

**‘My truth: how I lived in these times, in this place’:
Reading the Body-soul in J.M. Coetzee’s Late Fictions**

Pojanut Suthipinittharm

PhD

University of York
English and Related Literature
September 2015

Abstract

This thesis offers readings of a number of less discussed texts by J.M. Coetzee and attempts to take as full an account as possible of the human beings that are embodied in these works. Suggesting that critical approaches are often too invested in their specific ideologies to accommodate for the protean nature of certain Coetzee's narratives, it contends that a better ground for approaching his writing can be found in the unmediated experience of living, which Elizabeth Costello—Coetzee's lecture alter ego—once calls 'the body-soul.' This study thus traces Coetzee's fascination with what it means to be fully alive as an individual being in his writing during the period between his apartheid-era novel *Age of Iron* (1990) and the final fictional memoir *Summertime* (2009). By paying attention specifically to the living beings of the characters, or in the case of Coetzee's fictional memoirs, that of John Coetzee himself, this thesis shows how it is possible to make better sense of Coetzee's puzzling late works and their formal inventiveness.

While on the whole the thesis advances an alternative approach of reading Coetzee's fiction, its individual chapters focus on employing the concept of the body-soul to help release the works' meaning. The first chapter examines Coetzee's fiction-as-lecture 'The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals,' which forms part of *Elizabeth Costello*. I reconstitute Costello's philosophical exposition about the 'sympathetic imagination' for animals as being inseparable from her personal desires as a body-soul vulnerable to death. Chapter Two also centres on Coetzee's characters as living beings and connects the metafictional *Slow Man* (2005) with the epistolary *Age of Iron* through their common reiterations of the figure of a writer who follows another character with his/her imaginative writing. In Chapter Three, the living being of John Coetzee in *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* provides a basis from which to contend with the narratives' mixed tactics of fictionalisation and confessional truth-telling. Chapter Four looks at *Elizabeth Costello*'s 'The Problem of Evil' and *The Master of Petersburg*. Here again, the attention to the body-souls of the protagonists enables a confrontation with the possibility that Coetzee's fiction writing and the living beings within it may not always be a force for good. Throughout the thesis, I assert that the truths contained in these works of Coetzee are truths of the body-soul that cannot be fully extricated from their embodiments, yet by their embeddedness in living experiences that cannot be doubted, they seem to be what Coetzee, as he was in those times and places of writing, was able to believe in.

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Acknowledgements

In completing this thesis, I am deeply grateful to Professor Derek Attridge, my PhD supervisor, who to me epitomises the ideal reader anyone can wish to have. I thank him for his brilliance, his kind support, and for showing me that generosity can go hand in hand with the highest level of academic achievements.

I owe the opportunity to pursue a doctorate degree to the Royal Thai Government Scholarship and the efficient team who run the programme. I sincerely hope to be able to positively impact Thailand's education system in the near future. Special thanks go to Assistant Professor Charturee Tingsabadh, who introduced me to J.M. Coetzee in 2008 and has since crucially shaped my life to what it is today. My appreciations also to the friends I have made during the five years at the University of York, many of whom have long left, while many I will be sad to leave. Thank you for bringing so much joy into my life and for making these years my best yet.

Finally, endless gratitude is owed to my family for allowing me the freedom to learn and for providing the love that sustains me. If studying Coetzee has taught me anything, it is that one is made up of where one came from, and I am made of them.

Author's Declaration

I declare that I am the author of this doctoral thesis and that it is an original contribution, apart from those instances in which I quote or draw upon the works of others, where acknowledgement is given in footnotes. No portion of the work contained within this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other institution.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his long career, J.M. Coetzee has consistently produced fictions that defy habits of reading and hermeneutic schemas of critical analysis. For María J. López, criticism of Coetzee's works that is conducted under such wide-ranging critical tropes as 'prevailing theoretical categories, moral conventions, historical assumptions and political concerns' is prone to display 'simplification, theoretical naivety, intertextual ignorance or ideological bias.'¹ In the seminal monograph *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge articulates that the ultimate challenge for critics in responding to Coetzee's novels is to write criticism that is 'fully responsive to [the text's] singularity, inventiveness, and otherness.'² As Coetzee's oeuvre expands beyond the contested realm of South African/postcolonial concerns with his Australian phase works,³ the critical community is again forced into revising its largely ethico-political approaches that now appear to delimit engagement of this particularly devious oeuvre.

With more works and materials to contend with than ever, many recent studies on Coetzee have relinquished the impulse to make complete sense of the novels and have embraced instead the specialist side of literary studies. The main focus of Coetzee's criticism is beginning to shift from the ethico-political towards the formalistic techniques and artistic quality of Coetzee's literary works, i.e., the craft of writing and the works' position in literary history. Notable examples of such studies are Carrol Clarkson's *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*, the first linguistic account of Coetzee's novels, Patrick Hayes's *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, which traces the relationship of Coetzee's fiction to

¹ María J. López, *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J.M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), xiii.

² Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 11.

³ By Australian works, I am referring to the three novels published between 2003 and 2007—*Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. They are highly experimental in their narrative forms, and are either set in Australia or have protagonists who are Australian. These characteristics are not as explicit in Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), which invokes an unidentified time and place in an otherwise conventional novel form.

the prose of Samuel Beckett and the development of the novel form, and Jarad Zimble's meditations on the maturation of the Coetzee style in *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style*. These excellent studies have injected a literary sophistication into criticism on Coetzee and, by deepening the aesthetic appreciation of Coetzee's novels, reconstitute them as literature and works of art.

At the other end of the spectrum, the opening of the Coetzee Archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas in 2013, and the additional biographical source provided by JC Kannemeyer's biography, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012), are launching new archival and biographical studies that are likely to dominate Coetzee's studies in the years to come. Among the early studies, David Attwell's 'critical biography,' *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), utilises the intimacy afforded by the archive's biographical materials to move the discussion of Coetzee's novels beyond the regimented discourse of literary criticism. Attwell notes that, unlike his first academic monograph on Coetzee, he writes this biography as one of the 'ordinary readers,'⁴ reading a life of writing rather than the finished literary works.

Caught between these two strands of critical developments, the latter half of Coetzee's literary oeuvre—namely, his Australian novels and three fictional memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*—is incidentally being neglected as individual works by the critical world. The incisive literary lens of Hayes and Zimble is not conducive to a discussion of these texts, which cross over to non-literary genres. Hayes and Zimble provide minimal remarks on the Australian novels, while the memoirs fall entirely outside their literary interests. On the other hand, earlier attempts by politically minded critics to read the Australian texts are often unable to accommodate the texts' formal inventiveness. Their efforts to find an Australian reality in Coetzee's late fictions have forced them to contend awkwardly with the paucity of mimetic details. In one such attempt, Melinda Harvey remarks that 'the sense of Australian place in Coetzee's [*Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*] is slight, even compared with the skinflint world-making that we have come to expect from him since

⁴ David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-To-Face with Time* (New York: Viking, 2015), 22.

Dusklands.⁵ Ironically, instead of uncovering a meaningful engagement with Coetzee's newly adopted country, Harvey's discussion ends with the suggestion that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky may hold the elusive key to the novels' meaning: 'If Coetzee's emigration to Australia points us in the direction of any place at all it is Russia' (32).

So with regard to Coetzee's later works, the critical challenge laid down by Attridge to respond fully to the singularity of Coetzee's fiction remains relevant today. But what this singularity means in the current Coetzeean oeuvre will necessarily have to be formed differently from Attridge's influential claim of 'the singularity of literature' or from his emphasis on literature's ethical power.⁶ Specifically, the singularity of Coetzee's later writings may need to be released from the literary bracket that has often defined commentaries on Coetzee. While it has been generally assumed that, whatever is doubted by a Coetzeean narrative, Coetzee himself at least believes in the power of literature to convey the truth,⁷ the cross-genre forms of Coetzee's Australian novels are gradually challenging this assumption. We read, for example, Costello downplaying her own moral authority as a novelist: 'she no longer believes that story telling is good in itself... If she, as she is nowadays, had to choose between telling a story and doing good, she would rather, she thinks, do good.'⁸ To respond to Costello at

⁵ Melinda Harvey, "'In Australia You Start Zero": The Escape from Place in J.M. Coetzee's Late Novels', in *Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Chris Danta, Sue Kossew, and Julian Murphet (London: Continuum, 2011), 19. For a comparable effort, see in the same volume Elleke Boehmer, 'J. M. Coetzee's Australian Realism.'

⁶ 'Reading a work of literature entails opening oneself to the unpredictable, the future, the other, and thereby accepting the responsibility laid upon one by the work's singularity and difference... In a sense, the "literary" is the ethical.' Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 111. See also Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ Many critics consider Coetzee as a defender of literature. Writing of the essayistic *Diary of a Bad Year* in 2010, Peter McDonald still considers that 'Coetzee has devoted his life to defending literature as legitimate mode of public intervention in its own right, not to escape the burdens of history or politics but to confront them on his own resolutely literary terms.' 'The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 3 (1 September 2010): 497.

⁸ J.M. Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil', in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 167.

least in this instance requires us to slacken our attachment to the literary in order to be able to squarely gauge the validity of her claim.

