

Books by J. M. Coetzee

Foe

**Life & Times of Michael K
Waiting for the Barbarians
In the Heart of the Country
Dusklands**

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White Writing

*On the Culture of Letters
in South Africa*

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Idleness in South Africa

The local natives have everything in common with the dumb cattle, barring their human nature. . . . [They] are handicapped in their speech, clucking like turkey-cocks or like the people of Alpine Germany who have developed goitre by drinking the hard snow-water. . . . Their food consists of herbs, cattle, wild animals and fish. The animals are eaten together with their internal organs. Having been shaken out a little, the intestines are not washed, but as soon as the animal has been slaughtered or discovered, these are eaten raw, skin and all. . . . A number of them will sleep together in the veld, making no difference between men and women. . . . They all smell fiercely, as can be noticed at a distance of more than twelve feet against the wind, and they also give the appearance of never having washed.

The above observations on the Hottentots of the Cape of Good Hope were compiled in 1652—the year of European settlement of the Cape—by the Amsterdam publishing house of Jodocus Hondius, from travellers' reports (Hondius 26–28). Through its display of footnotes, its maps, its engravings of Hottentots in

exemplary poses, Hondius's little book seems to wish to emphasize that it is no work of fantasy: everything it records has truly been witnessed. Within the limits of the veracious, however, the picture it presents of the Hottentots is a selective one. The facts we read about them are above all remarkable facts, selected by the writers of the original reports from the mass of impressions they received at the Cape for being remarkable, and picked out in turn by Hondius because they seem likely to strike the man in the street in the same way.

In the early records one finds a repertoire of remarkable facts about the Hottentots repeated again and again: their implosives ("turkey-gobbling"), their eating of unwashed intestines, their use of animal fat to smear their bodies, their habit of wrapping dried entrails around their necks, peculiarities of the pudenda of their women, their inability to conceive of God, their incorrigible indolence. Though many of these items are merely copied from one book to another, we must believe that in some cases they were rediscovered or confirmed at first hand. They constitute some of the more obvious *differences* between the Hottentot and the West European, or at least the West European as he imagined himself to be.

Yet while they are certainly differences, these items are perceived and conceived within a framework of *samenesses*, a framework that derives from the generally accepted thesis enunciated at the opening of the extract from Hondius above: that although the Hottentots may seem to be no more than beasts, they are in fact men. Hottentot society being a human society, it must be amenable to description within a framework common to all human societies. The categories and subcategories of this framework will constitute samenesses extending across all societies. They will be the universals, while particular observations inserted in the various slots will constitute the differentia that mark particular societies.

Although the framework of categories within which the travel writers operate is nowhere explicitly set forth by them, it is not hard to extract it from their texts. The list is something like the following:

1. Physical appearance
2. Dress: (a) clothing, (b) ornamentation, (c) cosmetics
3. Diet: (a) foodstuffs, (b) cuisine
4. Medicine
5. Crafts: (a) handicrafts, (b) implements
6. Technics
7. Weapons
8. Defence and warfare
9. Recreations
10. Customs
11. Habitation: (a) dwellings, (b) village layout
12. Religion (including superstition, witchcraft, magic)
13. Laws
14. Economy
15. Government
16. Foreign relations
17. Trade
18. Language
19. Character

Though the number of categories employed may not be nineteen in each case, behind each of the discourses called "Account of the Hottentots" or "Description of the Hottentots" exists some such grid. At its most immediate level, the grid functions as a compositional aid, giving a form of arrangement to the data. But at another level the grid functions as a conceptual scheme, and as such creates the danger that observations may be deformed to fit into one slot or another when they "really" cut across the categories, or that things that belong in no preconceived slot will simply not be seen. Thus—to give hypothetical examples—observations of drug-induced trances and prophecies might fall under Medicine or Religion or (possibly) Law or Government, but decidedly not under all four; observations of cattle-slaughtering rituals under Diet or Dress or Religion or (possibly) Economy, but not under all four. Or, to give real examples, we find O. F. Mentzel pondering over whether the Hottentots' so-called *Pisplechtigheid* (ceremonial urinating) is a recreation or a religious ceremony, or adducing it as proof of the poverty of the Hottentots' language

that they use a single term (translated as *andersmaken*) to cover the acts of marrying a couple, initiating a youth into manhood, curing an illness, and driving out a spirit (Mentzel 2:281, 288).

Of course it is too much to expect of the seamen, ships' doctors, and Company officials who contribute to what I will henceforth loosely call the Discourse of the Cape that they will put aside their inherited Eurocentric conceptual schemes in favour of a scheme based on native conceptual categories. Such a move would be entirely anachronistic. But it might further be said that the collapse of the categories of (say) Diet, Medicine, and Religion into each other would threaten to collapse systematic discourse into what the traveller started with: a series of sightings and observations selected from sense-data only on the grounds that they are striking, remarkable; that is to say, into a mere *narrative* rather than a comprehensive *description*.

