

# The Great Escape Artists...

A pebble  
is a perfect creature

equal to itself  
obedient to its limits

filled exactly  
with a stony meaning

with a scent which does not remind one of anything  
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardor and coldness  
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse  
when I hold it in my hand  
and its noble body  
is permeated by false warmth

Pebbles cannot be tamed  
they will look at us  
with a calm very clear eye  
to the end

He is like a stone,  
a pebble that,

having lain around quietly  
minding its own business

since the dawn of time,  
is now suddenly

picked up and tossed randomly  
from hand to hand.

A hard little stone,  
barely aware of its  
surroundings,

enveloped in itself and its  
interior  
life

(J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*)

(Z. Herbert, *The Stone*)

According to Gilles Deleuze, great literature is an outcome of a meeting between the Original and the Prophet. The latter one, that is the writer, encounters the Original on his way. The Original in the absolute sense. Neither an outsider nor an outcast generated by the system as its establishing exterior but an individual who in his attitude and behaviour eludes all kinds of assignments that inform systems rule (interpretation, narrative, history, psychology etc.). The Original is „above and beneath classification“ (J.M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*). An encounter with the Original makes it evident that our cultural obviousnesses and axioms are conventional and fictitious and opens the disturbing space of atopos. It is the role of the Prophet to discover a trace of the split that the Original makes in the order of the world by his very existence.

The Original is, as it were, a kind of a Human Stone, *homo lapis*. Deleuze claims that the Originals „can only survive by becoming stone, by denying the will and sanctifying themselves in this suspension“ (G. Deleuze, *Bartleby or the Formula*). The stone, silent, uncooperative, and insignificant, apparently fully submitted to us, retains his „justice and fullness of dignity“, his hidden and intact „stony meaning“ for eternity. Yet the end of all things when „there will not be left here one stone upon another“ will not affect... the stones themselves. Stones—milestones, cornerstones, tombstones, boundary stones—emblemize the human desire for fixedness. „Stone thinks only himself stoning“ (U. Eco, *Paradoxical Exercises Regarding the Thinking of Stones*, in: *The Island of the Day Before*) and celebrates without any ill will his dignified indifference, his resistance, his obstinate „No“ on the margin of History. But the confusion it creates remains inversely proportional to the importance we attach to it. As Czeslaw Milosz wrote: „The avalanche changes its course / owing to stones it carries on“ (*The Moral Treatise*)

Michael K, the eponymous protagonist of John Maxwell Coetzee's novel quoted above, is no doubt a model type of Deleuze's Original, a *Homo lapis*. A recluse with a harelip, who is „not clever with words”, stays in a state of limbo between life and death in a hole dug in earth, „living a life that consists merely of passing time” and cultivating the virtue of total idleness. The whole country is plunged into darkness of civil war and injustice but his aim is to lead a simple life that leaves no traces and to escape from all (metaphoric and real) camps that mankind has built for him. Thus his story „was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong”.

Moreover, in Coetzee's novel the relation between the Original and the Prophet is highlighted from the ethical point of view represented by Medical Officer: an exegete and a paternal figure. His care and concern gradually evolve into a quasi-religious attitude. After unsuccessful attempts for unraveling Michael's „meaning”, the message he brings to the world, Officer claims that „Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it”. Then he calls him „a great escape artist” which is a motto of a publishing project in which we would like to invite you to participate.

Our proposal is directed to writers, literary critics and scholars. Michael K is both the starting and the main reference point for written reflection on the following issues:

- Michael K as seen from political/ethical or philosophical point of view;
- Cultural/social oppressions and tactics for escaping them;
- Resistance to recognition, interpretation, (auto)biographical story; being „above and beneath classifications”;
- Michael K and other Originals in literature, movies, theatre, history etc.;
- Phantasms of „stony” existence; stone as a symbol, metaphor or allegory;
- Absurdity and mystery as threats to social conventions and axioms of reason
- The „Ethics of the Prophet”: the relation between literature and The Other.

The general questions we would like to pose are: Who was/is Michael K? What were/are his „life” and „times”? Who would be contemporary Michael K? What are the causes, paths and chances to succeed in their escapes? We would like to explore together but not exhaust (if that were possible) the interpretative potential of the novel called *The Life & Times of Michael K*.

We hope that you will find our proposal inspiring and worth your creative effort. We will be waiting for your applications for the project until July 25th 2012. The deadline for sending papers (written in English, French or German) is September 20th 2012. (The publication will be in Polish but we plan to prepare an English version as well. The editors have the right to reject the texts and abbreviate them in agreement with their authors).

Sincerely,

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