Costello's questioning of the literary must be placed in the context of Coetzee's long-running self-interrogations through his writings. Each new publication by Coetzee has consistently challenged its predecessors and the way in which we have viewed them. Costello's stance on storytelling, for instance, is a long way away from Coetzee's own in his early 1987 lecture later published as 'The Novel Today' (1988)—which he does not allow to be republished and in which he campaigns against the subsuming of the novel under history and strongly outlines the limits of historical discourse in a manner clearly preferential to the novel.⁹ It is not inconceivable that Costello's preference for doing good may one day be doubted by some character in Coetzee's subsequent works. Coetzee's novels are likewise always evolving. They vary greatly in their thematic interests, formal strategies and the contexts they elicit. Their grounds are forever shifting. The early literary experiments of *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* fall away to the cogent imagined worlds of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986), which are in turn replaced by the historical reality of South Africa in *Age of Iron* (1990) and then the alienating Russia of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). By the time of the multi-genre texts of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), it is clear that the Coetzee's oeuvre will not yield easily to a single critical framework, nor should we desire it to do so.

To respond to the provisionality claims of Coetzee's writing may require an equally modest mode of critical engagement that will not overstep the equivocal voice of his characters and the novels. The above quote from *Elizabeth Costello*, with its qualifications of 'as she is nowadays' or 'she thinks,' insists on an essential embeddedness in the limited existence of the character. One finds the

⁹ '[O]rthodox history does not have the means to give the kind of dense realization of the texture of life that the novel, or certain kinds of novel, do so well. And history does not have the formal means to explore, except clumsily and "from the outside", the individual experience of historical time, particularly the time of historical crisis.' J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream* 6, no. 1 (1988): 2.

same characteristics throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, including the interpellations of 'he thought' in *Michael K* and 'to his mind' in the striking opening lines of *Disgrace*. While Attridge rightly notes that phrases like 'he thought' in *Michael K* remind us 'that we are outside Michael K's consciousness' and cannot assimilate his otherness,¹⁰ this inserted boundary also simultaneously emphasises the embeddedness of thoughts in the character. Not only are the thoughts beyond our assimilation, they are in themselves provisional. In general, the claims made in Coetzee's novels do not venture far beyond the characters who voice them at a specific point in time. This embeddedness then allows Coetzee's writing to evolve with the character, to react to new stimuli, without invoking a permanent state of epistemological doubt. Though we may never make conclusive sense of the Coetzeean oeuvre, we can at least say that it is living and refuses to be pinned down. The texts embody the ongoing lives of their protagonists, who are simultaneously underwritten by their implied authors and the life of Coetzee himself. Given Coetzee's much-cited claim that 'all writing is autobiography,'¹¹ the reality of Coetzee's life ineluctably becomes the un-deconstructable basis of his writing.

The aim of the present study is to preserve the distinctive livingness of Coetzee's fiction as far as possible within the discourse of criticism. To do so, I will focus my attention within the limit of *being* in Coetzee's writing or what I would call, following Elizabeth Costello, 'the body-soul.' A focus on the limit of the body-soul means the subsuming of external parameters, such as critical approaches and ethical judgement, to the characters' specific state of being and the verbal forms it has given rise to. By enforcing this limit to reading and nothing else, it is possible to carve out a secure yet flexible stance to engage with Coetzee's unpredictable course of writing. Given the multifariousness of Coetzee's works, my readings of different texts and characters will have a degree of independence from one another, but throughout I try to accentuate the living presence that Coetzee is exceptionally alive to in his writing as being

¹⁰ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 50.

¹¹ J.M. Coetzee and David Attwell, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.

consistently the wellspring of the text's meaning. Within the philosophical language of criticism, this will remain an incomplete effort, but it will provide an alternative perspective on some obscure portions of Coetzee's oeuvre and their relationship to the rest of his writings.

This thesis conducts readings of a selection of Coetzee's works that have attracted limited critical attention or, due to their uncertain genres, are resistant to formal approaches of literary criticism. By giving attention to the protagonists' body-souls—i.e., their fears, desires or vulnerabilities—one can gain a focal point from which to continuously engage with the texts in all their changeability and, hopefully, to bring the writing to life. My selection includes, first of all, the Costello's fiction-as-lecture text 'The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals,'¹² which is widely read in philosophy but whose narrative portrayal of Elizabeth Costello is often left underrepresented in comparison to her argument. Coetzee's puzzling metafictional novel *Slow Man* is discussed alongside *Age of Iron*, with particular focus on the living beings of the writer and the character to help account for the novel's metafictional conceit. This study additionally attends to the John Coetzee(s) of the three highly disparate fictional memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, which challenge both literary interpretations and truth-directed readings. Finally, two unlovable Coetzee texts, 'The Problem of Evil,' and the novel *The Master of Petersburg*, are examined with the same focus on the characters as living beings. In its limited scope, this thesis fails to address the earliest of Coetzee's fiction such as *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*, or the group of novels from which Coetzee gained his global reputation like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, and *Disgrace*. However, by comparison with the texts covered in this thesis, these omitted works may be said to have been well-accommodated within the sensitive criticism from the historical and ethical perspectives, notably by critics such as David Attwell¹³ and Derek Attridge. Meanwhile, *Diary of a Bad Year*

¹² J.M. Coetzee, 'The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals', in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 59–90.

¹³ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

and Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2015), are challenges that will have to be left for the future.¹⁴

Approaching Elizabeth Costello's 'body-soul'

This study's proposed attention to the body-soul is made conceptually possible by 'The Philosophers and the Animals,' the first of Coetzee's two 'The Lives of Animals' lectures at Princeton University in 1997, which now form part of his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*. The fiction-as-lecture provides a description of sympathetic engagement that deeply informs this thesis. In the lecture, the character Costello refers to the experience of being alive as the only essential ground required for sympathy with other beings. I call this basis in short as 'the body-soul' but, throughout Costello's talk, she in fact never settles on a name for this basic experience of being alive. She speaks varyingly of 'the living soul,' 'the body-soul,' or 'embodied soul,' but never employs the same term more than once. Her explanation of this experience is entirely tautological, as if to suggest that such awareness should be self-evident for all beings without needing intellectual explanation: 'To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*. (...) To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul.'¹⁵ Indeed, to give a single name to the experience of being alive is to enforce a uniformity that does not exist, for living entails change. Unfortunately, a thesis cannot be coherently written on an experience with no name, so this singular experience is to be called by the most neutral of Costello's multiplying terms, made up of two nouns without active or passive verb to suggest temporality: 'the body-soul.'

Costello provides more shape to 'the body-soul' by opposing this state of being to the Western ideal of human superiority over animals based on its possession of the rational thinking mind. In a magnificently forceful passage, Costello details the sense of being a body-soul as follows:

¹⁴ The implications of this study on how one might approach *The Childhood of Jesus* are addressed in the thesis's conclusion.

¹⁵ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 77–78 (emphasis original).

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. (78)

For Costello, this embodied state of being, which she knows without having to think, knows by the fact of her being alive, is an irrefutable foundational reality. At special moments of clarity, Costello asserts that ‘we *are* that knowledge’ (77).

The body-soul is clearly a development from Coetzee’s famous comment on his novel *Foe* in one of the interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (1992), where he states that ‘If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not.”’¹⁶ This standard of the body has played a crucial role in distinguishing Coetzee’s novels since *Barbarians* as achievements that are independent from high modernism, whereas Coetzee’s first two novels, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*, may be seen as influenced by disembodied poststructuralist experiments or Beckettian prose. For Brian May, *Barbarians* ‘provides a critique of, and passage beyond, the asceticism of *In the Heart of the Country*.’¹⁷ But it is less acknowledged that Coetzee speaks of the body’s dominance in South Africa as a politically inscribed force rather than a natural state of being. He continues that ‘in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons... but for political reasons, for reason of power.’ The overall sense of this section is that Coetzee had longed to engage with other aspects of life, but could not since, as he says, ‘the suffering body *takes* this authority.’¹⁸ Coetzee thus sees the last

¹⁶ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

¹⁷ Brian May, ‘J.M. Coetzee and the Question of the Body’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 404.

¹⁸ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

pages of *Foe*, in which it is written that mute bodies ‘are their own signs,’¹⁹ as ‘[closing] the text by force,’ bringing to an abrupt end ‘the endlessness of its skepticism.’²⁰

Within this same interview, Coetzee hints at his interest in finding less coercive ways of closing a text. He mentions the Dostoevskian ideal of divine grace in confession, presenting it tentatively as an alternative way to end regressive confessions with ‘a measure of charity’ rather than force. Then, Coetzee’s writing in this final part of the interview turns strikingly ambivalent; as if he is describing a growing sense that cannot find full expression within available frames of reference. He switches liberally between different discourses, comparing the endlessness of Freudian psychology to the finality of Dostoevskian religious faith and then suddenly referring to himself as ‘a political novelist’ and to all human beings as ‘children.’ I will reproduce an extended quote here to give a sense of the confusion that stems from a lack of fitting intellectual ground:

Politics, in its wise stupidity, is at one with religion here: one man, one soul: no half-measures. What saves me from a merely stupid stupidity, I would hope, is a measure of charity, which is, I suppose, the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world. Another way of saying this is that I try not to lose sight of the reality that we are children, unreconstructed (Freud wouldn’t disagree at this point), to be treated with the charity that children have due to them (charity that doesn’t preclude clear-sightedness). (249)

With the help from Costello’s subsequent evocation of ‘the body-soul,’ we are in a better position today to make sense of what Coetzee is gesturing at, namely, that in his writing he longs to find a mode in which to bring his own secular

¹⁹ ‘But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.’ See J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 157.

²⁰ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

narrative to an end that is truer to himself than psychology, which he sees as endless; than religion, for which he has not the faith; and than politics, which, to him, represents an unwelcome external force. The body is only one part in this larger concern of Coetzee, with the soul being another and the full experience of living being the complete picture.

