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The Idea of Gardening

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The Life and Times of Michael K

by J.M. Coetzee

Viking, 184 pp., \$13.95

Allegory is generally regarded as a superior literary form. It is thought to clear the reader's lungs of the transient and fill them with a deep breath of transcendence. Man becomes Everyman (that bore).

From the writer's point of view, allegory is no more than one among other forms. But I believe there is a distinction between the writer's conscious choice of it, and its choice of him/her. In the first instance, loosened by time from ancient sources of myth, magic, and morality, allegory is sometimes snatched from the air to bear aloft a pedestrian imagination or to distance the writer, for reasons of his own, from his subject. In the second instance, allegory is a *discovered* dimension, the emergence of a meaning not aimed for by the writer but present once the book is written.

J.M. Coetzee, a writer with an imagination that soars like a lark and sees from up there like an eagle, chose allegory for his first few novels. It seemed he did so out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as a stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. He seemed able to deal with the horror he saw written on the sun¹ only—if brilliantly—if this were to be projected into another time and plane. His *Waiting for the Barbarians* was the North Pole to which the agitprop of agonized black writers (and some white ones hitching a lift to the bookmart on the armored car) was the South Pole; a world to be dealt with lies in between. It is the life and times of Michael K, and Coetzee has taken it up now.

Michael K (the initial probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka) is not Everyman. In fact he is marked out, from birth, by a harelip indelibly described as curled like a snail's foot. His mother is a servant in Cape Town, which means he is a so-called coloured, and he grows up fatherless in a home for handicapped children. His deformity distorts his speech and his actual and self-images. He shrinks from the difficulty of communication through words and the repugnance he sees holding him off, in people's eyes; thus he appears to be, and perhaps is, retarded—one of those unclassifiable beings that fascinated Dostoevsky, a "simple."

He is suitably employed as a gardener by the municipality of Cape Town. A civil war has been going on for an unspecified time—as such wars do, undeclared and unending—and in various parts of the country—as such wars are waged in our time, Michael K's time—with roving destruction missing patches of stranded calm. Michael is no more aware of this war than of much else in society that ignores him (women, the possibility of friends), until his mother is dying of dropsy and neglect in an overcrowded hospital and begs to be taken "home" to the farm in the near-desert country of the Karoo where she was born the child of laborers.

She and her purse of savings are taken on the road in a wheelbarrow shelter put together by her simple son. Turned back the first time because of lack of permits, set upon by thugs as desperately homeless as themselves, they do not get very far before the mother dies. A purpose for his apparently unnecessary continued existence coheres slowly in Michael K's mind: he will take his mother's ashes, presented to him as a brown paper parcel, to be buried at the "home" she spoke of. He finds it, or what may be it, abandoned by the white owners; the coloured laborers no doubt long ago moved off the land under one of the schemes to herd blacks away from whites that were the beginnings of the war.

He lives there in the veld, sowing and tending a handful of pumpkin seeds, until frightened off by the arrival of an army deserter; is picked up and commandeered for a forced labor camp; returns to the farm, which is visited by guerrillas from whom he conceals himself only to be captured, starving, by the army. Interrogated as the guerrillas' suspected contact man, he is kept in the makeshift hospital of a "rehabilitation" camp for captured rebels set up on a former race course in Cape Town. One night he disappears from his bed and is given up as lying dead somewhere beyond the walls.

But Michael K is alive. Fled—yet again—from the sinister care of a gang of beach nomads who dispense to him, out of pity, wine and sex (travesty of untasted joys), he is holed up among abandoned beach furniture in the apartment where his mother once worked.

I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too.

The mistake I made, he thought, going back in time, was not to have had plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket. Then my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch. I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of ve in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me at all times so that every night I could make a tour of t sites to water them.

This, then, is the simple story of a "simple" man. And it begins unexceptionally, anybody's refugee plodding predictably away from hunger and homelessness without much hope that these will not be waiting again at the end of the journey. You can shake your head decently over yet another evocation of commonplace misery; the only particular reaction, this time, a slight sense of impatience—did it all have to be laid on so thick? Does the man have to be harelipped, etc., on top of everything else?

