artistic adaptations in general, if readers are acquainted with the adapted text, the result is "an ongoing dialogical process" (2006: 21) between the work with which they are already familiar and the one which they are experiencing. Michael Riffaterre, who equates literariness with intertextuality, distinguishes between optional or "aleatory intertextuality", which enables readers to approach texts with reference to any or all other texts with which they are familiar,¹ and compulsory or "obligatory intertextuality", which requires that readers take account of a specific source text or texts (Still & Worton 1990: 26; Riffaterre 1980: 627-628; 1984). All of the post-transitional South African novels mentioned earlier exemplify what Riffaterre calls "obligatory intertextuality".

In his essay, "Intertextuality and Ontology", John Frow proposes a number of theses about intertextuality, beginning with the general premise, after

1. "The intertext proper is the corpus of texts the reader may legitimately connect with the one before his eyes, that is, the texts brought to mind by what he is reading. This corpus has loose and flexible limits. Theoretically it can go on developing forever, in accordance with the reader's cultural level; it will expand as his readings expand and as more texts are published that can be linked up to the original point whence these associated memories took their departure." (Riffaterre 1980: 626)

Kristeva, that a text is “not a self-contained structure but ... differential and historical” (1990: 45). Texts, he says, “are therefore not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness. They are shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures”. These absent textual structures, he continues, “at once constrain the text and are represented by and in it; they are at once preconditions and moments of the text” (45). Intertextual structures may be represented implicitly or explicitly in a text. Importantly, Frow goes on to argue that the “identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of reading” (46). Intertextual analysis is therefore different from mere source criticism: “[w]hat is relevant to textual interpretation is not, in itself, the identification of a particular intertextual source but the more general discursive structure (genre, discursive formation, ideology) to which it belongs”. The aim of intertextual analysis is not simply to establish “a unilinear causality (the concept of ‘influence’)” but to understand “the work performed upon intertextual material and its functional integration in the later text” – that is, in Hutcheon’s formulation, the “ongoing dialogical process” in the liminal zone between text and intertext. In a similar vein, Riffaterre distinguishes between the “verticality” of source criticism and the “laterality” of intertextuality: “Influence from text to text, or the linkup of text with source, is a ‘vertical’ relationship of recurrence and sameness, whereas intertext is related to text ‘laterally’: there is a simultaneity and otherness, a contiguity, a mutual solidarity, so that the text functions as a literary artefact only insofar as it complements another text” (1980: 627).²

As an act of critical interpretation, Mohlele’s intertextual appropriation of Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* in his novel *Michael K* bears out Coetzee’s argument in his lecture, “What is a Classic?” (1991), about the reciprocal relationship between a classic and its reception. On the one hand, the classic “is some kind of touchstone because [it] has passed the scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of intelligences” (2001b: 18), while on the other hand, “the function of criticism is defined by the classic” (19): in effect, criticism “may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival”. Furthermore, Mohlele’s blatant borrowing of Coetzee’s text, its protagonist, and even part of its title, illustrates Coetzee’s own recognition in his Nobel Lecture, as Olga Glebova points out, that authorship is “an inherently appropriative act” (2014: 182). Literature is “a field marked by signs of presence, filled with the words of others”, and literary activity is “collaboration and actualization of previous texts” – or, as Coetzee himself expresses it in his Nobel Lecture, “He and His Man”, speaking of the “plagiarists and

2. Seen in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, this lateral and ongoing dialogical process forms an integral part of the dialogism and hybridity of the novel – as Bakhtin puts it: “Every novel, taken as the totality of all the languages and consciousnesses of language embodied in it, is a *hybrid*” (1981: 366, original emphasis).

imitators” (2003a) who descend upon an author’s story: “there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit for ever in silence”. “He and His Man” is itself a fictional appropriation of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which, in turn, is a compound of prior narratives. In the post-transitional, palimpsestic “zone of activity” that is Mohlele’s *Michael K*, we see how a precursor text can become, as Glebova puts it, “an object of perpetual reinterpretation” – or, in the words of Coetzee’s eponymous novelist, Elizabeth Costello: “certain books are so prodigiously inventive that there is plenty of material left over at the end, material that almost invites you to take it over and use it to build something of your own” (2003b: 13)