As the above passage may already suggest, I would also argue that ‘the soul’ evoked in Coetzee’s writing, and in Costello’s sense of ‘the body-soul,’ stems from a different source than religious doctrines. The soul is again part of the inexpressible and indivisible experience of being alive. In Costello’s use of the term, she brings the divine immortal soul down to earth, it now belonging neither to God nor to the Devil, but to the actual living experience in combination with bodily sensations. The Coetzean soul has irrational desires as the body has desires, which affect the actions of the characters. Two memorable passages from *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace* show his characters acting out of raw impulses that are not explicable in discourses originating from outside the characters themselves. The first is Costello’s curt justification for her vegetarianism at a reception dinner after her ‘The Lives of Animals’ talk:

‘But your own vegetarianism, Mrs Costello,’ says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: ‘it comes out of moral conviction does it not?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ says his mother. ‘It comes out of a desire to save my soul.’²¹

The second quote comes from *Disgrace* and concerns David Lurie’s rumination over his unnecessary effort to give euthanised dogs respectful burials:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honor and dishonor anyway?

²¹ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 89.

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.²²

In both these instances, the characters' actions are clearly independent of their retrospective explanations. Costello and Lurie end up settling for very limited justifications that centre on their inner impulses. Often, criticism's final word on the matter would be that the narratives are ironising these justifications of the characters, that Coetzee recognises the fundamental discrepancies within Costello's vegetarianism or Lurie's sentimental attachment to dogs over people; but I doubt this is entirely the case. The Coetzeean narrating voice is often too close to the protagonist to fully satirise him or her. Some of the distance that it affords certainly does portray the characters' actions as imperfect attempts to do the right thing, but these acts are seriously taken as life decisions in a universe where perfect answers are unavailable, where actions are called for before rational conclusion can be reached.

The characters seem to have an instinctive sense that beside bodily impulses, which are sexual in Lurie's case and a matter of appetite in Costello's, there is also a spiritual element to their unconscious, an impulse to do good for 'the soul' that is as basic and irreducible as hunger or desire. In Lesson 5 of *Elizabeth Costello*, 'The Humanities in Africa,' Costello is caught in another feast following a graduation ceremony in which her sister has been given an honorary degree. During the meal that satisfies the body's hunger, she thinks privately of 'a soul with the hungers of a soul,' that 'perhaps that is what all of them are around this table, in their deepest being: hungry soul.'²³ So far critical discussions have tended to align the frequent use of the word 'soul' in Coetzee to religious ideology, specifically in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but perhaps the term is altogether much more elemental. Beyond a similar set of words, the sanctity of religion is rather at variance with the grittiness of Coetzee's portrayal of spirituality. While the word 'soul' or 'evil' in Coetzee

²² J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), 146.

²³ J.M. Coetzee, 'The Humanities in Africa', in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 128.

may refer to roughly the same thing as in religion, his characters are shown to be grasping at these concepts from their immediate experiences rather than as a pathway towards a version of religious faith.

Historicising the body-soul

The presence of the body-soul in Coetzee's fiction was most likely formed as Coetzee contended with life in apartheid South Africa, where his own hyper-rationality and predilection for European high culture were rendered incapacitated. This founding experience is unique to the conflicted existence of the colonial intellectuals, whose received culture is formed far away from their immediate surrounding. In a lecture delivered in 1991 titled 'What Is a Classic?,' Coetzee observes the similar fate of the American-born British-domiciled poet T.S. Eliot in terms that clearly apply to himself:

To [young colonials], the high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm. In extreme cases, they are led to blame their environment for not living up to art and to take up residence in an art world. This is a provincial fate... but particularly a colonial fate.²⁴

In Coetzee's case, the result of this difficult struggle is an art that possesses the aesthetic and theoretical sophistication of European civilisation but a grounding in the primordality of the living and dying body-soul.

The relationship between these two lineages is presented by Coetzee in 'What Is a Classic?' as an oppositional but dependent one; and insofar as the lecture is autobiographical, this antagonistic dependence also represents Coetzee's attempt to conceive of his own standing in the history of Western literature. At the close of the lecture, Coetzee invokes Zbigniew Herbert's notion

²⁴ J.M. Coetzee, 'What Is a Classic?', in *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002), 7–8.

of the confrontation between ‘the classic’ and ‘the barbarian’ in an effort to rescue the fading idea of the classic in a globalised age. Coetzee’s proposal of what constitutes a classic is conspicuously devoid of geographical border or evocation of shared artistic qualities. Instead, it is founded upon living and surviving people; the classic, for Coetzee, is what survives with them: ‘what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs—that is the classic.’²⁵ The living basis of this definition is clearly congruent with Costello’s idea of the body-soul. Coetzee then adds that this survival is only meaningful if there are constant attacks; that is, to become a classic, a work of art may depend upon oppositions such as ‘criticism of the most sceptical kind’ to test its worthiness (19).

By this definition, Coetzee’s fiction gains the capacity to become a world classic. It also bodes well that Coetzee has himself survived a fair share of critical attacks for the irrelevance of his fiction during the South African apartheid. But beyond this, it is difficult to trust the lecture’s statement as a universal criterion for the classic since the motivation behind its formation is so evidently self-interested and personal. Whatever the true answer to the question ‘what is a classic?’ is, it does not directly concern the reading for the body-soul that I am interested in. This question is introduced here mainly to underline the historicity of the body-soul’s appearance in Coetzee’s fiction, and hopefully to then show that historicity does not necessarily dispel the meaning of the body-soul as it does rational, universal truths. The truths of the body-soul are already living and dying. They are inherently provisional. In order to historicise the body-soul and draw out its provisional meaning, I will briefly read ‘What Is a Classic?’ against its aspiration to establish a classic by limiting its relevance to Coetzee’s own situation.

Seen in a cold light, the appearance of ‘What Is a Classic?’ betrays Coetzee’s own anxiety of not belonging among the revered classics or of being perceived as only their exotic offshoot. This anxiety is understandably great as long as the authority of the old cultural centres remains absolute, both in

²⁵ Coetzee, ‘What Is a Classic?’, 19.

Coetzee's own Western educated mind and in the global consciousness. Therefore, part of the reason why Coetzee's texts often enact barbaric attacks upon their characters' distinctly Western mentality—for instance, against the magistrate's colonial power in *Waiting for the Barbarian*, Mrs. Curren's classicist education in *Age of Iron*, or the Romanticism of David Lurie in *Disgrace*—is likely because the Coetzeean texts are trying to stake out a place in the hall of fame for their provincial identity. On the other hand, reading from a sympathetic perspective of myself as also an outsider to Europe, these novels verbalise a true and much more ambiguous internal conflict, one that responds intimately to a colonial condition that is vaguely shared by much of the world's population. In a sense that is not definitive, the non-rational component of Coetzee's fiction—its accommodation of the body-soul—functions importantly to open up the Western corpus to interpretations from non-European, non-Christian experiences, and even that of the animal. For Coetzee, it would seem that any writing does contain a living truth that, although it is limited in scope, is still relatable and true in the primordial sense of our experiences.

With sensitivity to the body-soul, it is possible to historicise a piece of writing in a manner that does not delegitimise or delimit its assertions, but rather with an interest in understanding at an affective level the embodied truth of another's life and, therefore, also of one's own living truth. One sees Coetzee returning to living-ness often in his discursive writings. In *The Good Story*, a collection of Coetzee's correspondence with psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee casually expounds on the difference between 'living reading' and 'dead reading.' He writes that, while with dead reading 'the words never come alive on the page,' living reading 'involves finding one's way into the voice that speaks from the page, the voice of the Other, and inhabiting that voice, so that you speak to yourself (your self) from outside yourself.'²⁶

While this preferred manner of reading for Coetzee represents a critique of rationality and its Western locality, it has the capacity to step outside itself and recognise its own historical indebtedness to Western civilisation. One regularly

²⁶ J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Harvill Secker, 2015), 179.

finds Coetzee's 'anti-rational' writing suggesting its own historicity through the voices of their characters. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren reflects on her letter to her daughter—which is in effect the novel itself—as being 'my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place.'²⁷ Hers is further a living truth that, like the classic, depends upon life for its survival, upon being read and reimagined by another body-soul. Addressing her daughter, she writes: 'If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. You will never even know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh.'²⁸ This study will attempt to act as that sympathetic reader who, in reading the texts, prolongs their life.

Coetzeean clarity and the role of critics

One feature of Coetzee's fictions that has not been acknowledged enough in criticism is their remarkable clarity. I speak of this clarity firstly from the perspective of a critic who finds in Coetzee's fiction a drastic reduction of narrative secrets that would require the uncovering process of interpretation, and I present this claim of the fiction's transparency in part to recalibrate my own critical relationship with Coetzee's texts. Literary criticism tends to begin by emphasising puzzling or obscure aspects of the text, which it will then strive to disentangle into neat exposition, but Coetzee's fictions are compelling because of their clarity, in light of which one's interpretative attempts feel superfluous. Secondly, this clarity depends on clear connections from Coetzee's writings to his own life as a body-soul. That is, when one reads Coetzee with some familiarity with the author and his situation, one can imagine approximately the experiences or the real world coordinates from which the meanings are coming.

There are a few considerable objections to my claim of Coetzeean clarity that should be addressed at the outset. The most obvious of which is the common view that the ethics of Coetzeean texts rests on their preservation of the Other's obscurity. The text's self-reflexivity problematises finalising interpretations and resists being made to support universalised and repeatable meanings. We are never sure what Coetzee's novel says as a unified whole and, therefore, it is

²⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 130.