The crippling weakness of anthropological narrative as compared with anthropological description is that, in reverting to chronological sequence, it forgoes access to the achronological, spatial, God's-eye organization of categorical description. Some travel writers try to have the best of both worlds—the immediacy of narrative, the synopticism of description—by disguising the latter as the former. Here, for example, is Christopher Fryke writing of a visit to the Cape in 1685:

My curiosity led me to enter one of [their huts] and see what kind of life these people led. As I came within, I saw a parcel of them lying together like so many hogs, and fast asleep; but as soon as they were aware of me, they sprang up and came to me, making a noise like turkeys. I was not a little concerned; yet seeing that they did not go about to do me any harm, I pulled out a piece of tobacco and gave it to them. They were mightily pleased, and to show their gratitude they lifted up those flaps of sheepskin which hang before their privy-parts, to give me a sight of them. I made all haste to be gone, because of the nasty stench; also I could readily perceive that there was nothing special to be seen there. Moreover, some I found at their eating, which made the stink yet more unbearable, since they had only a piece of cow-hide, laid out upon the coals a-broiling, and they had squeezed the dung out of the guts, and

smear'd it with their hands over one another. And the hide they take out when it is broiled, and beat it, and so eat it. This so turn'd my stomach, that I made haste to be gone. [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:259]

The historical veracity of this narrative is much to be doubted (a few pages later Fryke comes upon a serpent eating a Hottentot). But note how the brief story is put together by the stringing together of anthropological commonplaces from the categories Physical Appearance, Dress, Diet, Recreations, Customs, Habitation, Language, and Character:

1. The Hottentots sleep by day (idle Hottentot character) in a hut (Hottentot dwelling), lying all over one another (Hottentot sexual mores) like hogs (place of Hottentots on the scale of creation).
2. They make a noise like turkeys (Hottentot language).
3. They accept tobacco (Hottentot recreations) and lift their flaps (Hottentot dress) to exhibit (Hottentot sexual more) their private parts (anatomical peculiarities of the Hottentots).
4. Fryke is driven away by the stench (Hottentot uncleanliness), observing as he leaves Hottentots smearing one another with dung (Hottentot cosmetics) and eating cowhide and guts (Hottentot diet).

One of the commonplaces of the Discourse of the Cape is that the Hottentots are idle. Since it is not custom but absence of custom, not recreation but absence of recreation, this idleness usually finds its place in category 19 as part of Hottentot character. Surprisingly little mention of Hottentot idleness occurs in the approximately 150 accounts that R. Raven-Hart summarizes from travellers who touched at the Cape before 1652.¹ But as the Company begins to settle in and accounts of the Hottentots become more detailed, the theme becomes more prominent, idleness being described and denounced in the same breath.

1. Only three travellers mention idleness, and all three deduce the idleness of the Hottentots from the fact that they did not practise agriculture, rather than observing it: Edward Terry, 1616; Augustin de Beaulieu, 1622; and Johan Wurffbain, 1646 (Raven-Hart, *BVR* 83, 101, 165).

They are lazier than the tortoises which they hunt and eat.—Johan Nieuhof, 1654 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 1:22]

They are a lazy and grimy people who will not work. . . . They are idle, and like to sit without doing anything.—Volquart Iversen, 1667 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 1:103]

Their chief work is nothing more than to dig up and eat . . . roots. . . . When they are satiated they lie down without a care.—George Meister, 1667 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 1:203]

The major work of the men is to lie about, unless hunger drives them.—Johann Schreyer, 1679 [L'Honoré Naber 40]

If they are not hungry, they will not work.—Christopher Fryke, 1681 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:234]

They are very lazy, liking better to go hungry than to work.—Fr.-T. de Choisy, 1685 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:269]

They secure for themselves a luxurious idleness, they never till the soil, they sow nothing, they reap nothing, they take no heed what they shall eat and drink. . . . Whoever wishes to employ them as slaves must keep them hungry.—William ten Rhyne, 1686 [Schapera 123]

They are a very lazy sort of people. . . . They choose rather to live . . . poor and miserable, than to be at pains for plenty.—William Dampier, 1691 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:385]

Their native inclination to idleness and a careless life, will scarce admit of either force or reward for reclaiming them from that innate lethargic humour.—John Ovington, 1693 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:396]

They are extremely lazy, and had rather undergo almost famine, than apply themselves.—Francois Leguat, 1698 [Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:432]

They are, without doubt, both in body and mind, the laziest people under the sun. . . . Their whole earthly happiness seems to lie in indolence and supinity.—Peter Kolb, 1719 [Kolb 1:46]

The men . . . are . . . the laziest creatures that can be imagined, since their custom is to do nothing, or very little. . . . If there is anything to be done, they let their women do it.—Francois Valentijn, 1726 [Valentijn 71–73]

[A] dull, inactive, and I had almost said, entirely listless disposition . . . is the leading characteristic of their minds . . . , necessarily produced by the debilitating diet they use, and their extreme inactivity and sloth.—Anders Sparrman, 1783 [Sparrman 209]

Lazy, idle, improvident. . . —O. F. Mentzel, 1787 [Mentzel 2:276]

Perhaps the laziest nation upon earth. . . [However] the women are very industrious in household affairs.—C. F. Damberger, 1801 [Damberger 57–58]

Though there are occasional dissenting voices,² and though the judgments of many writers are based on secondhand evidence or *idées reçues*, one must be struck by the persistence of these strictures, which continue into the period of British occupation of the Cape (see below). Idleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor—these terms are meant both to define a Hottentot vice and to distance the writer from it. Nowhere in the great echo chamber of the Discourse of the Cape is a voice raised to ask whether the life of the Hottentot may not be a version of life before the Fall (as Bartolomé de las Casas suggested in respect of the Indians of the New World), a life in which man is not yet condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but instead may spend his days dozing in the sun, or in the shade when the sun grows too hot, half-aware of the singing of the birds and the breeze on his skin, bestirring himself to eat when hunger overtakes him, enjoying a pipe of tobacco when it is available, at one with his surroundings and unreflectively content. The idea that the Hottentot may be Adam is not even entertained for the sake of being dismissed (on the grounds, say, that the Hottentot does not know God). Certainly no one dreams of asking whether what looks like Hottentot *dolce far niente* may not be the mere outward aspect of a profound Hottentot contemplative life. At a more practical level, no one asks for what reason a people whose traditional diet is meat, milk, and *veldkos* (forage food) should after 1652 decide that vegetables are better and begin to till the soil; or why, after artificial appetites for baked bread, tobacco, and spir-

