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From Dissensus to Inoperativity: The Strange Case of J. M. Coetzee’s *Michael K*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article develops a comprehensive reading of *Life & Times of Michael K*, one of J. M. Coetzee’s most controversial novels, which has provoked strong feelings and an intense debate among critics since its publication in 1983. Scholarly works on the novel have tended to explore the ethical dilemma raised by the enigmatic life of the protagonist and his apparent unrelatedness with its “times”, focusing on the issues of absolute alterity and its (un)representability, while denying any political import to the novel. These interpretations draw on a conformist understanding of politics that transforms the social outsideness of Michael K into his political irrelevance. The argument developed in this article takes instead the reconceptualizations of (emancipatory) politics by Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben as a basis for a thorough political reading of Michael’s outsideness. The notions of “dissensus” and “inoperativity” help to disclose, behind Michael’s apparently unpretentious life, a complex strategy aimed at maintaining his distance from power, while keeping power itself at a distance.

J. M. Coetzee’s novels are quite unanimously considered demanding and provocative texts challenging readers’ expectations and forcing them to revise habitual interpretative patterns. The main reason for this is probably the sense of uneasiness that issues from the morally elusive situations described in several of Coetzee’s plots, which frustrate our wish to formulate a clear-cut opinion on what is going on and consequently to “take a side”. This kind of undecidability has often been related by critics and scholars to the issue of alterity, which clearly occupies a central position in Coetzee’s work. The attempt to get in touch with an indifferent or resisting other gives rise in his novels to a series of weird and disturbing encounters, which are presented as an unavoidable imperative but remain at an abyssal distance from any reassuring and consoling solution. Gayatri Spivak has claimed in this respect that Coetzee’s novels figure “the singular and unverifiable margin, the refracting barrier over against the wholly other that one assumes in the dark”.¹ This is also the reason why scholars tend to stress the ethical tension and constitutive undecidability of Coetzeean narratives, while denying their political engagement, as

1. Spivak, 175.
this requires clear-cut positions and choices that always endanger the constitutive elusiveness and inaccessibility of absolute alterity.

In the majority of Coetzee’s works, the disturbing effects of the encounter with the other (barbarian, black, outcast or animal) are experienced and narrated, mainly in the first person, by an empowered self—the colonists, the authorities and the South-African white middle-class who are the protagonists and focalizers of novels such as *Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for the Barbarian, Foe, Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*. *Life & Times of Michael K* belongs to this list only as an exception, because it is mostly narrated in the third person from the perspective of the other itself—son of a housemaid and an absent father, the enigmatic, presumably black, protagonist of the novel has grown up in the “Huis Norenius”, an institution for disadvantaged children of Cape Town. This unmediated attempt at representing otherness has sharpened some of the problematic aspects of the interpretative framework introduced above, which generated the following attitudes towards the novel:

- A critique of Coetzee’s evasion from explicit political intervention. Nadine Gordimer sees, for instance, in Michael K a depiction of South-African blacks as victims without hope completely ignoring their political efforts at the time when the novel was published.2
- A demystification of Coetzee’s (implicit) claim to represent, in his quality as a white privileged intellectual, the marginalized other, which would turn the novel into an act of ethnocentric violence.3
- A recognition that the central topic of the novel is the unavoidable failure of any attempt at representing otherness; scholars refer here to thinkers such as Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida.4

In what follows I will develop an alternative interpretative framework that faces up to the most disturbing aspects of Michael K’s life, taking seriously their political implications rather than discarding them as insoluble ethical impasses. As a starting point I fully agree, therefore, with Derek Attridge’s remark that “we can derive no ethical lesson from Michael K’s condition”, while the novel still presents us with invitations to “apprehend ways of being outside, but highly relevant to, the comfortable patterns of our daily lives”.5 This relevance of the outsideness of Michael’s condition to our daily life is exactly what needs to be explored as the political potential of the novel, not for South-African blacks of the eighties, but here and now. While the interpretational framework sketched above tends to identify outsideness with political irrelevance on the basis of a conformist understanding of politics, thinking of outsideness as politically relevant requires a different conception of (emancipatory) politics that I will draw from Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben. The encounter between their theory and Michael K’s life will not only help to highlight the political potentiality of Coetzee’s novel; it will also allow me to test two opposite conceptions of the articulation between outsideness and political relevance,

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2Gordimer, 3–6.
3E.g., Wright, Derek.
4E.g., Monson; Marais.
5Attridge, 56, 60.
which Chantal Mouffe has defined “critique as engagement” versus “critique as withdrawal”.  

Resisting the Ethical Turn

I will start with a reconstruction of the novel’s plot, focusing on three thematic axes which have often separately attracted the attention of critics. The first—which I will call “the axis of camps”—has the cadences of a picaresque novel consisting in a series of escapes and imprisonments on the background of the fictional civil war and the permanent state of emergency with which Michael must, against his will, repeatedly engage. The novel thus begins with Michael fleeing Cape Town “peninsular area” without the necessary permit and, together with his sick mother, heading to the farm where she grew up in the region of the Karoo. This turns him into an illegal vagrant and, after the death of his mother, he is captured at a roadblock and forced to work in a labour gang, but manages to escape. He settles at the farm, but he is driven to leave it by the arrival of the grandson of the owners, an army deserter who tries to make Michael into his “body-servant”. He flees to the mountains where he is arrested by the police and sent to the resettlement camp of Jakkalsdrif, from which he escapes, returning to the farm only to be recaptured by the soldiers, who suspect him of collaborating with the mountain guerrillas and intern him in the rehabilitation camp of Kenilworth. He succeeds to escape from there also and returns ultimately to Cape Town where the novel ends.