²⁸ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 130.

assumed that the text must not be transparent but is rather calling into question notions of closure. Outside the texts, already notable for their difficulty, we also encounter Coetzee's reputation as a deeply private individual, an impression left most pointedly in the few interviews he has taken part in, in which he comes across as unwilling to expand on the points proffered by his interviewers. Newspaper articles predominantly describe Coetzee with the words 'reclusive' and 'private.'

Though this image of a prickly, reclusive author is a tired stereotype, it curiously resonates with Coetzee's own depiction of his young self as a secretive boy in *Boyhood*. The boy's primal fear is the thought that 'the ugly, black, crying, babyish core of him' will be revealed to the world despite 'all the stories that have been built up around him, built by himself, built by years of normal behaviour.'²⁹ In the final memoir *Summertime*, a fictional biographer of John Coetzee describes the author's reputation as 'a cold and supercilious intellectual.'³⁰ These self-parodies and critical and media portrayals contribute to an impression of Coetzee's guardedness that can sometimes obscure the extraordinary forthrightness of his fiction—a forthrightness that is already apparent in the fact that we can quote from Coetzee's writing to discuss his own abstruseness.

The second resistance has to do with the limit of criticism itself as a discourse. To say that a work of fiction is clear in itself has serious ramifications for literary criticism, which is a discipline with a lot riding on the emotional and intellectual obscurity of its subject. Coetzee in his role as critic raised this conflict of interest in his 1984 lecture 'Truth in Autobiography' at the University of Cape Town. In the lecture, Coetzee sharply deconstructs the 'truth' as presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Confessions*, but finishes by turning his attention back onto his own critical practice and pointedly asking:

²⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), 112.

³⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Vintage, 2009), 235.

What privilege do I claim to tell the truth of Rousseau that Rousseau cannot tell? What is the privilege of criticism by which it claims to tell the truth of literature?... Is it not possible that to tell what the privilege of criticism over literature is would be to tell a truth that criticism cannot afford to tell, namely, why it wants the literary text to stand there in all its ignorance, side by side with the radiant truth of the text supplied by criticism, without the latter supplanting the former?³¹

So despite his critique of Rousseau's text, Coetzee suggests that, rather than criticism being a superior form than the literary text in which to utter the truth, the truth uncovered in his critical reading also harbours its own secret. Like Rousseau's autobiography, criticism has a truth that it cannot afford to spell out, specifically regarding its posture (or imposture) of perfect clarity and its dependence on literature. This point, Coetzee says, is 'the heart of this lecture'; that '[a]ll forms of discourse may have secrets, of no great profundity, which they nevertheless cannot afford to unveil' (5-6). The presence of a secret is not the fault of a discourse but a currency that underpins its being.

As so much of Coetzee's fiction does not owe allegiance to one discourse, but is rather a movement across critical thinking, affective life and fictional creation, there remains at least a possibility that his narratives can be more transparent than writings in a specific discourse. While further proof will have to be in the reading, for the moment we can take advantage of criticism's dependence on textual obscurity to gauge the transparency of Coetzee's fiction by looking at the difficulty experienced by critical respondents to the novels. It is notable that critically negative readings like the one Coetzee performs on Rousseau very rarely surface in relation to Coetzee's novels; the only prominent one being Benita Parry's 1998 'Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee,' which argues that the persecuted characters in Coetzee's novels are

³¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Truth in Autobiography*, Inaugural Lecture (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1984), 5–6.

ventriloquized and objectified.³² Her misgiving did not find much support in the critical community and its argument that Coetzee's novels up to *Age of Iron* silenced their persecuted characters can be said to have been prefigured in the novels themselves.

On the other hand, the most successful, which is to say most responsive, critical commentaries on Coetzee share an emphasis on what the novels do—ethically, historically, stylistically, etc.—rather than on trying to say what they mean. The most influential demonstration of such criticism can be found in Attridge's monograph *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, which avoids the violence of interpretation by shifting the critical gaze inward onto one's activities as reader and critic in relation to Coetzee's novels. The chapter 'Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*,' in particular, captures the major critical challenge posed by Coetzee's texts by demonstrating that, before the critics arrive, Coetzee's characters have already explored the allegorical possibilities of their stories, already scoured their own lives for meanings, yet still having to go on living in the unknown. In light of the characters' self-critique, Attridge suggests an experiment whereby the readers 'resist the allegorical reading that the novels seem half to solicit, half to problematize, and take them, as it were, at their word.'³³ In saying so, he argues for what he calls 'literal reading,' which is an experience of each reading as a singular *event* in which meanings, as Attridge puts it, 'are derived from my familiarity with the genre, my participation in the shared meanings of my culture, and from my own personal history' (40). As I see it, this is literary criticism practiced with a growing autobiographical awareness of the provisionality of its own truth, driven to self-reflection by a body of fictional text that wears its autobiographical truth on its sleeve.

So to write criticism on Coetzee's fiction is often to meet the challenge of a text with an already extraordinary clarity and also a complete oeuvre that

³² Benita Parry, 'Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee', in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 151.

³³ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 35.

comes furnished with the disclosure of its most relevant literary and theoretical influences.³⁴ In his study of the Coetzee archive, David Attwell reproduces a passage from Coetzee's notebook that interestingly conjures an image of what Coetzee does when he writes:

With every book I have written, the temptation has been to extend (to get length) by adding planes of consciousness. Every time this stratagem has been (rightly) avoided. Insofar as the books have achieved anything, it has been that they have reduced the planes to (projected the planes onto) a single plane.³⁵

This image of the single plane nicely captures Coetzeean clarity. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee famously describes a state of clarity in Dostoevskian term of 'grace,' which stands opposed to cynicism. He gives definitions of the two poles as follows: 'Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness.'³⁶ Coetzee does not attribute the debate between cynicism and grace to himself. Instead, he says that it 'is staged by Dostoevsky' or that they are 'terms brought into prominence in the essay ['Confession and Double Thoughts']' (392), which includes a discussion of Dostoevsky's work. One senses that the meanings of cynicism and grace for Coetzee are based on the world of Dostoevsky's novels and influenced by the Russian's embattled Christian faith—in other words, they are the truth of Dostoevsky's body-soul. In responding specifically to Coetzee's fiction, it may be necessary to imagine a Coetzeean version of the ideal condition

³⁴ Coetzeean critics can be said to be particularly dependent on their subject's writing given that Coetzee is a novelist/critic. In her article on *Boyhood*, Collingwood-Whittick acknowledges 'the invaluable frame of reference provided by Coetzee's own theoretical writing' (14), and, indeed, Coetzee's critical writings on concepts such as 'the middle voice' and 'countervoices,' or his readings of writers such as Kafka, Beckett, and Dostoevsky, and pithy comments like 'all writing is autobiography' have decisively shaped the critical perceptions of his work.

³⁵ Quoted in Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 156.

³⁶ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 392.

for truth and place it into a Coetzeean world picture. From the above quote from Coetzee's notebook, it appears that his writing vaguely conceives of this task as a condensation of various segregated ways of perceiving into one, which, I will argue, is the plane of his protagonist's living body-soul.

The body-soul and the Australian fictions

Costello's evocation of the embodied soul comes at the start of Coetzee's return to the formal experiment of *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. The first three novels following his emigration from South Africa to Australia in 2002 have author figures featuring prominently in all of them and are marked by increased metafictional self-referentiality. The criticism of his novels in turn responded to the change by transferring its focus from the ethico-political considerations of anti-apartheid readings, to explorations of delocalised literary concerns such as style, fictional genres and question of authorial authority. While the literary is no doubt interconnected with the ethico-political, the connection has not always been made. Criticism on Coetzee begins to split between appreciations of Coetzee's subtle political engagement during works from the apartheid era and the literariness of his Australian works. The latter, viewed as dominated by epistemological uncertainty, are approached in an intellectual manner with less sympathetic recognition for their embodied quality.

In her consideration of the Australian fictions, Elleke Boehmer describes Coetzee's voice as 'a famously stripped-down, standardized yet globalized English voice—one that assumes a broadly secular, humanist position.'³⁷ This characterless rendition, however, runs quite contrary to the full-bodied presence recalled in Costello's speech about the embodied soul that is tethered to its specific context. On the other hand, Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill, editors of an influential collection of essays, *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, recognise that there are more continuities than discontinuities between the J.M. Coetzee before and after the apartheid. Their introduction to the monograph relates an intention to 'realign the South African Coetzee with the "late modernist" Coetzee, who has never abandoned or forgotten or ceased to care

³⁷ Boehmer, 'J. M. Coetzee's Australian Realism', 4.

about that modernist, linguistic and epistemological battlefield.³⁸ But this statement only further cements the idea that disembodied epistemological and formal questions will now be the overarching theme for discussions of Coetzee's works.

While this thematic shift allows criticism to revisit Coetzee's South African novels with a keener appreciation for the technical complexity that underpins their political and ethical resonances, the reverse cannot be said about Coetzee's Australian novels, for by and large, they are not viewed with the same affective engagement that is afforded his South African fiction. The experience of reading Coetzee's late novels, of being led along their highly irregular narrative rhythms, is often dissected in criticisms down to static snapshots of formal contrivances or the characters' argumentative assertions. Hayes's monograph *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, for instance, approaches the Australian novels as creative arguments. To Hayes, this section of the oeuvre represents Coetzee's intellectual foray into cultural criticism, whose meanings are best understood when placed 'in a much wider tradition of debate on the nature and value of "high culture."' ³⁹ While I have no objections to the insights from sensitive applications of such an approach, this study hopes to provide an alternative stance that will continue the embodied legacy of Coetzee's South African experience.