2. See, for example, Grevenbroek, 1695, in Schapera 271–73.

its have been awoken in them, they should want to sell any more of their labour than would be required for the immediate satisfaction of these appetites. No one bothers to put, save rhetorically, the ethical question: which is better, to live like the ant, busily storing up food for winter, or like the grasshopper, singing in the sun all day, heedless of the morrow? The pastoral platitude that the wandering shepherd, with his meagre possessions and his easily satisfied wants, shows us a way of escaping from the cares of civilization, is nowhere spoken.

It is not enough to answer the question of why questions like these were not asked, by saying that the kind of person responsible for the Discourse of the Cape would never have thought of asking them. Certainly many of the travel writers were straightforward Company officials, ships' captains, or military men; but there were also scientists of distinction among them (Kolb, Sparrman), as well as men of learning (Ten Rhyne) and serious amateur observers (Schreyer). Furthermore, in Europe the fabled Hottentot did in time become a term in learned discourse, though less in inquiries into the natural state of man than in debate about whether there was a single creature called Man or several races of men, some nearer to beasts than others.³ To understand why the Hottentot way of life, characterized by (and stigmatized for) its idleness, was in no way held up to Europe as a model of life in Eden, we must be aware of attitudes towards idleness prevailing in Europe at the time when Europe, and particularly Protestant Europe, was colonizing the Cape.

In the medieval Church contemplation was esteemed a higher kind of activity than work. The privileged position of the contemplative life was rejected by Luther as part of his rejection of a privileged spiritual status for the clergy. In Germany after the

3. François Bernier (1620–88) concludes that the Hottentots are "a different species" from the Negroes of Africa. John Locke (1632–1704), however, suggests that the intellect of the Hottentot seems "brutish" only because of environmental influences on him. Buffon (1707–88) contends that the distance between the Hottentot and the ape is far greater than the distance between the Hottentot and the rest of mankind. Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840) argues that, while the Hottentot may seem to belong to "a different species," there is in fact only "one variety of mankind." See Slotkin 95, 173, 184, 189.

Reformation in particular, preachers placed increasing emphasis on work as the fundamental divine edict, an edict that all men must obey to atone for Adam's fall. To be idle was to defy the edict; to be improvident—to depend on God's providence to save one from starving—was an aggravating offence, a provocative tempting of God. The devotional books of the period thunder against the "curse of idleness"; the community of Herrnhut, founded in 1727 and destined to form the model for the missions of the Moravian Brethren to the Hottentots of Africa, is representative of the age in writing into its statutes the requirement that everyone who joined the community had to labour for his own bread (Vontobel 67–70, 38; Marais 147–48).

As part of the Reformation, too, the Renaissance (and ultimately classical) distinction between base idleness and *otium*, time for self-cultivation, was rejected. Mankind was widely held to be so weak that without the discipline of continual work it was bound to relapse into sin. Bucer went so far as to suggest excommunication as the ultimate penalty for idleness (Vontobel 78). In Calvinism in particular, writes Max Weber, "waste of time [becomes] . . . the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health . . . is worthy of absolute moral condemnation" (157–58).

At the same time a war on social parasitism was set in train. Even almsgiving was condemned as "a great sin" in that it encouraged people to evade God's edict on work (Vontobel 75). By the middle of the seventeenth century what Michel Foucault calls "the great confinement" had got under way. The culmination of a series of measures designed to put an end to vagrancy and begging as a way of life, it began with the confinement of the beggar class and went on later to sweep up the insane and the criminal. During crises of unemployment the houses of confinement became in effect prisons for the workless; during economic upswings they acted as hostels cum factories. As productive organizations these were a failure, but that did not matter: their purpose was not to turn a profit but to proclaim the ethical value of work. In this earliest phase of industrialization and this primitive phase of economic thinking, Foucault suggests, labour and

poverty were held up as simple polar opposites: labour was imagined as having the power to abolish or overcome poverty "not so much by its productive capacity as by a certain force of moral enchantment" (*Madness and Civilization* 48–55).

Though conducted with greater ferocity in Protestant countries, the war on beggars took place in both Catholic and Protestant Europe and continued as long as vagrancy remained a significant social problem, that is, well into the nineteenth century. The anathema on idleness, which was part of this war, did not falter with the Enlightenment; for the Enlightenment simply replaced the old condemnation of idleness as disobedience to God with an emphasis on work as a duty owed by man to himself and his neighbour. Through work man embarks on a voyage of exploration whose ultimate goal is the discovery of man; through work man becomes master of the world; through a community of work society comes into being. Karl Marx is wholly a child of the Enlightenment when he writes, "The entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour" (305).