The axis of camps describes the establishment of boundaries and delimitations and their control as the main concern of power, which cannot tolerate Michael’s in-between-ness, his ability to live in the interstices between opposite spaces, identities or groups; thus, when he is interrogated about his relations with the guerrillas and he declares “I am not in this war”, the camp interrogator (the voice of delimiting power) answers him: “Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not” (138). A reason for following Dominic Head’s interpretation of “the camp motif” as “the basis of the novel’s allegorical intervention” could then be the fact that, as Agamben has shown, the camp is the way by which power deals with dangerous in-betweenness (exceptions), by giving it a place outside the ordinary politico-judicial sphere and thus transforming it into bare life unconditionally subjected to power. The axis of camps presents Michael’s behaviour as a mute rebellion well synthesized by his wish to “be out of all the camps”, which brings one of the characters to define him as “a great escape artist, one of the greatest escapees” (166).

A second axis of the plot gives to the novel a surprising bucolic twist, centred on the issue of gardening. Before leaving Cape Town, Michael worked as a communal gardener and during his two periods at the Karoo farm he cultivates some patches of land with pumpkins and melons. Michael himself conceives of gardening as opposed to war, and therefore the camps: “enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening” (109). An important sub-motif of the novel’s axis of

7All quotations from Life & Times of Michael K are cited parenthetically by page number.
8Head, 104.
9Agamben, Homo Sacer, 166-80. The children’s institution where Michael grows up and the hospital where his mother dies can accordingly be considered as additional elements of the novel’s “axis of camps”.
gardening is nutrition. In the course of the novel, Michael eats less and less until, during his second stay at the farm, he imagines living only off his pumpkins every day of his life. The issue of gardening has often been used by critics to illustrate the political limits of the novel. Some have seen in it a conservative refusal of modernity, some an ecological allegory and animal ethics. Others have interpreted it as Michael’s choice to step outside society and history, in the fashion of a modern Candide.

A third axis of the novel, both intra- and meta-fictional, problematizes language and its representing capacities. While living at the farm, K progressively renounces not only eating but also speech, developing what Duncan McColl Chesney has defined as an “ethics of silence”. On the meta-fictional level, Coetzee explores the possibilities and limits of language and representation in the tripartite structure of the novel. While the first and the third part narrate the story in the third person from Michael’s perspective, in the second part, which covers Michael’s imprisonment in the Kenilworth camp, the narration is taken over by the “I” of a benevolent medical officer. He wants to help Michael, keeping him in the infirmary of the camp and trying to reconstruct his story and make sense of his life, but is deluded by Michael’s refusal to cooperate—expressed in such disarming formulas as “I am not clever with words” or “I never asked for special treatment” (139, 145). The failure of the medical officer has been explained as a mise-en-scène of the impossibility of understanding radical otherness and representing the unrepresentable. Although this is undoubtedly an important aspect of the story, it is through a different interpretation of this axis of the novel that I will now proceed to introduce my own approach. This requires a brief summary of Rancière’s critical remarks on the contemporary “ethical turn” in aesthetics and politics that will help me to detect the shortcomings of the above mentioned ethical approaches to the novel.

Rancière’s critique of the ethical turn notoriously centres around its misrecognition of the political potential of the other (called the “excluded” by Rancière), which aims to neutralize the threats of alterity to the self-enclosure of the consensual community. Within the ethical treatment of the other, political neutralization takes two apparently opposite, though actually concurring, forms:

on the one hand, the excluded is merely the one who accidentally falls outside the great equality of all—the sick, the retarded or the forsaken to whom the community must extend a hand in order to re-establish the social-bond. On the other hand, the excluded becomes the radical other, the one who is separated from the community for the mere fact of being alien to it, of not sharing the identity that binds each to all, and of threatening the community in each of us.

The attitude of the medical officer in the second part of Coetzee’s novel is a vivid illustration of all this. On the one hand he wants to save Michael by convincing the camp commander that he is sick and retarded, and by healing him physically and psychically. This is the general logic of the rehabilitation camp: “the orange, white and blue on a flagpole in

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10Leist, 200–5.
11Murray; Neimnneh and Muhaidat.
12Clingman, 57.
14E.g. Van Zanten Gallagher, 161–5.
15Rancière, Dissensus, 189.
16Later in the novel Michael reflects “I have become an object of charity […] Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me” (181).
the middle of the track, a five-piece band playing ‘Uit die blou’, and six hundred sullen men standing to attention, barefoot, in their tenth-hand khakis, having their thinking set right” (132). On the other hand, when confronted with K’s obstinacy, the medical officer does not fail to make explicit the kind of treatment which the consensual community reserves for the “radical other”: “If you don’t cooperate you will go to a place that is a lot worse than this! You will go to a place where you stand baking in the sun all day and eat potato-peels and mealie-cobs, and if you don’t survive, tough luck, they cross your number off the list and that is the end of you!” (138).

Thus, instead of explaining the relation between the medical officer and Michael in terms of the ethic of otherness, we could consider part two of the novel as a description of the modalities by which the ethical treatment of alterity (re)establishes consensus. Michael, the excluded, refuses both sides of the treatment: “Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? […] I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (182). Rancière’s notion of dissensus allows us to move from the ethical treatment to the possible (re)politicalization of alterity and exclusion. In dissensus the excluded is neither an “object of charity” nor an “alien” to be separated into the camps, but rather “a conflictual actor, an actor who includes himself as a supplementary political subject, carrying a right not yet recognized or witnessing an injustice in the existing state of right”.17 At the end of part two of the novel the medical officer becomes conscious of this possibility and, in an imaginary dialogue with the escaped Michael, makes explicit the shift from the logic of consensus to that of dissensus: “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). “To take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” is a good description of that paradoxical political supplementation by which dissensus emerges. Despite the system’s attempts to track him down (as a “vagrant”, a “guerrilla’s storage man”, an “unemployed”, etc.) and make him one of its “terms”, Michael escapes any classification—the medical officer describes him as a “human soul above and beneath classification” (151), a “nondescript”, while his outsideness (“not becoming a term”) does not cease to be “scandalously” and “outrageously” relevant (a “meaning” which “takes up residence”).