An important point is that the body-soul features not in an opposition to the intellectual opinions held by the characters in Coetzee's novels. Its presence does not simplistically detract from assertions the voice is making, assertions which are what Coetzee's criticism has so far picked up. Rather, the body-soul is a basis of the human (or non-human) in the writings, whether these writings be in the form of letters, ideas, opinions, arguments, or drunken babbles. Coetzee's fictions speak with this troubled awareness of embodied souls, so that even as it depicts characters whose actions or viewpoints one finds instinctively repulsive

³⁸ Graham Bradshaw, 'Introduction: After "Disgrace": Lord and Lady Chandos in Cape Town and Adelaide', in *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, ed. Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 14.

³⁹ Patrick Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 225.

or ridiculous, one's attention is still preserved by glimpses of the corporeal and spiritual agony that informs them. Alternatively, and this is an important point to get across, when the opinions expressed in the fiction are so logically persuasive that they overwhelm doubts, as is the case in the excellent discursive mode of *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's texts still acknowledge the restricted impact of even a perfect argument on the characters' ongoing lives. So rather than requiring a change of approach from the readers, in my view Coetzee's Australian novels bring the body-soul into sharper focus by showing its survival even when the writing engages with postmodern techniques that are notoriously disembodied. The characters' vulnerabilities continue to leak out of the seams between the different forms adopted by Coetzee's late novels.

The varied terrain of Coetzee's fiction covered in this study helps show that whether Coetzee resorts to inventive formal devices in his narratives or does not—as in the instance of the predominantly realist *Age of Iron*—the formal decision still feeds into his adherence to the characters' beings and their circumstances. It is not the case that the Coetzee who wrote *Age of Iron* had yet to consider the techniques of postmodern metafiction, but rather that the violent reality of South Africa under the State of Emergency, and under which Mrs. Curren lives her last days, would have been shortchanged by the insubstantiality communicated by the self-reflexive postmodern voice. The Australia of *Slow Man*, on the other hand, engenders a much less precarious life for Paul Rayment and comes equipped with a welfare system that takes care of his worst physical vulnerabilities, even if it fails to provide his soul with 'loving care.'⁴⁰ Thus, unlike the people under South African apartheid, Rayment's life choices are divorced from matters of his own life and death. In a limited sense, his less fraught existence allows for the metafictional intervention of his author Elizabeth Costello and the interplay between the different novelistic genres that coexist in that novel.

The living reality of Coetzee's characters is, in other words, more foundational than the literary or discursive forms that house them. A reading that is focused on form cannot put us on a solid footing to engage with Coetzee's

⁴⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Vintage, 2006), 261.

fiction, as the forms of his writing never cease to evolve with the characters. Without going into too much detail of individual works at this point, we can look at how *The Childhood of Jesus*, Coetzee's most recent novel at this time, has already brought about a return to stable narration and an imaginary setting and disrupted the critical narrative of recent years that Coetzee's Australian fiction signals a turn towards formally self-reflexive literature. The term 'Australian fiction' itself is rendered suspect by a new story that is set in an imaginary Spanish-speaking town named Novilla. Taken as a whole, the genre shifts from realist to metafiction, or from letters, to lectures, to essays, to fictional narrative, and to autobiographical tales, do not form a meaningful trajectory among themselves. A recognition of the body-soul in Coetzee's writing, however, can free our reading from the endless task of enforcing coherence onto multiplicity and give us a mode of appreciating each literary or discursive form as readable representations of specific states of being.

The autobiographical

The claim I am making about reading for the body-soul differs slightly from Attridge's argument that Coetzee's fiction nudges the readers to read not for a specific message, but to experience it as an 'ethically charged event, one that befalls individual readers and, at the same time, the culture within which, and through which, they read.'⁴¹ While I find immensely important Attridge's inclusion of the reader and their context, I would question the assumption of a Levinasian 'ethical' undercurrent in Coetzee's fiction, which suggests that the narratives are fundamentally concerned with how one should act towards the Other. The ethical imperative itself is historically situated. It may have been a central concern during Coetzee's apartheid fiction, but it has noticeably less leverage in the democratic world of Australia. We can alternatively trace the life of 'the ethical' in Coetzee's novels through the word 'soul' and its changing concerns. In *Age of Iron*, set during the height of apartheid violence, Mrs. Curren professes that she is 'trying to keep the soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul,' and one senses in her remark the threat from the moral corruption of the

⁴¹ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, xi.

age. On the other hand, the ‘soul-life’ of Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*’s Australia is gloomy rather than in peril, and it chooses to chase after earthly love for his nurse Marijana Jokić instead of religious salvation: ‘It all feels one to him, one movement: the swelling of the soul, the swelling of the heart, the swelling of desire. He cannot imagine loving God more than he loves Marijana at this moment.’⁴²

Attridge’s influential ethical grounding has led to an overemphasis in subsequent critical commentaries on the unknowable figures of the Other in Coetzee’s writing, which in fact perpetuates the process of othering it criticises. The emphasis is also achieved at the expense of our attention for the central consciousness on whom we depend for the experience of the Other, and who is often already an other to ourselves. In my reading of *Age of Iron* in Chapter Four, the relationship between Mrs. Curren and the derelict Verceuil is shown to involve mutual likeness and difference that is never static as is suggested by the poles of the same and the other.

Age of Iron additionally introduces the motif of ‘following’ that helps us concretise ‘the event’ of reading and writing into the image of living beings. Mrs. Curren writes that she follows Verceuil because ‘in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written.’⁴³ And indeed, the constant movement of Coetzee’s fiction may be best epitomised in this action of ‘following’ through which the writing self strives to transcend the restrictive view of its authoritative position by giving up the lead and becoming a bare body-soul that tails a fictional being. From Coetzee’s different critical essays on autobiography like ‘Double Thoughts,’⁴⁴ we can gather that he perceives the speaker’s position—which is determined variously by the ‘automatism’⁴⁵ built into language, genre or discourse, as well as the speaking self’s psyche and its infinite contexts—to always involve a measure of blindness. It is only by the constant shifting of all

⁴² Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 186.

⁴³ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 9.

⁴⁴ J.M. Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky’, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 251–93.

⁴⁵ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 18.

these components while adhering to the foundational fact of being alive that he can see his writing breaking into new meaningful grounds for himself.

By conceiving writing in this way, we are bringing into the picture the writing self who does the imaginative following and is himself registered in the text. There is a famous statement by Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*, written right after *Age of Iron* in 1991 that: ‘all writing is autobiography: everything that you write... writes you as you write it’ in the sense that writing ‘reveals... what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place’ (17-18). Today, the statement strikes me as an oddly insufficient description of his current oeuvre. Its preoccupation with the process of writing and thinking occludes the body-soul and its desires, which has now emerged to be crucially involved in his creative process. Perhaps Coetzee had wanted to leave the matter for later on in his writing career; in any case, we are at present blessed with a wealth of deeply personal works from Coetzee himself such as *The Master of Petersburg* and the three fictional memoirs, together with external sources such as JC Kannemeyer’s biography *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, David Attwell’s critical monograph on Coetzee’s manuscripts *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* and a comprehensive Coetzee Archive at Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

Given all these biographical materials, which will only grow with time, ‘all writing is autobiography’ has a more literal meaning now than it did in the days of *Doubling the Point*, at least in so far as Coetzee’s own practice is concerned. In other words, Coetzee’s fiction has a dimension that is undeniably non-textual and real, which if we have not already felt within the text, is confessed to in its half-hidden autobiographical referents. The self-reflexivity of Coetzee’s fiction crucially differs from the technique literary postmodernism employs to reveal the hands that pull the strings, which reinstates the writer’s command over textual play as his vulnerabilities remains blanketed. Instead, Coetzeean reflexivity is more often an effect of the autobiographical, meaning that it reaches for the being behind the writing and confronts its more resistant anxieties and desires. The writer in this case feels himself not in control since he is being half-uncovered as he half-creates his stories.



The chapters of this thesis are organised by the novels' thematic interests and formal similarities. Starting with the border text between Coetzee's South African and Australian works, Chapter One, 'Sympathy for Elizabeth Costello,' reads the chapter 'The Philosophers and the Animals' from *Elizabeth Costello* by following the eponymous protagonist's argument in a lecture against the Western philosophical and rational conception of non-human animals. I demonstrate that parts of Costello's lecture are rationally *unfounded* and hinge on the reader's sympathy for her as a character. Her argument only makes the fullest sense when it is read with sympathy for the body-soul behind the words. The dependence of her lecture on sympathy parallels her assertion that, in place of rationality, one can relate to any animal through the 'sympathetic imagination,' a faculty that is based on one's awareness of oneself as another vulnerable body-soul. While my reading begins with rational engagement with the philosophers cited by Costello during the lecture, it ends with the off-stage figure of Costello in a car with her son, uncertain that all that she has said—her embodied truth—may be no truer than the truth of her meat-eating family members. This particular chapter from *Elizabeth Costello* sensitively conceptualises, without abandoning the complexities of living, what it entails to relate to another body-soul.

The second chapter expands the implications of the body-soul from the act of reading to the act of writing and approaches *Slow Man*'s baffling introduction of the authorial presence that has puzzled critics since its publication. I attend to the living figure of the writer in *Slow Man* and in *Age of Iron* as he/she 'follows' another character and advance the notion that Coetzee sees his writing as an act of 'following' another living being in hope of arriving at a deeper truth than is possible in a plain rational account written from the position of authority. In the process, I also attempt to make the Coetzeean oeuvre cohere by linking the two formally and temporally disparate texts—the former a constricted realist narrative about the mid-1980s State of Emergency in South Africa and the latter a halting metafiction set in twenty-first century Adelaide, Australia—under the image of the body-soul. Chapter Three, 'The Confessions of John Coetzee,' confronts the living being of Coetzee in his writings, specifically in the fictional memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. A focus

on the body-soul of John Coetzee provides a neutral platform to make sense of the series's intriguing blend of truth and fiction without privileging one over the other. I trace how Coetzee draws on different discourses—of the memoir, the confession, fiction, etc.—to speak the truth of different phases of his life with keen awareness of their discursive blind spots.