To appreciate in Mohlele’s *Michael K* the dialogue between an adaptation and an adapted text, or hypertext and hypotext, or latecome text and source text, one needs first to consider Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* itself in terms of literary adaptation. Coetzee’s intertextual appropriation of different novels and stories by Franz Kafka in his fiction, including *Life & Times of Michael K*, has been discussed by numerous critics.³ Coetzee himself has set out his interest in Kafka in two of his literary essays: “Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka’s ‘The Burrow’” (1981), in which he examines Kafka’s “preoccupation with the metaphysics of time” (1992: 211), and “Translating Kafka” (2001a), which is a critique of Edwin and Willa Muir’s translation of *The Castle* in the light of Mark Harman’s later one. David Attwell devotes an entire interview with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* to a discussion of Kafka’s influence on Coetzee, who, Attwell suggests, was at the time, like Kafka, a marginalised, “minor” writer, speaking “both within and to the dominant culture or ‘major’ language – in terms that the dominant culture cannot immediately assimilate” (Attwell 1992: 202). Coetzee says in this interview that what engages him most about Kafka is that, paradoxically, he “hints that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one’s own language,

3. Besides Glebova’s analysis of *Elizabeth Costello* especially in relation to Kafka’s story, “A Report to an Academy”, Kamil Michta (2014) discusses Kafka as the main source of Coetzee’s ecological thought and examines the notion of shame in *Disgrace* in the light of Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, while Krystyna Stamirowska (2014) compares the alienated figure of Coetzee’s Michael K to Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*. In his review of the earlier debates around Kafkaesque elements in Coetzee’s fiction, Peter Horne says that “Coetzee’s writing is throughout a rewriting of texts of South African and world literature” (2005: 56); however, Horn argues: “To rewrite and write anew has a completely different function in the work of J.M. Coetzee than to caricature or parody an existing style. He is interested in the canonicity of certain texts and the question of their validity within and outside of a Western cultural tradition, especially about their validity in a colonised country like South Africa” (57).

perhaps to report back on what it is like to think outside of language itself” (198).

The ongoing dialogical process in Mohlele’s *Michael K* asks, then, not only for his narrative to be read in palimpsest over Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*, but also for Coetzee’s narrative to be read simultaneously over Kafka’s novels and stories (the name Michael K is taken by many readers to be an obvious allusion to Josef K). However, there is a still deeper layer to the fictional palimpsest, as Peter Horn has demonstrated in his article, “Michael K: Pastiche, Parody or the Inversion of Michael Kohlhaas” (2005), and Attwell has shown in his book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, (2015), namely Heinrich von Kleist’s German Romantic novella of 1810, *Michael Kohlhaas*, which was admired by Kafka. Horn identifies the central topic in *Michael Kohlhaas* as being “the question concerning the way in which a citizen in a corrupt or unjust state could find justice for himself” (2005: 65), and he provides a detailed account of the inverse parallels between *Michael Kohlhaas* and *Life & Times of Michael K* (63ff.). Attwell describes *Michael Kohlhaas* as “a novel about the failure of law and government, followed by the disintegration and disaffection of the hero, who later comes to represent a pure, post-Enlightenment idea of freedom” (2015: 131). Through his study of Coetzee’s notebooks (conducted in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin), Attwell traces the evolution of Kleist’s outlaw hero, Michael Kohlhaas, via Kafka, into his almost-namesake, Coetzee’s freedom-seeking Michael K – this fictional lineage finally begetting Mohlele’s Michael K.