In interpreting Michael’s behaviour as a case of dissensus, we immediately run up the fundamental problem for any political reading of the novel. According to Rancière, dissensus starts a struggle for the verification of equality, which implies that the excluded have a desire for a voice and visibility, that they demand the right to speak and to be heard.18 In Michael’s case, the ground of dissensus seems to be at the same time reverted and radicalized, as what he silently and invisibly reclains is a right to silence and invisibility which no one is willing to allow him. Invisibility and silence are the attitudes he adopts throughout the novel when dealing with the representatives of camp power like policemen, soldiers, administrators and doctors. His abstinence from speaking, his refusal of testimony, makes them repeatedly consider him an “idiot”, a word which originally (Greek idios)

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17 Rancière, Dissensus, 189.
18 See Rancière, Disagreement.
referred to a “private man”, someone who is inadequate for public, political life. Thus, according to the medical officer, Michael is “a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man”, living “in a world all his own” (149, 142). This interpretation of Michael’s idiotism is shared by the critics who stress the apolitical nature of his way of being and, consequently, of Coetzee’s novel. I will instead borrow a different understanding of Michael’s “idiotism” from linguistics, where the term refers to deviant uses of language that do not conform to linguistic standards. Under this perspective, the fact that Michael is “not clever with words” (139) does not imply that he cannot speak, but that both his silences and his words are idiotic (anti-normative) means of (non)communication with puzzling and disarming effects on the interrogating authorities.19 Far from representing the constitutive handicap which decrees his exclusion from public life, amazing idiocy is the strategy Michael chooses to keep his distance from power and power at a distance.

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Michael K forms in this respect an exceptional pair with another literary character who has never ceased to intrigue radical thinkers—Bartleby, the scrivener. Like Michael, Bartleby is an enigma for the other characters of Melville’s novel as he barely eats nor speaks; neither the benevolent attempts to understand him (the narrating “I” of Bartleby is reminiscent of the medical officer of Michael K) nor the direct repression of his radical alterity have any effect on his famous formula “I would prefer not to”, which is also, as Gilles Deleuze has observed, a linguistic idiotism: “the formula […] severs language from all reference, in accordance with Bartleby’s absolute vocation, to be a man without references [just like the “nondescript” Michael], someone who appears suddenly and then disappears, without reference to himself or anything else.”20

While Bartleby/Michael are good representatives of that “absolute refusal” of authority which brings together humanity as such, beyond classifications, they remain for Hardt and Negri21 incapable of going further on the road to political liberation, their refusal leading them instead to “social suicide”; they remain “idiots” in the sense of “private men”. I do not agree with this conclusion, because it ignores two important differences between Michael and Bartleby, which make the former a better candidate for observing not only the disruptive effects but also further political potentials of absolute refusal. Firstly, as Hardt and Negri observe, Bartleby is “immobile, almost petrified in his passivity”,22 while Michael (the escape artist) is always on the move. Secondly, while Bartleby dies in prison of starvation at the end of Melville’s novel, at the end of Coetzee’s novel Michael is alive, outside of all camps imagining, dreaming of or planning (it remains unclear in the novel) a return to the farm. Though critics tend to consider the end of the novel as immediately preceding Michael’s death, it is Coetzee himself who weakens this hypothesis by explaining in an interview that the title of the book does not begin with a definite article precisely because he did not want to convey the idea of a life considered as

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19For instance, when interrogated at the hospital where his mother died, he starts to tell his story but at some point he “began to fear he was giving away too much, and would answer no more questions. The man [a hospital authority figure] gave up and went away” (31). Later on, at a police road block, he thinks that “If I look very stupid, perhaps they will let me through” (40). And when soldiers ask him to tell his story but are answered by silence, Michael “had the feeling they did not know what to do” (123).
20Deleuze, 73–4.
22Ibid., 203.
completed. We could thus say that, whereas Bartleby’s negativity materializes unavoidably into death, Michael’s tentatively opens up a space for imagining the New.

Topological Dissensus: Making Separations Inoperative

It is in the novel’s axis of gardening that the traces of Michael’s way of giving body to his refusals can be detected. My reading will be based here on a couple of topological notions from Agamben’s reconceptualization of politics that I proceed now to briefly introduce. While Rancière is never mentioned in works on Michael K., a few scholars have referred to Agamben, mainly while discussing the centrality of the camp topic in the novel. As a matter of fact, we can recognize in Michael K an exemplary case of bare life: if, in Agamben’s description, the homo sacer comes close to the condition of the “living dead”, the novel’s medical officer similarly thinks of Michael as approaching as close to “a state of life in death or death in life, whatever it was, as is humanly possible” (159). At any rate, if we want to make any political sense of Michael’s life, we must keep in mind that bare life is not only the object of sovereign power as a biopolitical body, but it may also become the site for the constitution of a new possible politics. As Agamben explains, “There is no return from the camps to classical politics. [...] This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life which is wholly exhausted in bare life.” 

The abandonment of “classical politics” implies that deposition of historico-politico destinies and tasks that is enacted by Michael when, instead of confirming with his deeds, he disrupts with his refusals the articulation of individual life and historical time postulated in the title of the novel. In Agamben’s words, we should give up the search for “new—more effective or more authentic—articulations” (in our case, of a life with “its” Times) and rather “show the central emptiness” which (un)grounds any articulation, risking ourselves in that emptiness. The traditional idea of a foundational telos as the essence of human political existence is here replaced by the idea of a void to be shown and inhabited. It is this replacement and its political implications that I will try to detect in the life of Michael K.

In order to do that, we need to move from Melville’s Bartleby to another literary character who has often been correlated, not just for homonymity, with Michael—Kafka’s K. Agamben’s reading of the relation between K and the Castle provides us with the interpretative key to make sense of Michael’s above mentioned mobility. According to Agamben the struggle between the land surveyor K and the Castle in Kafka’s novel should be understood as a struggle around the constitution of limits: the arrival of K calls into question the “boundaries, separations, and barriers” that the Castle “established between humans”. 