Both of the above attitudes—that idleness is a sin, that idleness is a betrayal of one's humanity—can be seen in the Discourse of the Cape. In the first hundred years or so of settlement, the idleness of the Hottentots is denounced in much the same spirit as the idleness of beggars and wastrels is denounced in Europe. One might say that the rhetoric used to justify class warfare in Europe is transferred wholesale and unthinkingly to the colony to condemn the refusal of the natives to be drawn into its economy as wage labourers. This formulation must be qualified, however. For the first wave of denunciation of Hottentot idleness belongs not so much to the discourse of the rulers of the Cape, where one might expect to find it if the problem of finding labour were uppermost, as to the rudimentary ethnographic discourse of travel literature.⁴ Furthermore, if one is to be drily

4. Van Riebeeck alludes to the idleness of the Hottentots only once, in a dispatch to the Chamber dated 14 April 1653, in which he begs to be removed from among these "dull, stupid, lazy, stinking people" to Japan, where his talents may be of more use. His *Journals* contain no reference to Hottentot idleness. Though his successors, Wagenaar and Borghorst, have more than a little to say about idleness, it is the idleness of the free farmers they condemn. See Van Riebeeck; D. Moodie 32, 270, 294, 304.

logical, sloth is precisely what the newly arrived colonizer might expect in a heathen folk who have not heard God's word and know nothing of the ban on idleness. In fact, the disguising of an attack on what we may call Hottentot passive resistance to wage-labour as a denunciation of idleness belongs to a later stage in the history of the Cape; the emphasis on Hottentot idleness in the literature, though understandable in observers with seventeenth-century Protestant backgrounds, is a response to more immediate frustrations. What the idleness of the Hottentot means to the early ethnographer becomes clear if we ask what it is that the Hottentot is *not doing* when he is found to be idle.

The charge of idleness often comes together with, and sometimes as the climax of, a set of other characterizations: that the Hottentots are ugly, that they never wash but on the contrary smear themselves with animal fat, that their food is unclean, that their meat is barely cooked, that they wear skins, that they live in the meanest of huts, that male and female mix indiscriminately, that their speech is not like that of human beings. What is common to these charges is that they mark the Hottentot as *underdeveloped*—underdeveloped not only by the standard of the European but by the standard of Man. If he were to develop dietary taboos, ablutionary habits, sexual mores, crafts, a more varied body decoration than uniform coating, domestic architecture and technology, a language of human articulations rather than animal noises, he would become, if not a Hollander, at least more fully Man. And the fact that he self-evidently does not employ his faculties in developing himself in these ways, but instead lies about in the sun, is proof that it is sloth that must be held accountable for retarding him.

What kind of creature is this Man whom the Hottentot, in his present state "to be counted more among the dumb beasts than among the company of reasoning men" (J. C. Hoffman, 1680 [L'Honoré Naber 31]), refuses out of idleness to become? It is Man with a developed Physical appearance, Dress, Diet, Medicine, Crafts, etc.—in other words, what we may call Anthropological Man. The Hottentot is Man but not yet Anthropological Man; and what keeps him in his backward state is idleness. Thus his idleness has the status of an anthropological scandal: despite the

fact that nothing remoter and more different from European Man can be imagined than the Hottentot, the Hottentot, on closer inspection, turns out to yield an extremely impoverished set of differences to inscribe in the table of categories. Where he ought to be generating data for the categories, he is merely lying about. Where he ought to have Religion, there is a virtual blank. His Customs are casual. His Government is rudimentary. Though far more different from the European than the Turk or the Chinese is, the Hottentot paradoxically presents far fewer differences for the record.

The force of the righteous condemnation that the Discourse of the Cape brings to bear on the Hottentot comes from the accumulated weight of two centuries of denunciation of idleness, from the pulpit and the judicial bench, in Europe. But his idleness is responded to with particular animosity by the travel writer, the protoanthropologist, to whom he promises so much in the way of difference and yields so little. It is striking that, once we move out of the categorical discourse of anthropology, where the scheme requires the writer to inscribe eighteen or nineteen blocks with lists of remarkable differences, to the discourse of history, which at its simplest requires the writer merely to chronicle each day the remarkable events of that day, there is far less stress on the idleness of the Hottentots (see note 5, below). Indeed, in history the Hottentots suddenly seem all too busy, intriguing with one another, driving off cattle, begging, spying.

I am far from wanting to deny that, to the extent that the word *idle* has any objective meaning, the Hottentots were idle, or to assert that the condemnation of Hottentot idleness had nothing to do with the desire of the colonists to impress them as labourers. What I do wish to stress, however, is that the almost universal denunciation among the travel writers represents a reaction to a challenge, a scandal, that strikes particularly near to them *as writers*; that the laziness of the Hottentot aborts one of the more promising of discourses about elemental man. Nor is this generation of writers the last to respond with frustration to the recalcitrance of the colonies to generate materials to fill out its discourse. The ethnographer Gustav Fritsch, travelling around South Af-

rica in the 1860s, observes that it would not be possible to use Boer life as material for stories because in Boer life nothing ever happens (161); and, at much the same time, Nathaniel Hawthorne is lamenting the "commonplace prosperity" without surprises and reversals, the "broad and simple daylight" of America, that make an American novel impossible (vi). In each case the colonial material is condemned as too exiguous for the European form; in each case the question is whether the new materials do not require a rethinking of old forms, old conceptual frameworks. The moment when the travel writer condemns the Hottentot for doing nothing is the moment when the Hottentot brings him face to face (if he will only recognize it) with his own preconceptions.