In his essay, “Heinrich von Kleist: Two Stories”, in which he discusses *Michael Kohlhaas* together with Kleist’s novella *The Marquise von O-*, Coetzee himself identifies two compelling aspects of Kleist’s writing that resonate with his observation about Kafka’s fiction paradoxically allowing glimpses of “what it is like to think outside of language itself”. A story by Kleist, Coetzee says, with reference to *Michael Kohlhaas*,

reads like a taut synopsis of an action that has recently taken place under the storyteller’s gaze. The final effect is of intense immediacy. In an essay entitled “On the Gradual Formulation of Thoughts while Speaking” Kleist questions the notion that the sentences we speak are encodings in words of thoughts we have formulated in our minds. Rather, he suggests, thought takes form in a continuous back-and-forth process as the word-stream unrolls itself. The essay helps us to pin down a paradoxical quality of Kleist’s narrative prose: the scene is captured in language of steely precision, yet at the same time it seems to be constructing itself before our eyes.

(2018: 87-88)

Coetzee identifies a second paradoxical element in Kleist’s stories: their resistance to narrative security – the fact that there is “no solid ground ... no ultimate place where we as readers can take a stand and be sure of ourselves”

(90). In his discussion of *The Marquise von O-*, Coetzee considers the ambiguity and epistemological uncertainty around “whatever did or did not happen” (92) to the marquise “during a clearly demarcated gap in the narrative”. This event (a rape?) that gives rise to the action of the story “takes place not only offstage (that is, outside the narrative) but (it would seem) unbeknownst to the marquise herself” (94). Coetzee concludes that Kleist’s originality lies in his paradoxically “creating a vehicle in which the invisibility and indeed inscrutability of the originating action becomes the engine of the narrative, as the characters onstage struggle to work out what has truly happened”. The figure of Coetzee’s Michael K has inherited not only his name from his literary forebears, but they have also passed on to his story an element of inscrutability, which then again becomes Mohlele’s chief preoccupation in *Michael K*.

The challenge for any novelist inscribing a narrative in palimpsest over Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* is that it is such an intractable work of fiction with an intractable protagonist. *Coetzee’s novel, with its narrative sparseness, resists being read in either fully realistic or allegorical terms*. In his interview with Attwell, Coetzee compares his protagonist’s resistance against – “or rather, withdrawal from or evasion of – accepted ideas of the heroic” (1992: 206) to the book’s own resistance against and evasions of authority, including Coetzee’s own. Coetzee’s K is perceived by other characters in the novel as being insensate and inarticulate – a baby whose “eyes aren’t opened” (Coetzee 1983: 121), or feeble-minded, or “a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man” (204). In his quest for freedom he becomes increasingly insubstantial in human terms, imagining himself to be living “in a pocket outside time” (82), to be part of the “stony ground” (65), like sand, becoming “smaller and harder and drier every day” (93), even “as a speck upon the surface of [the] earth” (133), or “like an ant that does not know where its hole is” (114), or “a mole or an earthworm” (248), or “a parasite dozing in the gut” (159). K escapes from the rules of Huis Norenus where he spent his childhood, and afterwards from the civil war, its looting and riots, police and military roadblocks, labour gangs, relocation and rehabilitation camps. According to the medical officer at the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp, this “skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip” (226) is “a great escape artist” (228): he has managed to live far away from “the grinding of the wheels of history” (217); he seems to have “passed through the bowels of the state undigested” (221); and his stay in the camp can be seen as “an allegory ... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (228). K’s harelip symbolises his freedom also from the constraints of narrative; when he tries to explain himself to himself, his story is “always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (151), and, to the frustration of the medical officer, he is unable to give himself some substance by telling his story to others – “there is nothing there, no story of the slightest interest to rational people” (194).

Attwell suggests that K allegorically “represents something within writing itself. K could be the element within textualization that is beyond calculation or control, that continually eludes textualization (although, paradoxically, textualization brings the elusiveness into being)” (1992: 204).

It is precisely this paradoxical textual elusiveness that Mohlele has explained as his main motivation for appropriating Coetzee’s K as a character:

I wanted to humanise the character, give him immediacy ... In the [Coetzee] book, he is there but he is over-mythical. It’s not like he isn’t there in the human form. He is, but he is written with such a distant register that he exists like smoke and drink. I wanted to give him the fiery logs that are the character and give him a tangible existence, even his mortality.