Chapter Four examines two devious Coetzee texts, *Elizabeth Costello's* 'The Problem of Evil' and *The Master of Petersburg*, which intentionally challenge the reader's sympathy with the body-soul. They provocatively ask, if not every living being is the force for the good, should we still read with sympathy? Both these texts are at least mildly offensive: in 'The Problem of Evil,' Costello uses her lecture platform to criticise a real-life author Paul West for his novel's portrayal of torture, while *The Master of Petersburg* presents, without any disclaimer, a false story about the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky mourning the death of his stepson that is more a story about Coetzee himself. My chapter explores the possibility that Coetzee's fiction can be entirely unpleasant and unprincipled perversions, but still remain representations of experiences that are an inescapable part of living.

CHAPTER ONE

Sympathy for Elizabeth Costello

Sympathy has become a prominent concept in commentaries on Coetzee's novels following the provocative claim of Coetzee's protagonist Elizabeth Costello that 'there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination,' delivered in the first of Coetzee's two 'The Lives of Animals' lectures at Princeton University.⁴⁶ Yet many of these literary responses do not embrace Costello's sponsoring of sympathy, seeing it as cancelled out by the irony built into the Coetzee's oeuvre. To Sam Durrant, 'Coetzee's fiction unequivocally rehearses the failure of Costello's sympathetic imagination.'⁴⁷ The novel *Disgrace*, in which the protagonist David Lurie faces the impossibility of his ever understanding the female experience of rape, is regularly touted as evidence of Coetzee's acknowledgement of sympathetic limits. For Molly Abel Travis, *Disgrace* demonstrates the pitfalls of empathy and, instead, works by 'eschewing resolution and calling forth an ethical response beyond empathy.'⁴⁸ Geoffrey Baker echoes the opposition between *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*, contending that 'Elizabeth Costello's seemingly visionary proclamations on a sympathetic imagination without limits lie somewhat tarnished in the incinerator afterglow of *Disgrace*.'⁴⁹ Rather than sympathy, the literary critics consider Coetzee's fiction to espouse the Levinasian model of engagement with unknowable alterity, which distances itself from sympathy and its sentimental reputation.

⁴⁶ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 80. Previously published in *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Sam Durrant, 'J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination', in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 2006), 120.

⁴⁸ Molly Abel Travis, 'Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 40, no. 2 (2010): 246.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Baker, 'The Limits of Sympathy: J.M. Coetzee's Evolving Ethics of Engagement', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 36, no. 1-2 (2005): 44.

The two ‘The Lives of Animals’ lectures have also inspired a host of responses from animal studies and analytic philosophy,⁵⁰ which, in a surprising contrast, are much more congenial to Costello’s privileging of the sympathetic imagination over philosophical thinking. Among them, Cora Diamond’s ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’⁵¹ stands out for its sensitivity to Costello’s embodied critique of philosophy. Diamond senses in Coetzee’s lecture-narrative a reality that is ‘resistant to our thinking it’ (45) and argues for the need to respond to the Costello piece from ‘our own sense of what it is to be a living animal’ as opposed to ‘pulling out ideas and arguments as if they had been simply clothed in fictional form as a way of putting them before us’ (53). Diamond notes that this reading as a living animal is not to say vaguely that one should read the text as literature, but she does not go further, restricting her discussion only to what philosophy should not do.

While my argument in this thesis is obviously more in line with Diamond’s, I would like to highlight in these different strands of scholarly commentaries the tendency to stop at the limits of our respective discipline and sometimes even to declare what lies outside to be unknowable. In literary criticism, this is to reiterate the limit intrinsic to characters’ viewpoints,⁵² while in philosophy it is to stress the limit of rational thinking. Yet these restrictions curiously do not apply to Coetzee’s writing in quite the same way, given that it is capable of flagging out the discursive limits for us. The chapters of *Elizabeth Costello* are not altogether achieved within the discourse of philosophy or of

⁵⁰ Notable monographs of philosophical discussions of Coetzee are Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Anton Leist and Peter Singer, eds., *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

⁵¹ Cora Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’, in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008).

⁵² The limit of literature emerges specifically in the second lecture of ‘The Lives of Animals’ entitled ‘The Poets and the Animals.’ In it, Costello examines different literary representations of animal figures and similarly teases out the respective limits and power of each representation. The works of literature discussed are shown as making up neither a uniform nor an ideal approach for the reality of animal lives. See J.M. Coetzee, ‘The Lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals’, in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 91–115.

literature, unless we define the literary discourse senselessly as anything and everything. Coetzee's writing in this case moves through generic boundaries and presents us with texts that increase possibilities rather than delimit them.

This chapter is interested in Coetzee's overriding interest in the living being of Elizabeth Costello that, from where I see it, allows Coetzee's fiction-as-lecture to divest discursive limits and subjects them to our gaze. While we often hear critics repeat that Coetzee's fictions are difficult and unyielding, it may be possible that these impressions of textual obscurity are produced by the fixed critical demands that are unable to track the living text along its full course. As I have indicated in the introduction, though Coetzee's texts consistently gesture towards difficult, unknowable experiences beyond themselves, in themselves they strive to be, and are, highly knowable. This knowability does not produce Foucauldian knowledge belonging to the discourse of power, but involves a sympathetic grasp of the body-soul of his protagonist, which in this case is Costello herself. Costello's provocative claim about the boundless sympathetic capacity, in a sense, frames the narrative's challenge for us to sympathise with its leading lady.

Admittedly, my effort to address Coetzee's evolving fiction from within the critical discourse also entails a partial view. In reading 'The Lives of Animals' lectures, I have striven to remain adaptable to Costello and the text's changing discourses as far as possible, but this aim remains ineluctably incomplete. My focus for this chapter is to show that the body-soul is not an occult concept of transcendence, but is methodically embodied within the text's tangible structures and in the context of its delivery. In spirit, my reading is a continuation of Diamond's response and it shares her belief in the living mode of relating to Costello. It differs, however, in coming from a tradition of literary criticism that affords a more formally attentive analysis, perhaps at the expense of the direct simplicity of analytic philosophy.

Beside my general claim about the body-soul, this chapter also delves into Costello's horror over humans' treatment of animals. I identify how Costello's argument falls silent at decisive moments so that one is required to reach into one's own parallel experience as living being and ask oneself if her

claim is true. Her concerns are presented in an intricate weave that stretches over two lectures of impressive philosophical analysis, her son's thoughts, the audience's responses, the opinions of her daughter-in-law, the conversations before and after the lecture, etc., and I argue that this contextualising composite conveys the fundamental provisionality of Costello's argument for the animals. However, Costello's claim is provisional not because human sympathetic capacity is in fact limited, but rather because Coetzee plants this claim into the circumstances of its mortal speaker.

The chapter starts outside the text by reviewing the theoretical history of the term 'sympathy,' which is a notable absence from the lecture despite it being otherwise a theoretically sophisticated speech. This absence clearly signals Costello's break from rational discourse in the matter of sympathy. This background is followed by an explication of the rational component of Costello's lecture, which includes her engagement with the philosopher Thomas Nagel. I additionally compare Costello's stance to Jacques Derrida's writing on the animal, which has been highly influential in critical readings of this particular Coetzee text, and begins to highlight the significance of Costello's fragile voice versus Derridean equanimity. Finally, I draw on the first chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, 'Realism,' to assert the achievement of 'The Philosophers' in providing Costello and her concern for the animal with the solidity of the body-soul.

I. Sympathy/empathy: the missing theoretical context and definition

While Costello's evocation of the 'sympathetic imagination' puts her in contact with the complex history of the term 'sympathy,' this history is notably absent from her lecture. The wholesale omission of the term's conceptual development and the philosophers' names usually associated with it appears to be a conscious decision by Coetzee behind Costello, as he seems otherwise comfortable with discussing the matter outside his fiction. The strategy certainly helps to further divorce this portion of Costello's speech from the rational discourse that otherwise determines her lecture format. A brief survey of the term's history, however, should help us appreciate the nuances of Costello's call for non-rational engagement with other beings. This history additionally involves

the differentiation between the two sister terms ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy,’ which sees Coetzee making an interesting choice to go with the former.

‘Empathy’, from the German word *Einfühlung*, is much newer than ‘sympathy,’ having been first coined in German by Johann Friedrich Herbart in 1831 and later introduced into the English language via the casual translation of British psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909. ‘Sympathy,’ on the other hand, is first recorded by the OED in 1578, but its origin stretches as far back as the late Latin word of *sympathia*. The distinctions that have been proposed between sympathy and empathy show little agreement both in their daily usage and across different academic disciplines. Initially, the German ‘empathy’ or *Einfühlung* was employed in the service of aesthetic theories and was most influentially associated with the work of the German philosopher Theodor Lipps at the beginning of the 20th century. Lipps employs it to explain how one appreciates art by projecting oneself into that which is beautiful.⁵³

The object of Lipps’s empathy can be either animate or inanimate—a rock, a tree, etc.—and the aesthetic experience runs only one way from the subject to the object with no accounting of how the object’s actual experience may affect the subject emotionally. Lipps himself downplays the distinction between empathy (‘feeling into’) and ‘sympathy’ or *Mitgefühl* (direct translation: ‘feeling with’), saying that “[t]he word “sympathy” appears to be only another word for *Einfühlung*.”⁵⁴ However, in his own use, ‘sympathy’ in fact has a broader meaning and can refer to both the negative and positive projections, while his use of empathy focuses mainly on positive aesthetic experiences. Though Lipps’s conception of empathy is clearly too limited as a ground for examining Coetzee’s fiction, it was later interestingly picked up in the field of psychology through Lipps’s admirer Sigmund Freud and, across the pond, through Titchener. In its psychological guise, empathy retains the sense of

⁵³ Gustav Jahoda, ‘Theodor Lipps and the Shift from “Sympathy” to “Empathy”’, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2005): 154.