That this is a phenomenon of more significance than the failure of a set of casual writers with rough, workaday minds to escape their ethnocentric prejudices, can be seen from a landmark of anthropological writing, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754). In a paragraph in which he specifically mentions the Hottentots, Rousseau characterizes Man in his savage state as "solitary, indolent [*oisif*], and perpetually accompanied by danger," a creature who "cannot but be fond of sleep." Man is lifted out of primitive savagery by the invention of tools, which bring about the first revolution in human culture and permit him an easier, less perilous life. In the new phase of comparative leisure [*loisir*] that tools permit, he begins to create conveniences for himself, conveniences which eventually develop into the yoke of civilization. The phase of leisure intermediate between savage indolence and the cultural revolution that will arrive with the invention of metallurgy and agriculture, the introduction of private property, the rise of social inequality, and the growth of work into an unavoidable part of daily life, is singled out by Rousseau as "the happiest and most stable of epochs. . . . The example of savages, most of whom have been found in this state, seems to prove that men were meant to remain in it, that it is the real youth of the world, and that all subsequent advances have . . . in reality [been steps] towards the decrepitude of the species" (169, 195-99).

When Rousseau comes to spell out what life might be like in this "happiest and most stable of epochs," the description he gives,

though based on reports from the New World, could very well be a panorama of Hottentot life: people have rustic huts, clothes made of skins, adornments of feathers and shells, bows and arrows as weapons, clumsy musical instruments. What, then, is the crucial difference that prevents the Hottentot from being admitted to the golden age? Certainly his unsavoury personal habits and his infringement of European taboos on the preparation and consumption of meat play their part. But the essential difference is that the Hottentot is indolent, spending his "free" time sleeping, while among other savages who have passed through the toolmaking revolution free time becomes leisure, time devoted "industriously" to the elaboration of "conveniences" (*ibid.*). Rousseau thus, in line with Enlightenment thought, resurrects the humanistic opposition of leisure (Roman *otium*, Greek *scholē*, time for self-improvement) to idleness: the Hottentot does not belong to the happiest of epochs because he is idle.⁵ Leisure holds the promise of the generation of all those differences that constitute culture and make man Anthropological Man; idleness holds no promise save that of stasis.

II

Condemning the Hottentot for his idleness, the early Discourse of the Cape effectively excludes him from Eden by deciding that, though he is human, he is not in the line of descent that leads from Adam via a life of toil to civilized man. The Hottentot, that is to say, is not an original of civilized man. Although one cannot postulate that so farsighted an intention lay behind the strictures of the early writers, this conclusion nevertheless prepares the ground for the next phase of the attack on the Hottentot way of life, a way of life that, even as early as the mid-eighteenth century, was no longer confined to ethnic Hottentots but had found converts among Dutch Boers of the remoter frontiers. Thus O. F. Mentzel, who spent the years 1732-41 at the Cape, writes that some of these Boers "have accustomed themselves to such an extent to the carefree life,

5. On the classical background to the notion of leisure, see De Grazia 11-25.

the indifference, the lazy days and the association with slaves and Hottentots, that not much difference may be discerned between the former and the latter" (2:115). This "Hottentot" life of idleness and improvidence, this *lekker lewe*, never wins a spokesman in the Discourse of the Cape. The stratagem it might conceivably have resorted to—that of asserting an analogy between the Hottentot and unfallen man, between the Cape and Eden, and via this analogy claiming a tenuous legitimacy—is never used;⁶ and though the idle life continues to be lived on all sides, it does so illegitimately, defensively, and invariably, when disclosed in print, as a scandal.

The indolence of the Hottentots is discovered afresh by British commentators after Britain's takeover of the Cape in 1795. Robert Percival writes of "the peculiar indolence and want of vigour of the Hottentot character," which he diagnoses as "an original bad quality" (84–85). John Barrow writes of indolence as "the principal cause of [the] ruin" of the Hottentots, "a real disease, whose only remedy seems to be that of terror," the remedy of hunger having shown itself to be inadequate (1:102). William Burchell praises the Moravian missionaries for their insistence on manual labour and predicts that once they have taught the Hottentots "the necessity of honest industry" they will have "cut off the root of, at least, half the miseries of the Hottentot race" (1:80). The consensus is that the Hottentot way of life, characterized by low-level subsistence maintained by the minimal resort to wage-labour ("laziness"), wandering in search of greener pastures ("vagrancy"), and a sometimes casual attitude toward private property ("thieving"), will have to be re-formed by *discipline* (a key word of the age) if the Hottentot is to have any stake ("pull his weight") in the Colony.

To the extent that it recognizes the fact that a Hottentot tribal life within the areas settled by colonists no longer exists and that the only viable future for the Hottentots is within the colonial economy, this attitude can be regarded as hardheaded. But to

6. For one exception to all the head-shaking, see Simon de la Loubière, 1687: "In such poverty [the Hottentots] are always gay, always dancing and singing, living without occupation or toil" (Raven-Hart, *CGH* 2:269).

the extent that it sees "indolence" as part of the Hottentot racial "character," an "original bad quality" which only generations of strict discipline will eradicate ("cut off the root of"), we can accurately call it a racist attitude. It looks on the Hottentot and sees only squalor, disease, and blank torpor, closing its eyes to the possibility that, given a choice between idleness (with accompanying poverty) and the wretchedness of lifelong manual labour, people may deliberately choose the former. In contrasting inherent European diligence with inherent Hottentot sloth, it seems to forget the history of the early phase of industrialization in Europe, where it required a reformation of "character" occupying generations before the labouring class would embrace the principle that one should work harder than is required to maintain the level of material existence one is born into.⁷ To bring about this reformation, to make people believe that "the opportunity of earning more was [more] attractive than that of working less," required a sustained programme of ideological indoctrination conducted through schools, churches, and the popular press, a programme meant to convince the lower classes that work was "necessary and noble" (Anthony 41, 22). A writer like Barrow, son of a self-made man and an influential adviser on colonial policy, is wholly committed to this ideology, as were the missionaries to whom the conduct of the programme of indoctrination was entrusted in the Colony. To persuade the Hottentots of Bethelsdorp to spend their time collecting the juice of aloes, John Philip of the London Missionary Society (LMS) allowed a shop to be opened on the mission station. The "experiment" of getting the Hottentots to work by holding before them the temptation of desirable articles for purchase succeeded: "Money instantly rose in estimation among them." The morality of what Philip admits to be "the creation of artificial wants" is irrelevant here. To Philip as a social thinker, the Hottentot clearly had no