(in Sosibo 2018)

Mohlele addresses the textual conundrum in Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* intertextually in *Michael K* by appropriating K and giving him two afterlives in his own novel: first as fictional character, and secondly as metafictional subject.

As a fictional character in Mohlele’s narrative, Michael K is introduced by the middle-aged, Oxford-educated narrator, Miles, who describes himself as being “not someone you would consider important, not readily noticeable ... coy and somewhat reclusive”, and “often misread” as being shy. (Mohlele 2018: 6). A recovering drinker (“not an alcoholic – there is a difference”, p. 27), Miles presents himself as “essentially a disillusioned bureaucrat with artistic ambitions”. While acknowledging that he possesses neither the temperament nor the talent to become a poet, he nevertheless clings, with parodic hyperbole, to the hope that “there might be an as-yet-undiscovered, overlooked path that will usher [him] into the furnaces of the poetic, where [he] will inhabit shadows of the greats, obliterate reputations of the hesitant, and live to be a hundred and fifteen with poetry oozing from [his] every pore, dripping from [his] every orifice”. His greatest downfall, he says, is the discovery of his “God-given passion: a compulsive and obsessive fascination with all things literature, the life of art” (50). His desire “for a heightened life, a life of passion and of creation, a life that would outlive [him] by thousands of years, a life of a famous poet”, leads to his becoming increasingly downhearted about his godlike authority as director-general of birth registrations and asylum seekers in Johannesburg to determine the fate of countless African refugees. He is depressingly aware of immigration statutes, paperwork and permits, of regulations and their violations, and, as he rhetorically puts it, of his own “powers to decide on the movement and freedom of other, sickly, destitute, traumatised, fleeing, despairing, stateless, useful, noble and wise human beings, and other countless categories, including beautiful and kind-hearted” (38). At the age of 49, he quits both his job and Johannesburg, and withdraws for nearly three years to the remote Karoo hamlet of Dust Island

that does not appear on any map of South Africa, but is “a back-of-beyond outpost ideal for self-discovery and fugitives” (77).⁴

It is in Dust Island that Miles encounters Michael K, “a tall scrawny man with a harelip” (12), as neighbour for a year and as friend, albeit in the barest sense of the term. Michael K has effectively escaped from the end of Coetzee’s narrative and turned up in Miles’s. Michael K’s backstory, emerging in the form of “disjointed fragments” (13), matches that of Coetzee’s K; he was “an avid pumpkin gardener, he claimed to have survived a war and a stint at a hospital, [and ...] he had worked as a gardener in his youth” (12). His mother, Anna K, “had perished on a wheelbarrow trip to Prince Albert” (12). Michael K lives in a rudimentary, pyramid-shaped hut in Dust Island, the only Dust Islander, Miles says, “without any sense of communal belonging – lonesome and solitary” (13). In addition to his solitariness and apparently precarious hold on life, Miles is struck by “his inventiveness; finding elementary solutions to the complex problems of making life only just comfortable; his admirable skill in preserving energy and emotions” (15). Echoing Coetzee’s medical officer, Miles describes Michael K as “a particle bouncing around in infinite space, a granule of obscurity and weightlessness” (18). No more than the medical officer can Miles piece together any coherent sense of Michael K as a creature of ideas, opinions, emotions, or knowledge of sex: “Michael simply lived” (19). The Michael K he knows, Miles says, was “Resourceful. Patient. Adaptable” (21). The one word that he too associates Michael K with is “presence” – paradoxically “he was a very *present* being, in an absent kind of way” (23, original emphasis). Miles returns to this concept in a later account of the unconventional nature of their friendship, which both parties experienced outside of narrative but which Miles can only indicate with recourse to language:

I cannot commit to stories and anecdotes, to elaborate memories and mutual plans, for our friendship cannot be said to have been of the conventional kind. It was marked by a mute connection of thoughts, by long, drawn-out and palpable silences. There was a fondness there, a flickering glow, beautiful and fragile, but present nevertheless.