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23Morphet, 454.
24E.g., Woesner, 232.
25Agamben, Homo Sacer, 188.
26Michael thus considers himself as “one of the fortunate ones who escape being called” (104) and appears to the medical officer as “a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations” (151).
27Agamben, The Open, 92.
28The officers of the rehabilitation camp in Coetzee’s novel refer to the place from where they receive orders as “the Castle” (152); for a study on the Kafkian motives of “Michael K” see Meljac.
29Agamben “K,” 36.
is understood as the ‘divine government’ of the world, then the land-surveyor [...] is engaged in an obstinate struggle with the castle and its bureaucrats over the limits of this government.”

Michael’s perpetual mobility can in the same way be understood as an attempt to put boundaries and separations into question in order to let what Agamben calls a “central emptiness” emerge as the possible place for giving body to his refusal. Michael’s dissensus in the novel thus takes the form of a silent fight around “the control of social space”: it is a “topopolitical” (topological+political) dissensus. We can follow this in the motif of the fences as the terrain on which the struggle between Michael and “the Castle” is played out in the novel.

Fences are not only the means by which the camp is separated from its surroundings. Even more importantly they reproduce camp logic outside the camps, spreading it over the entire land; thus, when Michael climbs the camp fence and escapes, he wonders that “every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway” (97). In front of the law, which not only legitimates the existence of fences but does actually coincide with their very existence, Michael is always already guilty and sacer, like K in Kafka’s Trial. But he, who cannot imagine himself “spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land” (97), does not engage in a direct attempt to abolishes fences. His strategy is aimed rather at making them inoperative by cutting off their bond with the law, which is centred around the issue of property; as the farmer for whom Michael is forced to work while imprisoned in the Jakkalsdirf camp clearly states: “You should go into fencing. There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what. If you carry stock, you need fences: it’s as simple as that” (95). Making fences inoperative implies therefore deactivating the logic of separation, looking out for possibly undivided spaces in-between: “he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see” (47). For the interpretative approach I am trying to develop here, it is crucial to juxtapose this last sentence with a passage I quoted above—“I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too”. It is not that, at the end of the novel, Michael renounces “flying high” in favour of “lying low”; “flying high” and “lying low” are, on the contrary, the paradoxically co-existing strategies of Michael’s topopolitical dissensus.

“The idea of gardening”

Returning to Agamben terminology, we can understand Michael’s “corners, angles and corridors between the fences” in the terms of that “central emptiness” which must be shown as the place where all separations and articulations are called into question. For both Agamben and Michael K/Coetzee, the possibility of a different form of life (and politics) for human beings is essentially related to the opening and maintenance of this kind of

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30Ibid., 33.
31Head, 103.
32Rousseau’s discussion of property in part 2 of the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality begins with the image of putting up a fence and enclosing the land.
33Michael also reports this as a fantasy from his childhood: “I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences.” (133)
place. But how could this weird space of forgotten corners, angles and corridors—a space accessible through the paradoxical combination of lying low and flying high—look like? Michael K is conscious of the difficulty of answering this question and compares himself to an ant that “does not know where its hole is” (83). After his first arrival at the Karoo farm, he imagines it as “one of those islands without an owner”, but the arrival of the owners’ grandson disillusiones him: “Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson” (61). So it is not a matter of free islands or liberated territories; spatial metaphors may become misleading at this point, or at least we should see them as topological paradoxes, as the medical officer understands while drawing his conclusions about K’s behaviour: “The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. [...] It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road” (166).

The word “garden” comes from Old High German “gard” (related to the Slavic “grad”), which was used to refer to a delimited, enclosed place, seemingly bringing us back to the logic of the fences and the camp. A garden which is “nowhere and everywhere except in the camp” is essentially a non-garden.34 We must therefore renounce the concept of the garden as a place and concentrate on what Michael/Coetzee defines as the “idea of gardening”. What is at stake here is not localization (gardens), but a way of being (gardening): “the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself [...] It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth, the truth about me. ‘I am a gardener’, he said again, aloud” (181–2). Michael K differs from Kafka’s K precisely as a gardener differs from a land surveyor: both relate to land and space, but while the latter measures its limits, the former inscribes into it a new kind of activity. Gardening is, in other words, Michael’s way of risking himself within the Agambenian central emptiness (the forgotten spaces “between the fences” of the novel).

So, what is gardening? A possible answer, the one that is relevant here, could define gardening as that kind of activity which deactivates horticulture and makes it inoperative by renouncing its ends (the production of food for nurturance or profit) while keeping its means (the cultivation of plants). Gardening is horticulture liberated and suspended from its economy, that operativity which subjects human praxis to alienating ends. Reverting to Agamben’s definition of inoperativity, we can describe gardening as “a pure means [...] a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end”.35 This kind of emancipation goes beyond simple refusal: “Inoperativity is not left here to its own devices but instead becomes the opening, the ‘open-sesame’, that leads to a new possible use.”36 In Michael’s life, the “idea of gardening” as inoperativity invests three fundamental spheres of human praxis: dwellings, tools and the body. It is not a coincidence that these are all places essentially marked by issues of property, appropriation and appropriateness.

34Coetzee thus states that Michael “can’t hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of South Africa has been surveyed and mapped and disposed of. So, despite K’s desire, the opposition that the garden provides to the camps is at most at a conceptual level.” (Morphet, 456).
35Agamben, Profanations, 86.
36Agamben, “Glorious Body,” 100.
Dwellings: “It is not for the house that I have come”

I have already considered Michael’s aspiration to live outside of all camps. But where does he actually dwell when he is not in a camp? All those places seem to share a certain “inappropriateness”, which means, in our terms, an emancipation from their ordinary ends or uses. The room where Michael looks after his mother at the beginning of the novel and where he returns at the end is a place intended for air-conditioning equipment with the sign of a skull and crossbones on the door (6). For a few days he and his mother move to the flat of the Buhrmanns—where Michael’s mother used to do her cleaning work—after it had been plundered and abandoned by the owners, with windows and furniture broken and garbage everywhere, having thus lost its function as a home. This is the reason why Michael decides to move in, transforming the bathroom into a bedroom (15). In a similar way, when he reaches the Karoo farm for the first time and settles in the abandoned house, he makes his bed in the kitchen “where he could at least see stars through the hole in the roof” (58). On his way to the farm and after leaving it for the first time, he stops in the scrub, in an alley, under a railway bridge and an overhang, in a bungalow with shattered windows and the door broken off its hinges, in a hulk of car with the back seat removed, in the bed of the children of a stranger offering him shelter for the night, and in a mountain cave (26, 27, 33, 38, 45, 49 and 66).