7. Weber: "A man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose. Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalistic labour" (60). See also Hutt, chap. 5, "Preferred Idleness."

future unless he learned to sell his labour. As he candidly put it to his charges, they should not expect to use the mission stations as refuges from the dragnet of colonial authorities trying to tie them down as serfs on farms, as havens where a precolonial regime of idleness, improvidence, and easy morals might be maintained: quite aside from the fact that the missionaries would not sanction such a way of life, "the world, and the Church of Christ," which funded the missions, "looked for civilization and industry as proofs of [the Hottentots'] capacity for improvement . . . [since] men of the world had not other criteria by which they could judge" (1:204–05, ix, 212). In other words, if the Hottentots did not learn to work on the mission stations, the mission stations would close and they would be left to the mercies of the farmers. One way or the other, work they must. Thus, at the very time when the colonists were denouncing the LMS stations as "nests of idleness," idleness was what the missionaries saw as the one feature above all to be eradicated from the Hottentot "character."⁸ If the LMS stations never became quite the hives of industry that the Moravian stations were reputed to be, it was largely because they did not practise the exclusion of people who came not to work but to share in the prosperity of their kinsfolk. As one observer lamented, the more industrious Hottentots of the Kat River settlement were having their wealth eaten up by "squatters" (presumably relatives) who "indulged in habitual sloth and listless inactivity"; and John Philip had similar criticisms to make of mission stations where "the means of the industrious [are] eaten up by the idle" (Marais 225, 249).

But the true scandal of the nineteenth century was not the idleness of the Hottentots (by now seen as inherent in the race) but the idleness of the Boers. The sliding of farmers into an idle way of life can be traced back to the first decades of settlement. Governor Wagenaar, Van Riebeeck's successor, wrote to

8. "Nests of idleness" is the phrase used by the colonial magistrates in 1849 in their denunciation of the mission stations (Marais 197). For the comments of Rev. John Campbell, inspector of the LMS stations, on the "idleness and sloth" of Hottentots who come to the stations from both kraals and farms, see Campbell 92–93. See also Burchell's report that the missionaries at Klaarwater continually complained of "the laziness of the Hottentots" (1:246).

the Chamber in 1663 suggesting that half a dozen of the free farmers ought to be called home because of their "indolence and . . . irregular and debauched lives." From the Chamber, familiar with the problem from the Indies, he received a tolerant reminder that "our people, when abroad, are at all times with difficulty induced to work," and the suggestion that he should rely more on slaves (D. Moodie 270, 279). "Too much good fortune hath bred sloth among the farmers," writes Grevenbroek in 1695 (Schapera 273). A century later Le Vaillant comments that "from the profound inaction in which they live, one would suppose their supreme felicity to consist in doing nothing."⁹

Not only the farmer but the burgher of Cape Town was afflicted with this lapse into sloth. Stavorus describes a typical day in the life of a burgher at the end of the eighteenth century: a long smoke and stroll in the morning, an hour or two of business, a midday meal followed by a snooze, an evening of cards—all in all "a very comfortable life" (248). Percival and Barrow confirm his account a decade later: "A most lamentable picture of laziness and indolent stupidity," Percival calls it (Percival 255; Barrow 2:100–01).

The harshest remarks of nineteenth-century commentators are, however, reserved for the Boers of the frontier. In his survey of the productive potential of the Colony, Barrow writes, "Luckily, perhaps, for them, the paucity of ideas prevents time from hanging heavy on their hands. . . . [Theirs is a] cold phlegmatic temper and [an] inactive way of life . . . , indolence of body and a low groveling mind." Seeing sloth as by now part of the "nature" of the Boer, Barrow suggests that the Colony will not become productive until this "nature" is changed, or, failing that, until the Boers are replaced with more industrious and enterprising settlers (1:32; 2:118; 1:386).

The refrain is taken up by every traveller who penetrates into the back country and encounters farmers living in mean dwellings set on vast tracts, barely literate, rudely clad, surrounded by slaves and servants with too little employment, disdainful of man-