(p. 35, original emphasis)

4. In Bakhtinian terms, in the narrative presentation of Miles “the graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and everyday time are concentrated and condensed ... fused into unitary markers of the epoch. The epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time]” (1981: 247). This specificity of time and place in Mohlele’s novel is in contrast to the rather more generic presentation of time and place in *Life & Times of Michael K*, as well as in the section of Mohlele’s narrative dealing with Dust Island.

Mohlele's rehearsal and reinterpretation of his source text with its protagonist whose presence is paradoxically defined in terms of absence might usefully be approached in terms of Hutcheon's notion of parody, which, she says, is "often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality" and "is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (1989: 93). Parody is traditionally thought of in terms of mere ridiculing imitation, but Hutcheon redefines it more seriously as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (1988: 26). Mohele does not simply construct a narrative parallel to Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* in his own novel; as he explains: "As an artist, one has the privilege to explore intertextual relations between works of art and that's why I took the liberty to say I'm going to finish this story the way that I would like for it to finish" (in Sosibo) – which involves killing off Coetzee's K. In Mohlele's novel Michael K's quiet but not unexpected death, Miles says, leaves "a gaping hole ... at the epicentre of [his] being" (35).

Mohlele's re-imagining of Coetzee's K as a fictional character culminates in the parodic account of his funeral in Dust Island, where the acclaimed Nobel laureate John Coetzee ("a man of average build, with bifocal lenses, denoting poor or unreliable eyesight", 28), apparently moved by Michael K's sudden death, appears at his graveside, surrounded by reporters from the world's media as well as literary scholars. When Miles asks him how he knew the deceased, Coetzee replies: "I have known Michael since 1983 [the year when J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* was first published], but in reality much earlier than that ... I think it is sufficient to say that we have come a long way" (30). And when a reporter asks him afterwards how he came to hear of Michael K's passing, the distinction between fictional and actual author is blurred still further as Coetzee gazes ahead reflectively, and responds enigmatically, "Telepathic connection" (31), before driving off.

Miles's account of his acquaintance with Michael K in Dust Island is framed by a parodic Socratic dialogue between Miles and his confidant and literary mentor, the widely travelled and hugely knowledgeable, if opinionated, Professor Gustav von Ludwig, Head of Philosophy at Wits University, who showers him with books of poetry and novels and directs his reading. If Miles presents himself as a parody of the would-be poet, Von Ludwig is presented as a parody of a certain type of academic:

The professor does not have ramp-model looks, but has, as he points out, a Von Ludwig mind, with piercing but knowledgeable eyes that have captivated lecture halls for decades. He has chosen to reject the indignities of a wig, wears his balding head with the brazen defiance of a man confident of his achievements. His dress-sense (three-piece suits) is commanding without being flamboyant, that of a public intellectual in the age of television and glossy magazines. Manicured nails, moist lips that pronounce words with

vigour and precision, the neatest of moustaches betray countless hours of scholarly slavery (53)

And, to complete this portrait of professorial urbanity, we are told that Von Ludwig lives alone in a stylish apartment, and that his taste in furniture is as fine as his library and his wine collection.