When he returns to the farm he decides to avoid the house, making at last explicit the meaning of the inoperativity of proper dwelling places and the transformation (new use) of non-dwelling places into places to live in, which recurs insistently in the novel. On his first stay at the farm, he could sleep in the abandoned house, but “he was not at ease there” (58)—an uneasiness which gets explained by the arrival of the owners’ grandson. Although the house was already inoperative as a proper dwelling place, it continue to be operative as a source of separation and property. When he returns to the farm, it is clear to him that “whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies [the owners of the farm] lived, sleep where they slept, sit on their stoep looking out over their land. […] It is not for the house that I have come” (98). “Not to live as the Visagies” does not simply mean to refuse the position of servant, that their way of living reserved for a person like Michael; far more, it means to deactivate the mechanism of appropriation as a whole: “the worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line” (104).

This is why he decides to build for himself a burrow that would be impossible to distinguish from the surrounding landscape. Eric Paul Meljac reads this episode in the light of a Heideggerean “poetic of dwelling” as opposed to “commodity-driven housing”.37 I am rather suggesting to see Michael’s choice as an act of depropriation which, far from ending Michael’s vagrancy with the beginning of his sedentary life, works as an embodiment of that very same vagrancy:

I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations. What I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heart-strings. So that if ever they find this place or its ruins, and shake their heads and say to each other: What shiftless creatures, how little pride they took in their work!, it will not matter. (101)

37 Meljac, 72
Only after he has made the logic of dwelling with its property (nothing to pass on) and appropriateness (a makeshift) inoperative, can Michael start to consider the place where he is living in the terms of a “home”: “He felt at home at the dam as he had never felt in the house” (99).

**Tools: “Materials the insects would eat”**

This kind of (non)relation with dwelling is doubled in the novel by Michael’s (non) relation with objects. Inoperativity manifests itself here at first sight as *bricolage*. According to Derrida’s reading of Levi-Strauss the *bricoleur* is someone who uses “things which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used”;38 this can be paraphrased in the terms of Agamben’s creative understanding of inoperativity: “the creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.”39 Michael can be described as a *bricoleur* who deactivates old uses of things by emancipating them from their end and making them into the means for a new use. Thus, with a wheelbarrow, gardener’s hand-tools, an old crate, his bicycle and a steel rod he makes up a barrow to carry his sick mother (10, 16). At the farm he combines a stick, the tongue of an old shoe and strips of rubber from an inner tube into a catapult to kill birds (57). And he builds his burrow with fence posts, an iron sheet, slabs of stone, mud, dry grass and gravel (100).

But Michael’s way of making things inoperative goes further than *bricolage*, because it does not lead to their “re-appropriation” neither can it be attributed any mythopoetic function. Michael relates to objects rather, and, once again, in the modality of depropriation, so that it is not only appropriateness (as in *bricolage*), but also appropriation and property that are made inoperative in his relation to objects. This materializes during Michael’s journey to the Karoo farm, when he loses, abandons and gives away all that he had brought from Cape Town. When he arrives at the farm he has nothing other than a parcel containing his mother’s ashes, which he distributes over the earth. After he leaves the farm for the second time, a little bag with a few pumpkin seeds represents his only “possession” until the end of the novel. It is particularly while he is living at the farm that Michael’s way of making things inoperative and liberating them for a new use appears as depropriation and decreation: “Even his tools should be of wood and leather and gut, materials the insects would eat when one day he no longer needed them” (104). Means (the tools) are here conceived as completely coincident with the sphere of their use and the condition of possibility for their appropriation (that is their subsistence outside use) is cut off and deactivated.

**Body: “You are like a stick insect”**

Michael’s body occupies a central position in the novel. Scholars have often commented on the possible meanings of his harelip, the causes and consequences of his malnutrition, his unwillingness to work, and other related issues. However, there exists no systematic attempt to correlate the study of these disparate aspects into a complex understanding

38Derrida, 360.
39Agamben, Profanations, 86.
of Michael’s attitude towards life that would avoid the logic of suffering and victimization. The notion of inoperativity as a condition of possibility for a different use offers us precious theoretical tools for elaborating such an understanding.

Agamben’s recent volume *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* ends with a reflection on earlier attempts by Franciscans to conceptualize a human praxis beyond property. Such praxis, Agamben explains, changes not merely our relations with goods, but also, and more importantly, our relation with life itself: “the forma vivendi of the Friars Minor is […] that life which maintains itself in relation, not only to things, but even to itself in the mode of inappropriability and of the refusal of the very idea of a will of one’s own”.

But what does it mean for a life to be appropriated and what does it mean for it to maintain itself in the modality of inappropriability? Within the Agambenian theoretical framework I am employing here, the appropriation of life can be understood as the ultimate task of biopower, meaning the total set of mechanisms, or the “economy”, by which power subjects life to alienating ends for the production, conservation and transmission of value. Such biopolitical operativity conflates appropriation and appropriateness: appropriate are those ways of using the body (disposing of our lives) that aim to produce, transmit and maintain value. Michael’s ways of using his body are absolutely inappropriate insofar as they make inoperative the economy of life appropriation, thus affirming its inappropriability in a form of life which “decreases” values. Coetzee’s novel thematizes this in Michael’s (non)relations with: work (production of value); progeny (transmission of value); and nutrition (conservation of value).

**Work and Idleness**

The novel begins with Michael quitting his work in order to leave Cape Town. Later on work becomes related to captivity. The first two times when he is arrested and assigned to a labour gang and the resettlement camp, he repeats his Bartleby-like question “Why have I got to work here?”, “I don’t want to work. Why do I have to work?” (42, 85).