⁵⁴ Theodor Lipps, *Asthetik. Psychologie Des Schönen Und Der Kunst* (Hamburg & Leipzig: Voss, 1903), 139., trans. and qtd. in Jahoda, ‘Theodor Lipps and the Shift from “Sympathy” to “Empathy”’, 158.

psychological projection into another being, but the empathetic identifications become more specific to other human subjects or other sentient animals. In addition, the range of relevant feelings is broadened to include both the positive and the negative emotions.

On the other hand, the most influential use of ‘sympathy’ can be attributed to Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) where similarly it is used to denote ‘our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever.’⁵⁵ Smith’s definition of sympathy is rather similar to that of Costello, save for its Cartesian heritage that excludes non-human animals and its professed moral aspirations. For Smith, sympathy is an aspect of ‘human nature’ or a ‘faculty’ that everyone possesses (I.i.1.2). It does not reproduce the other’s exact feeling but the feeling ‘we ourselves should feel in the like situation’ that is conjured ‘by the imagination’ and encompasses the sharing of both misery and joy (I.i.1.2).

Another relevant conception of sympathy is to be found in the Romantic Movement of the arts in the late 18th and early 19th century. As with aesthetics, sympathy for the Romantics can be applied to any object but, unlike Lipps’s conception, it sports an idealism that claims a fundamental oneness with nature that allows human-being direct access to all the world’s experiences.⁵⁶ After this, sympathy slowly fell out of fashion within academic circles as its popularisation through the Romantic movement meant that it became more and more associated with a patronising sense of superiority that selectively recognises only the sufferings of others but not their joy. There is a sense today that empathy is a more equitable and inclusive version of sympathy or, as Rae Greiner put it, empathy is ‘sympathy minus the attitude.’⁵⁷

It would seem that for Coetzee the hairsplitting between sympathy and empathy is an inconsequential point that he is impatient to get beyond. In one of the email correspondences with Arabella Kurtz published in ‘Nevertheless, My

⁵⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), I.i.1.5.

⁵⁶ David Depew, ‘Empathy, Psychology, and Aesthetics: Reflections on a Repair Concept’, *Poroi* 4, no. 1 (2005): 103.

⁵⁷ Rae Greiner, ‘Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel’, *Narrative* 17, no. 3 (October 2009): 419.

Sympathies are with the Karamazovs,' Coetzee simply cites his desire to maintain connection with the 18th century writings on sympathy as the reason behind his preference for the word: 'I use sympathy where I can because there is a whole body of writing about sympathy (=empathy), particularly in the 18th century, which it would be a pity to lose touch with.'⁵⁸ Coetzee was probably thinking about Smith in making this statement. Nevertheless, Coetzee's own conception of sympathy in conversations with Kurtz and in 'The Philosophers' is more likely to be informed by the psychological appropriation of Lipps's 'empathy' as a projection *into* another being. In his first correspondence with Kurtz, Coetzee mentions that he draws from 'an earlier psychology: sympathy as a power of projecting oneself into the subjectivity of the other, and thinking and feeling from within him/her.'⁵⁹ Additionally, Coetzee also appears most comfortable discussing the matter within the confines of psychology, as can be seen in how the concept features centrally in his two collaborations with the psychoanalyst Kurtz while it rarely crops up in his copious literary criticism.

It is to be expected that Coetzee would conceive sympathy as a psychological projection as opposed to an authentic representation of others' experiences as claimed by the Romantics, since Coetzee's fiction clearly demonstrates a deep respect for the sanctity of others' experiences.⁶⁰ In the more recent collaboration with Kurtz titled *The Good Story*, Coetzee acknowledges that '[i]t goes without saying that the other lives we live at such times are not necessarily the true lives of the others to whom they belong' and may produce only 'fictional truths.'⁶¹ What this chapter will seek to understand is how Coetzee goes much further in his stories from this basic realisation of the difference between sympathetic truth and the truth of the other. In 'The Philosophers,'

⁵⁸ J.M. Coetzee, "'Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs': J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz', *Salmagundi* 166–67, no. Spring-Summer (2010): 48.

⁵⁹ Coetzee, "'Nevertheless'", 46.

⁶⁰ Cf. Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*.

⁶¹ Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, 134.

Coetzee becomes interested in the very real impact that fictional truths can have on their creator.

A final observation I wish to make at this juncture is that, since Coetzeean sympathy is partly influenced by the scientific curiosity of psychology, it distances itself from the moralism often found in evocations of sympathy within the fields of the humanities, where sympathy (or empathy) is overwhelmingly prized on the ground of its moral value. Coetzee seems to evade the moral question altogether and describes sympathy carefully as a capacity that is conditional on individual circumstances—‘an inborn capacity in human beings which may or may not grow, may or may not atrophy, may or may not be fostered’⁶²—rather than pressing it forward as an innate moral sensibility or responsibility. It is possible to view the Coetzeean sympathy as an alternative field of exploration that can add to, as well as qualify, human rational enquiries.

II. Costello’s sympathetic imagination and the philosophers

The story of Elizabeth Costello’s lecture in support of the sympathetic imagination makes up the first of the two ‘Lives of Animals’ lectures, which were initially delivered as part of the annual Tanner Lectures by Coetzee himself at Princeton University. The lecture is then published twice with minor alterations as a chapter in Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*⁶³ and *Elizabeth Costello*. Subtitled ‘The Philosophers and the Animals,’ the short prose fiction is told through the perspective of Costello’s physicist son John Bernard, who accompanies his mother on an official visit that mirrors the very one Coetzee was taking part in (though Princeton is instead called Appleton College, while ‘the annual Gates lectures’ replaces the Tanner lectures).

Within the son’s perspective is lodged this lecture by the fictional Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello on the subject of animals, which offers an impassioned attack on the rational underpinnings of human treatment of animals. The talk has a labyrinthine structure as Costello strings unconnected fragments of historical, philosophical, scientific, and literary references together with her own

⁶² Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, 134.

⁶³ Coetzee and Gutmann, *The Lives of Animals*.

personal sense and experiences. The confused organisation of her lecture betrays a voice that feels deeply about its subject—so aghast with the wrongs being perpetrated against farm animals that it is prepared to attack them from all angles imaginable. The impassioned plea is a natural form for Costello’s critique of human reason, but Coetzee also conceives of its potential offensiveness—that it may stir similarly emotional responses—as Costello’s contentious speech is depicted to ruffle the equable atmosphere of a public lecture event. Her analogy between the industrialised slaughter of animals and the Holocaust draws a letter of condemnation from a person in the audience: ‘The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.’⁶⁴ On the other hand, with the clever fictionalised distance Coetzee has created, his actual lecture at Princeton must have given off a different air altogether, even though there is a possibility that he could be privately beset with the same sense of indignation as his character.

The unflattering framing of Costello’s lecture nevertheless does not completely ironise her position since that position is never directly stated and seems also to be undergoing its own interrogations. It displays the qualities of both conviction and self-doubt that positions her at the enigmatic centre of the whole episode. Repeatedly, she expatiates on what is possible—what *can* be done—but does not venture to proclaim what should be done. While the two ‘Lives of Animals’ lectures are unmistakably directed towards a better treatment of animals, this is strictly-speaking only implicit in Costello’s explorations of other tangential issues and in the narrative’s representation of her own vegetarianism; itself is never directly stated. The first question from the audience after the first talk addresses this very ambiguity. A man says, ‘What wasn’t clear to me... is what you are actually targeting.’ He asks that Costello clarify.⁶⁵ Costello’s response is stubbornly cryptic: ‘If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says’ (82).

⁶⁴ Coetzee, ‘The Poets and the Animals’, 94.

⁶⁵ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 81.

The closest Costello gets to advancing a *should*—and the closest Coetzee himself has possibly ever gotten—is in the part of her lecture where the concept of the sympathetic imagination is broached and more or less conferred an ideal status. The main thrust of Costello’s argument is to establish that the sympathetic imagination is unbounded. While there are confusingly many entry points into Costello’s serpentine assertions, I will first examine her discussion of Thomas Nagel’s authoritative article titled ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’⁶⁶ I will trace the implications behind the ways that Costello’s burning speech contrasts with the rarefied philosophical model embodied here in Nagel and in the more complex thinking of Jacques Derrida, before moving on to Costello’s more positive engagements with Franz Kafka’s short story, ‘A Report to an Academy.’⁶⁷

Thomas Nagel and Jacques Derrida

In his influential article, Nagel attempts to overcome the disjuncture between two approaches of philosophical enquiries, namely, subjective phenomenology and objective physicalism. Nagel is trying to find a way to combine the forces of the human mind and body into ‘an objective phenomenology [that is] not dependent on empathy or the imagination.’⁶⁸ It is a project that clearly puts him at odds with Costello, who seems, moreover, to completely ignore this philosophical premise of Nagel’s work. Costello seizes instead on Nagel’s advancement, in the course of his larger argument, that the human mind is incapable of fully knowing what it is like to be a bat: ‘cannot form more than a schematic conception of what it *is* like.’⁶⁹ While he views that any knowledge of this kind will always remain ‘incompletable,’ Nagel argues that the more an organism resembles human being, the better we can understand it. Costello thus summarises Nagel’s concept as one that perceives a ‘continuum that stretches from the Martian at one end to the bat to the dog to the ape... to the

⁶⁶ Thomas Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1 October 1974): 435–50.