9. Le Vaillant 1:59. See also Paterson 84.

ual labour, content to carry on subsistence farming in a land of potential plenty. Percival comments, "There is I believe in no part of the world an instance to be found of European adventurers so entirely destitute of enterprise, and so completely indifferent to the art of bettering their situation." The women of the frontier he finds particularly "lazy, listless and inactive," a judgment confirmed by J. W. D. Moodie: they are "exceedingly torpid and phlegmatic in their manners and habits, dirty and slovenly in their dress" (Percival 211; Moodie 1:170). On the frontier "days and years pass in miserable idleness," says John Campbell (81). Burchell observes that the new immigrant, full of enterprise and energy, swiftly rises to prosperity, but then "adopts the rude manners [of the Africander] he at first despised, and, step by step, his life degenerates into mere sensual existence." Burchell repeats Barrow's diagnosis that sloth has become part of the Boer character, and follows Barrow's prescription that some kind of missionary work will be necessary to bring the Boer into the modern world: "The ease of an indolent life, with all its losses, is so much more agreeable to [them] than the labour of an industrious one with all its advantages, that the lives of such men must be entirely new-modelled before they can be capable of receiving the improvements of other countries" (1:194, 377). Fifty years after Burchell, Gustav Fritsch finds among the Boers "a degree of indolence and indifference [that is] absolutely Chinese in its constancy" (89-90); and the Carnegie Commission of the 1930s notes again the "indolence" of the "poor white" descendants of these farmers, an indolence which it ascribes to, inter alia, the South African climate, prejudice against "kaffir work," and a tradition of easy existence (Wilcocks 52-79).

The spokesmen of colonialism are dismayed by the squalor and sloth of Boer life because it affords sinister evidence of how European stock can regress after a few generations in Africa.¹⁰

10. Degeneracy was already held in prospect by Mentzel in 1787. Writing of those Boers who "prefer to live in the most distant wilderness among the Hottentots," he expresses his fear that if they do not intermarry with new European stock they will "degenerate and become uncivilized," like the Scots or Wends or Scythians: already "their nature is wild, their education bad, their thoughts base and their conduct ill-bred" (2:120).

In being content to scratch no more than a bare living from the soil, the Boer seems further to betray the colonizing mission, since in order to justify its conquests colonialism has to demonstrate that the colonist is a better steward of the earth than the native (the text usually cited in support is Matthew 25 : 14-30, the parable of the talents). Nor can one neglect the element of chauvinism in the comparison British commentators draw between the diligent English yeoman and the listless Dutch boer.

But there is a further component to the British response to Boer idleness, a component of moral outrage stemming from the perception that Boer ease is achieved at the expense of the misery of slaves and servants. The ease of the farmers is scandalous because it is corrupt: the case of the Cape Colony seems to confirm the dictum going back to antiquity (see Davis chap. 3; Lecky 1:277) that slaveholding corrupts the slaveholder. "The possession of slaves, and the subjection of the Hottentots . . . have been the source of the greatest demoralization of all classes in this colony" (J. W. D. Moodie 1:176). "The taint of slavery, here as elsewhere makes the white man lazy" (Alexander 1:70). In the Cape the taint works in a particularly insidious way because, aside from the slaveowner's own prejudice against manual labour, idleness as a pervasive way of life also has the consequence that about each farmer-patron there comes to cluster a band of dependants and hangers-on doing little work and getting the poorest of wages. Thus while disdain for work becomes institutionalized among the masters, the system does not even have the compensation that habits of industry are fostered among the servants—who are frequently found to prefer Boer masters to British because the latter, though they pay more, demand too much work (Marais 130-31).

On the other hand, the idleness of the Boers does not create the same crisis for the commentator *as writer* that the idleness of the Hottentot created in the seventeenth century. For while the framework of the earlier writing was that of a nascent science of Man, with universal and therefore obligatory cultural categories, nineteenth-century commentary takes the form of episodic narrative in which the narrator is free to move across the face of the Colony, seeing sights, having hunting adventures, meeting new people,

recording anecdotes and oddities. The genre is, in fact, *causerie*, as the typically extended chapter headings indicate.¹¹ In this mode almost any material is fit to fill the ethnographic space left by Hottentot and Boer inactivity, as long as it is diverting.

The fact that Boer idleness is achieved at the expense of a servile class and therefore differs in a crucial respect from the old Hottentot idleness has the natural consequence that the philosophical question that did not get asked regarding the Hottentots gets asked all the less regarding the Boers, namely, if we ignore the dirty skins, the clouds of flies, the rude clothing can these frontier farmers not be said to stand for a rejection of the curse of discipline and labour in favour of a prelapsarian African way of life in which the fruits of the earth are enjoyed as they drop into the hand, work is avoided as a scourge, and idleness and leisure become the same thing? The moral and political outlook of the typical British visitor to the Cape made it unlikely that such a thought would be entertained. Nevertheless, the fantasy of an African Eden does not get suppressed entirely, particularly once the efforts of the first wave of literary Romanticism to locate unfallen man in the child or the peasant or the savage have made the quest for man's origins a commonplace of travel writing. Certainly no one asks whether the torpor of the Hottentot or the sloth of the Boer is a sign that all wants have been met, all desires have been stilled, and Eden has been recovered. But there is a revealing moment in the *Travels* of Burchell, perhaps of nineteenth-century commentators the most readily sympathetic to native ways of life. In 1812 Burchell spent an evening among a group of Bushmen somewhere between Prieska and De Aar noting down their music and watching their dancing. At midnight he retired to bed. Of the evening he says:

Had I never seen and known more of these savages than the occurrences of this day, and the pastimes of this evening, I should not have hesitated to declare them the happiest of mor-

11. A typical chapter summary: "Wesleyville—Its delightful scenery—Second and third missionary stations—Interpreters and guides—Anecdotes of the elephants—Strange scenes—Hottentot eloquence—Grave argument—Artifice—Criticism, and humour—Games—Evening amusements—Shooting hippopotami—The River Kei—The Incagalo—Kaffir chief and his staff—Anecdotes" (Rose x).

tals. Free from care, and pleased with little, their life seemed flowing on, like a smooth stream gliding through flowery meads. Thoughtless and unreflecting, they laughed and smiled the hours away, heedless of futurity, and forgetful of the past.