Living at the farm he learns to love “idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour […] but as a yielding up of himself to time” (115). Idleness is not just praised in opposition to work. Rather, the non-relatedness of idleness with labour makes work inoperative: “He was neither pleased nor displeased when there was work to do; it was all the same” (115). That this deactivation of work implies the emancipation of human activities from their end as production of values becomes evident in Michael’s (non)relation with time: “He had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon. He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out” (115). Michael’s idleness not only makes both work and the measurement of time inoperative; far more than that, it cuts off that relation between work and the measurement of time which is the very formula of value. Idleness does not lead to inactivity here, but rather it marks the inappropriability of life through the subjection of the body to work for the production of values.

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40 Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 140.
41 The Marxist (economic) and Nietzschean (moral) understanding and critique of value do therefore strictly interrelate here.
42 Michael is in this respect the diametric opposite of Robinson Crusoe, the *homo economicus* par excellence, and Coetzee’s description of Michael’s idleness is an inverted image of Marx’s description of Robinson’s industriousness: “This our friend
“No desire to father”

The logic of reproduction and progeny is similarly made inoperative by Michael who imagines himself as “a child from a line of children without end” (117, 124) and explicitly questions the will to paternity: “How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling […] it is a good thing that I, who have nothing to pass on, should be spending my time here” (104–5). The inoperativity of reproduction and progeny is here directly related to the deactivation of the mechanisms for the transmission of value. While I have just described Michael as an “anti-Robinson”, Paul Franssen has shown how his renunciation of “dynastic ambitions” makes him into the reversal of Vergil’s Aeneas. Fleeing the “burning city” with no wife, father nor sons but only a dying mother, he makes the appropriation of life (patria potestas) through reproduction and progeny inoperative along with the patrilinear motif of the conquest, government and people of the land.

“Camp food” and the “bread of freedom”

One of the most enigmatic aspects of Coetzee’s novel is Michael’s attitude towards nutrition and its consequences on his body. Most of the analyses of the novel ignore this issue, while some interpret it as the sign of all Michael’s “deprivations” and others relate it to Coetzee’s animalist or ecologist ethic. I will instead consider Michael’s progressive renunciation of food as the most radical way of making inoperative the biopolitical mechanisms for the appropriation of life.

Nutrition can be understood as the means for the conservation of value through the physiological maintenance of the body, which is the condition sine qua non for both the production (work) and the transmission (progeny) of value. Michael’s refusal of eating is therefore not simply a revolt against captivity and the camps, even if the second part of the novel may suggest such an interpretation. Michael’s attitude towards food is rather a constitutive element of his form of life. Instead of a hunger strike, which interrupts nutrition for a while with a specific demand in view, we should speak of hunger inoperativity, which deactivates the whole mechanism by which power appropriates life through the subjection of the body to the conservation of value. This is why it is actually not in the camps, but on his way to and while living at the farm that Michael develops his vocation of non-eater. Let us reconstruct this progressive deactivation of hunger in the novel.

Robinson soon learns by experience, and having rescued a watch, ledger, and pen and ink from the wreck, commences, like a true-born Briton, to keep a set of books. His stock-book contains a list of the objects of utility that belong to him, of the operations necessary for their production; and lastly, of the labour-time that definite quantities of those objects have, on an average, cost him.” (Capital, 169).

43Franssen, 459; see also Atwell, 94–7.
44Wright, Laura, 91.
45E.g., Renders.
46Thus, according to Marx, the commodification of the producer through the separation of his/her function as worker from his/her individual life, reduces him/her to “a stomach” which needs to be filled (Manuscripts 19–34; 86–7; 118–19).
47To the insistence of the medical officer, who wants to feed him, Michael answers that he “can’t eat camp food” whence the medical officer concludes that “He just doesn’t like the food here. […] Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom” (146) hinting also at the possible official classification of Michael’s behaviour as a “hunger strike”.

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The beginning of Michael’s life is marked, on the first page of Coetzee’s novel, by his physical defect (the harelip), which determines his problematic relation with nutrition: “The child could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger. She [Michael’s mother] tried a bottle; when it could not suck from the bottle she fed it with a teaspoon, fretting with impatience when he coughed and spluttered and cried” (3). Hunger also haunts Michael’s infancy: “As a child K had been hungry, like all the children at Huis Norenius. Hunger had turned them into animals who stole from one another’s plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings” (68). This is probably why food attracts his attention in a peculiar way. We follow, for instance, Michael paging through magazines in the flat abandoned by his mother’s employers, looking at pictures of “beautiful women and luscious food” and discovering that “the food absorbed him more deeply” (16).

The narration of Michael’s journey to the farm is marked by continuous references to hunger and his more and more frugal, but precisely described meals.48 The journey is a kind of transitional moment when the operativity of nutrition starts to lose its grip on Michael; thus if, on the one hand, he was trying “to live off the veld but for the main part going hungry” (49), on the other hand, “He had not eaten for two days; however, there seemed no limit to his endurance” (35). When he arrives at the farm house and discovers some goats he still thinks that they “have to be caught, killed, cut up and eaten if he hoped to live” (52), but after killing one of them something changes: “the urgency of the hunger that had possessed him yesterday was gone” (55) and, for the first time, he is said to “eat without pleasure” (56). This is the moment in the novel when the process of making nutrition inoperative becomes irreversible. After that, Michael lives on small birds killed with his catapult and sows his pumpkins. When the grandson of the farm owners appears, he begins his attempt at making Michael into a servant by complaining that “there is nothing to eat!” (62). After fleeing the farm and while living in the mountains, the process of deactivating hunger is accomplished by Michael’s active engagement: “he felt hungry, but did nothing about it. Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (66). Thus, he ceases “to make an adventure of eating and drinking” and wonders “if he were living in what was known as bliss” (68). At the end of the period in the mountains (whose length remains a mystery because he did not keep a record of the passage of the days), “he could keep nothing down; even water made him retch” (69).