Postmodern parody, Hutcheon reminds us, is doubly coded: “it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (1989: 101), and, importantly, can be used as “a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past”. The high-flown exchanges between Miles and Von Ludwig about poetry and philosophy, poetry and civilisation, the poetic soul, the power of language, and poets as both ordinary people and creative beings, take place mostly in the coffee shops of suburban Johannesburg with its art galleries and shopping malls, and occupy much of the latter half of the narrative. In these exchanges, which are driven and informed by Miles’s passion for poetry and Von Ludwig’s sententiousness and which are in stark contrast to the spareness of Coetzee’s narrative in *Life & Times of Michael K*, various general truths are paraded, such as Von Ludwig’s assertion that there is no point in studying works of literature “without a mind fully equipped [philosophically] to dissect them” (54), or his pronouncement that “like music or the visual arts, the sheer scale of poetic invention is so great as to overwhelm any rational thought” (53). In response to Miles’s hope that his obsession would calm his soul, Von Ludwig insists that “true poetry had the opposite effect, that of stirring and impaling souls, setting things ablaze” (63). He claims, from the many poets whom he has personally encountered, that he understands the value of poems in theory as well as practice, and that all the poets he has known “had one thing in common: inner lives, vulnerabilities” (90). He also offers Miles the sobering insight that “poets are just people ... they love and scream and die and hate just like the rest of us. The difference is that they do it with a double mask: one part normal human and the other the mask of an artist” (103). These quasi-oracular utterances by the assertively present Von Ludwig serve only to intensify Miles’s desire for the life of a poet; in a formulation as overblown as Von Ludwig’s he explains how he is “electrified by the arresting power of language, the tingling sensations that trip down the spine when in the claws or affections of an accomplished poem, the myriad projectiles of feeling that threaten to excavate yearnings long entombed, the product of a lifetime of slavery to words and their shadows” (72).

All this overinflated talk about poets and poetry, also in a contemporary South African context (Mazisi Kunene, Lesego Rampolokeng and Keorapetse Kgotsitsile are mentioned), keeps returning to the inscrutable figure of Miles’s friend from Dust Island, Michael K, who is as paradoxically resistant to being given meaning in Miles’s narrative, as the originary figure of K is in Coetzee’s. Mohlele’s express aim to humanise K and to bring him into full presence as a character in his novel proves to be as difficult an undertaking as

Coetzee's; according to Kwanele Sosibo, Mohlele's "Michael K is not so much humanised as he is deconstructed" (2018). Despite Mohlele's desire to work with Coetzee's creation "as an artistic reflective character" to make him do what he wants him to do in his own book so as "to explore issues of contemporary South Africa or issues of the African continent" (in Sosibo 2018), his Michael K remains as intractable as Coetzee's K, and his inner world remains observed rather than inhabited also in this latecome text. From the outset Miles is "intrigued and confused" (17) by Michael K, whose arrival in Dust Island seems to "put in doubt and question the sequence and motives with which people do things" (16), and who, with his dreamy detachment, "could reorder known worlds without uttering a single word" (23). Because Michael K offers and expects nothing by way of friendship, and reflects no meaning back other than his solitude and indifference, Miles wonders whether he might have mistaken him to be a mirror, and whether this figure who confounds appropriation and interpretation might not be instead "that black spot on shattered mirrors, that point of impact that has lost its reflective powers, the damaged spot that holds together a mosaic of shattered glass, glass that has ceased to be a mirror, that distorts that which it is meant to reflect into countless duplications, contortions of a damaged image" (64). Or perhaps, he continues in his characteristically florid manner, Michael Ks are neither shattered nor whole mirrors, but rather the wooden frames that house them. Or can it be that Michael Ks are "so decapitated from humanity, that they cannot mirror its shadows and images?" (65). Is Michael K too small a shattered fragment to even contain an image? Does he perhaps represent "the new way of seeing – beauty in incoherence, a nudge towards the sanctity of portions of things, the comfort but suicide of not knowing?" Or is he like so many other reflecting surfaces in nature that "remain mute and unaffected by that that they reflect"? Or are the Michael Ks of this world "living, breathing, feeling and obscure mirrors – at once whole and shattered into a trillion microscopic particles of glass"? Although Von Ludwig dismisses Michael K as an insignificant figure and accuses Miles of "mistaking a recluse for a simple transmitter of grand ideas" (69) ("he was a gardener, his mother died, he was in hiding, was arrested, escaped ... so what?") and rejects the notion that he might have any allegorical meaning, Miles wonders to himself about such beings who "do not belong to an age" (70) and "escape scrutiny, thwart comparisons, cannot be quantified", but nevertheless have the "discreet power to subvert the known world" (70-71). Such power, Miles thinks, may be a greater possession than the gift of poetry.