Though hedged around with conditions ("Had I never seen and known more . . ."), this is a vision of man before the Fall, a vision whose seductions Burchell acknowledges: "I sat as if the hut had been my home, and felt in the midst of this horde as if I had been one of them; for some moments . . . forgetting that I was a lonely stranger in a land of wild untutored men" (2:48). Even Barrow, so censorious of the Boers, so dismissive of the Hottentots ("perhaps the most wretched of the human race" [1:93]), can be impressed by the Kaffirs and speculate that their natural nobility of bearing must be the consequence of simple diet, regular habits, abstinence from alcohol, pure air, plenty of exercise, and physical chastity—in other words, the consequence of freedom from the more debilitating features of civilization, in a regime which the British public school would later try to reproduce. But what draws Barrow to these African Spartans is in the first place their "sprightliness, activity and vivacity" (1:119), while Burchell's eulogy comes only after the Bushmen have danced "till morning light announced that other duties claimed their time." It would seem that the savage has to bend his neck to the yoke of "activity," "duties," before the thought may be admitted that he belongs to the Golden Age.

III

Today we are not likely to be so censorious of the idleness of the Hottentots (the Boers present a somewhat different case). We have a century of anthropological and historical discipline behind us to make us wary of observing the lives of foreign peoples too cursorily and from too self-centred a viewpoint. Given a chance to visit the seventeenth-century Cape, we might reasonably expect to see features of Hottentot life that eluded seventeenth-century observers. We might be more sensitive to seasonal variations in activity and to the rhythm of the Hottentot "week." We might be more hesitant about calling an entire people lazy on the grounds that the men lie around while the women are busy (a fact that several early travellers noted). We might pay

less attention to hunting and fishing and ways of dressing flesh—an area where taboos tend to clash—and more to the gathering activities of women and children. We might be more cautious of taking those Hottentots on the fringes of Dutch settlement as typical of all Hottentots.¹² With our wider historical perspective, we might also appreciate better what a massive cultural revolution is entailed when a people moves from a subsistence economy to an economy of providence, from pastoralism to agriculture—a move, indeed, in which the notion of *work* may be said to make its appearance in history.

Yet in the very openmindedness we might like to imagine extending toward the Hottentot from our modern science of Man lies the germ of an insidious betrayal of the Hottentot. For, no less than in the science of Man that met and was frustrated by the real Hottentots, the modern science of Man has at its foundation a will to see a culture at work in a society. The science of Man is itself a discipline, one of what Foucault calls the disciplines of surveillance; among its tasks are the tracking down and investigating of obscure societies in all quarters of the globe, the photographing and recording and deciphering of their activities (*Discipline and Punish* 224). If the Hottentot did not absorb the ideology of work in a generation, we cannot expect the Western bourgeois to shed his allegiance to it in a day. It would be particularly rash to expect that the modern researcher and writer would respond more generously than his ancestors to a way of life so indolent that, in its extreme form, it presented him with nothing to say. The temptation to say that there is something *at work* when there is nothing is always strong. The present chapter does not entirely resist that temptation. The challenge of idleness to work, its power to scandalize, is as radical today as it ever was. Indeed—though it takes us outside the bounds of the present discussion—we might wonder whether the challenge presented

12. Marshall Sahlins describes "the characteristic paleolithic rhythm of a day or two on, a day or two off" (23). Richard B. Lee, writing of the Dobe Bushmen, hunter-gatherers, observes how surprisingly high a proportion of their food intake comes from vegetable foods collected by women (33). Richard Elphick discusses the effect of "radically foreign" customs on the formation of European prejudice against the Hottentots (193–200).

by idleness to the philosophical enterprise is any less powerful or subversive than the challenge presented by the erotic, in particular by the *silence* of eroticism (see Bataille 273–76).

The history of idleness in South Africa is not a side issue or a curiosity. One need only look at the face of South African labour in the twentieth century to confirm this. The idleness of the Boer is still there in taboos on certain grades of manual work (*hotnots-werk, kafferwerk*), as well as in rituals of leisure indistinguishable from idleness (sitting on the porch, lying on the beach). The idleness of the native is still present in a tradition of overemployment and underpayment, maintained from both sides of the fence, in terms of which two men are hired to do one man's work, each working half the time and standing idle half the time, each getting half of one man's wage. The luxurious idleness of the settler is still denounced from Europe, the idleness of the native still deplored by his master. I hope that it is clear that I by no means add my voice to the chorus of moralizing disapproval. On the contrary, I hope that I have opened a way to the reading of idleness since 1652 as an authentically native response to a foreign way of life, a response that has rarely been defended in writing, and then only evasively (one thinks of H. C. Bosman), but that has exerted a powerful popular attraction since the days when commentators began to shake their heads over Europeans who, from too much intercourse with Hottentots, were sinking into a life of sloth. It is a measure of how powerful this attraction has remained into our times that, after 1948, the authorities embarked—and, to the extent that they were responding to social realities, found themselves compelled to embark—on a programme of laws to re-form South African society. Two cornerstone measures of this programme were the so-called Immorality Act and Mixed Marriages Act, laws whose primary intention and whose practical effect it was to take away from white men the freedom to drop out of the ranks of the labouring class, take up with brown women, settle down to more or less idle, shiftless, improvident lives, and engender troops of ragged children of all hues, a process which, if allowed to accelerate, would in the end, they foresaw, spell the demise of White Christian civilisation at the tip of Africa.