The return of Michael’s hunger corresponds with the end of freedom, when he is interned in a hospital and later on in the Jakkalsdrift camp. This is described by Coetzee in the terms of a new subjection: “Smelling the food, he felt the saliva seep in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again; but a hospital, it seemed, was a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their right” (71). It is through Michael’s hunger, which restores the operativity of nutrition, that power re-appropriates his life; as the hospital worker carrying the food trolley enigmatically explains: “Eat while you can, the great hunger is still to come” (72). Thus, when he is transferred to the camp, Michael’s first

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48Tea and biscuits actually destined for his mother at the hospital; doughnuts and pies; beans and powdered milk bought with the last of his money; worm-eaten fruits lying in an apple orchard; half-grown carrots pulled out of the earth; crushed mealies and bonemeal from a feeding trough; a chicken pie; and a meal of soup and pan-bread offered by benevolent strangers.
worry is getting something to eat: “He spoke to the policeman in the van. […] ’I didn’t ask to come here. Now, where must I get food?’ ” And the policeman closes the circle by reasserting the operativity of biopolitical economy as a whole: “This isn’t a jail, this is a camp, you work for your food like everyone else in the camp” (77).

After escaping the camp and returning to the Karoo farm, Michael starts again the process of deactivating hunger; he eats insects and roots and “his own need for food grew slighter and slighter. Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die” (101). The end of Michael’s second stay at the farm redoubles the end of his stay in the mountains insofar as nutrition is once again fully inoperative: “He had no appetite; eating, picking up things and forcing them down his gullet into his body, seemed a strange activity.” (119).

A fundamental change occurs instead between Michael’s alimentary behaviour at the first (Jakkalsdriff) and the second (Kenilworth) camps. While at Jakkalsdriff hunger returns him to biopolitical operativity, at Kenilworth he obstinately refuses to eat, thus escaping both camp life with its marches, singing and other physical activities, and the charitable attempts of the medical officer to rehabilitate him. Resisting hunger, Michael deconstructs the biopolitical mechanism through which the rehabilitation camp re-appropriates lives to the production, conservation and transmission of value. Thus, when Michael escapes the camp, the medical officer cannot but witness the impossibility of what has happened: “For two weeks he has eaten nothing whatever. […] I am amazed he had the strength to stand up and walk; it is a miracle that he climbed the wall” (156).

The New Uses of Michael’s Inoperative Body

Making inoperative the appropriation of life by power, that is, the subjection of the body to the production, conservation and transmission of value, Michael opens up Agamben’s “central emptiness” in its impropriety and inappropriability or, in other words, its commonness. Michael’s way of risking himself in that emptiness implies a transformation of his body into a place through which inoperativity may turn into a new, different use. Such embodied inoperativity is described throughout the second half of the novel as bodily lightness , insubstantiality and impassibility. These properties closely resemble three of the qualities—subtlety, agility and impassibility—that the theological tradition attributes to the body of the resurrected in Paradise and that Agamben considers in an essay entitled “The Glorious Body” as a paradigmatic instance of inoperativity. Contrary to what scholars usually state about Michael’s physical condition, the glorious body is not inert: “It is not potentiality that is deactivated in inoperativity but only the aims and modalities into which its exercise had been inscribed and separated. And it is this potentiality

49 “His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly.” (102); “So light now that he could not even be sure his feet were touching the ground.” (180)
50 “he felt as insubstantial as air” (58); “He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of the earth.” (97)
51 “Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought” (48); “He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone.” (135)
52 Impassibility means that the body is not subjected to “disordered passions,” subtlety is “a sort of extreme rarefaction,” and agility implies “effortless and uninhibited movement” (Agamben, Glorious Body, 94–5).
that can now become the organ of a new possible use, the organ of a body whose organicity has been suspended and rendered inoperative.\textsuperscript{53}

The new possible use of Michael’s impassible, subtle, agile body is immediately related to his extraordinary ability to climb walls and go through camp fences without any problem, whenever he decides to do it; as the medical officer explains, “Michael is gone [...] the wire does not seem to have been cut; but then Michael is enough of a wraith to slip through anything” (154). Michael’s bodily inoperativity is therefore the condition of possibility for that topopolitical dissensus, which allows him to live out of all camps while escaping charity. The alliance of apparently opposite “air” (lightness, insubstantiality) and “stone” (impassibility) in Michael’s inoperative body constitutes in this respect the ground for the two inseparable strategies, “flying high” and “lying low”, of topopolitical dissensus described above.

Following Gordimer,\textsuperscript{54} we could described this as Michael’s “negative freedom”. But the new use which Michael’s inoperative body manifests when “slipping through anything” does not stop there; it also becomes the premise for its new uses in the “areas that belong to no camps”, the “corners, angles and corridors between fences” exemplified in the novel by the veld around the Karoo farm. To describe these we have to go back to the idea of gardening as the paradigm of the subsistence of means as liberated from their ends, and ask: what in fact becomes of work, progeny and nutrition after they have been made inoperative, that is, after the deactivation of the mechanisms by which they were subjected to the production, conservation, transmission of value? There remains, we could say with Agamben, playfulness, joy and pleasure, or all that scholars usually refuse to recognize as possible elements of Michael’s condition. I will, in concluding, try to sort them out from his “miserable” life.

Within the sphere of activity in which Michael’s idleness has made production inoperative, work may become invested with passion and pleasure, which are related in the novel to Michael’s bricolagistic enterprises. Thus, after starting the building of the wheelbarrow “he barely ate or slept that night, so impatient was he to get on with his work” (18); this is repeated before he starts to make up his burrow in the veld: “Wrapped in the black coat he clenched his jaw and waited for dawn, aching after the pleasures of digging and planting he had promised himself, impatient to be through with the business of making a dwelling” (99). But it is particularly in growing the pumpkins and the melons that the operativity of production is substituted by the joyfulness of Michael’s work:

\begin{quote}
His deepest pleasure came at sunset when he turned open the cock at the dam wall and watched the stream of water run down its channels to soak the earth, turning it from fawn to deep brown. It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because it is my nature [...] A fit of exultation would pass through him at the thought that he, alone and unknown, was making this deserted farm bloom.” (59)
\end{quote}

Michael’s enjoyment of his work is clearly related to the fact that gardening has detached cultivation from its end (the production of value) and opened it to a new use as a pure means. When he and the thirty pumpkins are discovered, soldiers immediately try to reinstate the operativity of production, looking for an explanation of Michael’s activity which would also allow them to identify him—“who were these vegetables for? Who

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{54}Gordimer, 143.
did you give them to?”, to which he simply answers: “They weren’t mine. They came from the earth”, “What grows is for all of us” (139).