But Coetzee's mode, from the beginning, is soon seen to have arisen solely out of the needs of content, and is purely and perfectly achieved. As the reader is drawn into the novel there comes the extraordinarily rare occurrence of one's response to its events opening

up along with that of the central character himself. This is the reverse of facile identification, a prehensile comprehension stirs to take hold where the grasp of familiarity doesn't reach. A fellow inmate of the labor camp says to Michael K, "You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up." For the reader, too.

It is here that allegorical symbols occur. The work speaks: a voice inside the reader. Michael K is a real human being experiencing an individual body, but for some of us he will be the whole black people of South Africa, whatever gradations of color the South African Population Registration Act sorts them into; for some he will be the inmate of Auschwitz or Stalin's camps. Others will see the split lip and strangled speech as the distortion of personality that South African race laws have effected, one way or another, in all of us who live there, black and white. Similarly, white privilege may be seen to come to its end in one of Coetzee's implosive images, when the white guard's portable refrigerator is smashed and its contents spilled—"a tub of margarine, a loop of sausage, loose peaches and onions five bottles of beer."

The abstraction of allegory and symbol will not give access to what is most important in this magnificent novel, however. Neither will seeing it as a vision of the future. If it is set ahead in time at all, then this is done as a way of looking, as if it had come to the surface, at what lies under the surface of the present. The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and "resettlement" camps. A civil war is going on in 1984 on South Africa's borders, between black and white, and bombings by underground liberation movements within the country have caused R508 millions = of damage in five years. Coetzee has won (or lost?) his inner struggle and now writes, from among the smell of weary flesh, a work of the closest and deepest engagement with the victimized people of Michael K's life and times.

Political statements are made implicitly through the situations and reactions of Michael K that have no obvious political meaning. The deserter who comes to the farm is the grandson of the white farmer from Michael's mother's girlhood: Visagie's descendant and that of his laborer are living a parallel life now that the old structure is destroyed, one a fugitive from duty within the army that hunts and kills, the other fugitive from its pursuit. In the presence of the two on the farm is contained the core of tenure—this is the land that was taken by conquest, and then by deeds of sale that denied blacks the right even to buy back what had been taken from them. Can't the fugitives accommodate each other? Neither knows how to do this outside the ghostly pattern of master-servant. So Michael instinctively runs; and when he returns to find the boy has gone, he does not even then move into the Visagie house.

When he articulates the reason, it comes not as from an author's mouthpiece, but as what lies developing inside Michael, unsaid, unable to be shaped by his misformed lip. "Whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived, sleep where they slept, sit on their stoep looking out over their land. It is not for the house that I have come. The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings." (His hidden pumpkins.) Here is the concrete expression, through the creative imagination, of political debate about the future of South Africa under black majority rule: whether or not it should take over what has been the white South African version of the capitalist system.

Yet the unique and controversial aspect of this work is that while it is implicitly and highly political, Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it. That is clear not only in the person of Michael K, but in other characters, for example the white doctor and nurse in the "rehabilitation" camp, who are "living in suspension," although for the woman, washing sheets, time is as full with such tasks as it has ever been, and for the doctor it is a state of being "alive but not alive," while for both "history hesitated over what course it should take." No one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining that course; no one is shown to believe he knows what that course should be. The sense is of the ultimate malaise: of destruction. Not even the oppressor really believes in what he is doing, anymore, let alone the revolutionary.

1. "But wait till you can see HORROR, / my child, written on the sun."—Friston, the missionary, in South Africa. In William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (Hogarth Press, 1965). [↵](#)
2. "According to figures presented to the white parliament by the [South African] Defence Minister, General Magnus Malan, the bombings have caused about R508 million [\$ 432 million] damage in 5 years."—Joseph Lelyveld, *New York Times* correspondent, "ANC Presence Will Be Increasingly Felt," the Johannesburg *Star*, November 3, 1983. [↵](#)