Miles, Von Ludwig and Michael K occupy the same ontological realm of fiction in the narrative of *Michael K* – until Von Ludwig alerts Miles to the fact that Michael K is the principal character in a novel published in 1983 by J.M. Coetzee, about which "lots of papers and other books from all manner of scholars" (81) have been written, and that the Michael K of Dust Island is identical to the figure in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Von Ludwig later presents

Miles with a copy of Coetzee's novel, which Miles reads and rereads 23 times over the next fifteen years. The Socratic dialogue between Miles and Von Ludwig now moves more fully into the realm of metafiction as the philosopher wonders how the "Vacuous. Elusive. Unyielding" (82) figure of Michael K, can also be "quite an interesting specimen of almost mythical proportions" and generate so much critical interest. As metafictional subject, Michael K becomes the focus of a self-reflexive discourse about the recursive relationship between the Michael Ks of the respective appropriating and appropriated texts. If Coetzee's book is biographical, Von Ludwig wonders how the eminent author "managed to sketch such a lethal testament out of such a slippery character" (96) and to extract "a whole life from a boulder", and, furthermore, what "telepathic connection" (97) there might be between writers and the characters they write about or create, and how a real "flesh-and-blood man" might relate to "one immortalised in ink" (98). In the case of K, he cautions, one needs to maintain "a balance in one's observation of K's life and how it is recorded on the page" (97).

Their meta-discursive exchanges turn from questions around lived lives and textualised ones, and from biography, historiography and fiction to the question of the life and power of books in general – as Miles puts it to Von Ludwig, apropos of the susceptibility of books to damage and destruction: "Isn't it stranger still that books, inanimate but weirdly animate things that can stir all manner of emotions, can even be considered dangerous, can amass reputations and disciples, somehow determine aspects of our worth in the universe" (126). Ironically, Mohlele's narrative also tracks the physical deterioration of both Miles (through ageing) and Von Ludwig (through amputation as result of a motor accident) over the years.

Towards the end of the narrative, Miles wonders which Michael K is more interesting: Coetzee's fictional "nomadic simpleton-cum-fugitive or ... *escapee* ... the elusive one on the page" (132, original emphasis), or the real "flesh-and-blood recluse of Dust Island" whom he came to know. Von Ludwig informs Miles that "the Michael K world stretches as far as Texas", and that the answer to the question about Michael K's origins and meaning needs perhaps to be sought among the Coetzee papers that have been deposited in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, "papers that will outlive Michael by a thousand years". Mohlele's post-transitional novel self-reflexively situates itself in an ever-expanding intertextual conversation and contributes to the canonicity of Coetzee's "classic" novel when its narrator Miles ironically recognises "the Nobel laureate's silent command to scholars of now and of the future, to piece together, to build and shatter reputations on dim or insightful interpretations of how such a creature as Michael K is willed into existence: mocked and revered, a subject of literary and existential conversations on six continents" (132).

Mohlele's reader is left with the final image of his eponymous Michael K as a figure who, like his fictional precursor, resists appropriation, escapes from

authority, and whose presence is paradoxically predicated on absence. Michael K is (to adapt in conclusion Coetzee's description of Kleist's art) an inscrutable figure, an absent presence, who paradoxically becomes the engine of Mohlele's palimpsest narrative as he was of Coetzee's. Mohlele's Michael K is the metonymic subject of a self-reflexive fictional text that, despite – and also because of – its being so parodically over-determined, is itself, as Frow would argue, not a self-contained “structure of presence” (1990: 45) but is predicated on the repetition and the transformation of another, absent textual structure. To allow Mohlele's narrator, Miles, the final word: speaking (with characteristic hyperbole) for the author, he acknowledges the unresolved textual conundrum at the heart of the intertextual appropriation in *Michael K* of Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*: “He [Coetzee] has, to my mind at least, stirred the stars of the heavens with his liaisons and flirtations with the profound and obscure, conjured whole new galaxies at the centre of which Michael K seems the lone star: *present but unreachable*” (Mohele 2018: 132, my emphasis).

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