Michael plays in a similar way with the deactivated logic of progeny, imagining the pumpkins and melons as his “children” that he must help to raise: “he did not know what he would do if he lost his two beloved melons” (117). Just like a caring parent, he makes his bed one night in the middle of the field, besides his children, to protect them from animals. Playing with his inoperative progeny is the only way for Michael to invest “communitarian life” with passion and pleasure. Parental love, we could say, becomes truly possible only when reproduction as the mechanism through which life is appropriated and subjected to the transmission of value is made inoperative and opened up to a new use.

As for nutrition, the issue is not simply that Michael does not eat camp food because he is hungry for another kind of food (“the food of freedom”), as the medical officer has it. Far more, deactivating hunger as a mechanism for the appropriation of life, Michael makes possible a new use of nutrition which is invested with pleasure and joy—as we can read in the beautiful description of his ritual eating of the first ripened pumpkin, his “firstborn”:

On the wire grid he had made he laid the strips of pumpkin over a bed of coals […] The fragrance of the burning flesh rose into the sky. Speaking the words he had been taught, directing them no longer upward but to the earth on which he knelt, he prayed: “For what we are about to receive make us truly thankful”. With two wire skewers he turned the strips, and in mid-act felt his heart suddenly flow over with thankfulness. It was exactly as they had described it, like a gush of warm water. […] He lifted the first strip to his mouth. Beneath the crisply charred skin the flesh was soft and juicy. He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes. The best, he thought, the very best pumpkin I have tasted. For the first time since he arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating. The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight. He moved the grid off the coals and took a second slice. His teeth bit though the crust into the soft hot pulp. Such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else. And what perfection it would be with a pinch of salt—with a pinch of salt and a dab of butter, and a sprinkling of sugar, and a little cinnamon scattered over the top! Eating the third slice, and the fourth and the fifth […] K wallowed in the recollection of the flavours of salt, butter, sugar, cinnamon, one by one. (114)

**Dissensus as Inoperativity: The Engaging Withdrawal of Michael K.**

This article was conceived as an attempt to “rescue” Michael K from the interpretative grid of the “ethical turn” with its conformist understanding of politics and its consensual logic. The undecidability surrounding the articulation between “life” and “times” of Michael does not need to be interpreted as a consequence of the unrepresentable obscurity of the “wholly other”; it can instead be understood as originating from that clash of incompatible worlds which Rancière calls dissensus. This brings about a conceptual reversal from the ethical—the inaccessible separateness of absolute alterity, to the political—the deactivation of separations and the restitution of the separated to what Agamben calls the sphere of pure means and its common use.

A major problem of this interpretative approach lies in the fact that the ground of dissensus in the novel is not what we would expect from a Rancièrean theoretical standpoint: a particular wrong issuing from the unjust criteria of inclusion and exclusion which
structures a given social order. As a matter of fact, Michael declines to present any specific demand, to claim any right, because he very well knows that, as soon as he does so, he will be captured by the consensual logic of the camp or of charity. Thus, while one of the benvolent characters of the novel tries to get some demand out of him—“It is difficult to be kind to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it” (179)—Michael is said to have stopped wanting from his very childhood (68).

The “injustice” which Michael, silently and invisibly, contests is not a determined social wrong (hence the difficulty in reading the novel as an engaged intervention in 1980s South Africa), but the whole biopolitical economy of partition and separation (property, appropriation, appropriateness) which grounds power in the novel. This is why I have tried to describe Michael’s dissensus as “topolitical”, expressed as it is in his (non)relations to real and ideal (ideological) spaces and in his way of turning these (non)relations into a different form of life grounded on “the idea of gardening”. While this has often been interpreted as Michael’s voluntary exclusion from society and history, thus opposing Michael’s “withdrawal” to political engagement, I have drawn on Agamben’s concept of inoperativity to demonstrate the political relevance of Michael’s outsideness. Michael’s inoperativity is not left to its own devices, but opens up the space where his radical refusal gets embodied in a different kind of human praxis. The fact that his wish to be “outside of all the camps” is not accompanied by an attempt to fight out a recognized social position, his own place within the existent system, does not therefore imply Michael’s political failure in engaging power. On the contrary, it is exactly his withdrawal, his attempt at making his bare life into a form-of-life completely subtracted from the biopolitical economy, that represents—even, one could argue, in spite of Michael’s own will—the most radical way of engaging power, as the novel’s axis of camps constantly reminds us.

Thus, instead of opposing withdrawal to engagement or inoperativity to dissensus, the problematic outcomes of Michael’s extraordinary experience call rather for an effort to think of withdrawal with engagement and inoperativity with dissensus. A “call to thinking” is of course something very different from the elaboration of the strategy for action or the political agenda which many critics seem to expect from a writer like Coetzee. Michael’s lucid self-critical reflection on his failure at the end of the novel gives us a first clue about two fundamental aspects which need to be considered in the attempt to stay committed to Michael’s legacy while avoiding its evident shortcomings. These are the temporal duration and the collective dimension of what I finally suggest to call “dissensual inoperativity” or “engaging withdrawal”. Which would be the instruments for not only opening but also enlarging and keeping open the space(s) for gardening while camps have not ceased and, with the utmost probability, will not cease to exist? This is where not only Michael’s life and Coetzee’s novel, but also Rancière’s and Agamben’s understandings of emancipatory politics still seem to fall short and urgently need conceptual integration.

References


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