⁶⁷ Franz Kafka, ‘A Report to an Academy’, in *The Complete Short Stories* (London: Vintage Books, 2005).

⁶⁸ Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, 449.

⁶⁹ Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, 439.

human being,⁷⁰ a diagram that shows measurable degrees of difference that culminate in the epitome of human image.

Having singled out this assumption in Nagel's work, Costello abruptly brings up death by saying that she sometimes imagine herself as a corpse: 'For instants at a time,... I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror' (77). As an argumentative move, this contention of Costello is strangely tenuous and has no moorings in shared or knowable reality, but it serves in its fervent and irrational way to introduce death as the missing consideration in Nagel's formulation. Costello contends that imagining one's own death demands much more imaginative power than the task Nagel sets out: 'if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?' (77).

Sam Durrant reads the curious invocation of a corpse as Coetzee's way of emphasising the embodiment we share with the animals (and corpses), which can serve as a ground for sympathy in place of Nagel's problematic model of consciousness.⁷¹ However, my own sense is that Costello goes even further than the bound of embodiment. Her sympathy with a corpse is not indicative of other beings, but of the possibility to sympathise with anything at all. A corpse is, by definition, *not* an embodiment. In saying that there is no bound to the sympathetic imagination, Costello is suggesting a connection forged beyond embodiment, beyond life and, indeed, beyond all bounds. The corpse, in this case, stands for the horizon of our own living knowledge and consciousness. To be able to sympathise with a corpse entails an ability to break out of one's own subjective and mortal confines with one's imagination.

Such mention of death in relation to sympathy is not at all unusual. Adam Smith, the great advocate of sympathy, famously writes that '[w]e sympathize even with the dead.'⁷² Both Smith and Costello acknowledge that sympathy with the dead produces fictive sentiments that the dead can never entertain, but are the subject's own as he or she imaginatively fills in its position. 'What I know is

⁷⁰ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 76.

⁷¹ Durrant, 'J.M. Coetzee', 129.

⁷² Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.1.13.

what a corpse cannot know,' speaks Costello, 'that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and never will know anything any more. For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.'⁷³ Smith similarly writes that fellow feeling with the dead causes misery in the present because one experiences this extinction as one's own:

'...our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case. It is from this very illusion of the imagination, that the foresight of our own dissolution is so terrible to us, and that the idea of those circumstances, which undoubtedly can give us no pain when we are dead, makes us miserable while we are alive.' (I.i.1.13)

Smith's conception of sympathy is thus deeply informed by an awareness of its illusory ground and contrasts with Nagel's insistence on the basis of shared sensory faculties. Michael McKeon asserts that the Smithian concept of a society is in fact based on a 'virtual reality' engendered by 'imaginative acts of sympathy.'⁷⁴

In recalling death, Costello begins to break up Nagel's linear diagram of beings by adding to his orderly picture the negativity of death, to which every life form entertains a radically personal relation. Death is both shared and not shared. One's death, as Derrida famously describes in *The Gift of Death* following Heidegger, is radically one's own in a way that it is not possible to die 'in the place of the other,' or to save the other forever from his/her eventual death by one's dying.⁷⁵ Thus, for Derrida death can never be given or taken. This contradictory nature of the private and universal end to one's self is embodied in Costello's speech as she attempts to evoke the common experience of death in a

⁷³ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 77.

⁷⁴ Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 377.

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 43.

way that is borderline incomprehensible. She continues: ‘All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older... We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can.’⁷⁶ Costello’s knowledge of her own death is here brought out with such detachment from what has gone before in her speech (the discussion of Nagel) and from the shared intellectual premise with the lecture audience and the reader. It not only refutes the neat continuity of Nagel’s thinking on human terms, but also bluntly appeals for an understanding on a sympathetically corporeal level, on which there is no continuity between beings but perhaps a parallelism that the sympathetic imagination can unlock.



As an alternative to Nagel’s pragmatic thinking, Derrida’s poignant writings on the human-animal relation, especially in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, have been highly influential within the field of animal studies and have also subsequently been employed in pro-animal readings of ‘The Lives of Animals.’⁷⁷ But in spite of notable similarities between Derrida’s and Coetzee’s works that would require a dedicated chapter to fully explicate, Derridean readings of ‘The Lives’ tend to elide the rigorous deferral of authority and embodied vulnerability of the Coetzee’s text. As Derrida is one of the foremost thinkers on the topic of animals, a comparison of the differences between his philosophical works and Coetzee’s genre-defying piece may better specify Costello’s compromised position and its implications on the pseudo-argument she is advancing.

It will be noted that, apart from the non-linear organisation of her two animal lectures, Costello also appears to speak out of an intellectual confusion. To her son’s private enquiry after her intention behind the lecture, she cannot articulate what she is hoping to accomplish: ‘John, I don’t know what I want to

⁷⁶ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 77.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Michael O’Sullivan, ‘Giving Up Control: Narrative Authority and Animal Experience in Coetzee and Kafka’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 44, no. 2 (2011): 119–35; Robert McKay, ‘Metafiction, Vegetarianism, and the Literary Performance of Animal Ethics in J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*’, *Safundi* 11, no. 1–2 (January 2010): 67–85.

do. I just don't want to sit silent.'⁷⁸ While, as Robert McKay remarks, a lecture is generally expected to take 'the form of a univocal expression of authorial meaning,'⁷⁹ Costello steps out and, with her confused but strongly felt conviction, underdelivers on this expectation. A Derridean interpretation of this might be that Coetzee has, through his creation of the passionate Costello, deconstructed the control exerted by the genre of the lecture. In this line of reading, the content of Costello's passion would be turned into a clever textual ruse, while the real authorial meaning gets deferred. But could the truth not be simpler and closer to what is said, namely that Costello speaks out for the animals because she could not stand not to, and could this moral confusion not be projected onto Costello because it is also plaguing Coetzee? For McKay, when Coetzee lent his voice to Costello's lecture at Princeton, the distinction between author and character becomes severely compromised, which 'allow[s] the fictional creation uncannily to usurp the performing space that Coetzee himself inhabits' (77).⁸⁰

Turning to Derrida's work, his voice in *Animal* impressively commands an emotive and ethical authority. Conceptually speaking, Derrida is close to Costello. He places emphasis on the position of vulnerability and mortality, arguing that the shared vulnerability of beings is the basis for our feeling of compassion:

Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of

⁷⁸ Coetzee, 'The Poets and the Animals', 104.

⁷⁹ McKay, 'Metafiction, Vegetarianism', 77.

⁸⁰ McKay offers an excellent reading of *The Lives of Animals* that takes into account how Coetzee's lecture performance at Princeton—his actual presence and voice—complicates the metafictionality of the text and gestures beyond the usual metafictional deferral of authorial meaning. But McKay is reluctant to make assertions beyond the orbit of textuality that would acknowledge the possibility of Costello's words having come from a real body-soul's concern. He stops at contending that Coetzee 'has found a way to render fictional the reality of the author's beliefs that is supposedly deferred by its writing,' a contention which slightly favours the fictional over Coetzee's actual voice. McKay, 'Metafiction, Vegetarianism', 77.

compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish.⁸¹

Derrida conceives of this vulnerability from his critical engagement with the long philosophical tradition of establishing human and animal rights on the basis of their capabilities—whether an animal can, for example, think or speak—that lends itself to exclusive anthropocentrism. Following the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, Derrida proposes that the question should be ‘Can they suffer?’ which is a form of ‘Can they *not be able*?’ (28), that will put the obligation to support, for lack of a better word, animal rights beyond dispute.

A Costellan reading of Derrida may question the authoritative position from which Derrida speaks, one that still implies a belief that a philosophical re-conception of the animal figure holds the key to unlocking the pathos, a belief that the head controls the gate to the heart. Even as he is endorsing the heart to be open, his discourse itself forgoes doing so. Apropos of the animal, Derrida aligns himself with a relatively clear ethical scheme, which is to allow human pathos ‘to awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations vis-à-vis the living in general’ (27). For Derrida, the ethical is in itself unavoidable: human pity for suffering is ‘a necessity, a constraint that, like it or not, directly or indirectly, no one can escape’ (29). It is an admirable stance whose ethical authority and eloquence can subdue most cynicism.

As an alternative to this trust in human ethical nature, we can look again to Costello and her pessimistic remark on the human callousness during the Holocaust which concludes her first animal lecture. The final passage can be described as overdramatic in tone, propelled by dismay at the possibility of untethered heartlessness rather than by any kind of intellectual enlightenment:

‘We point to the Germans and Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them. We like to think they were inwardly marked by the after-effects of that

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 28.

special form of ignorance. We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter come back to haunt them... But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment.’⁸²

One is instinctively inclined to reject Costello’s dystopian verdict by a personal sense, to contend that surely there is some form of justice in the world and dismiss her conclusion as being an overemotional response to a terrible atrocity. In fact, given Costello’s compromised authority within the text, one is even afforded a space to do so comfortably.

But is Derrida’s contention of a fundamental human compassion or a personal sense of justice not an equally naïve response to atrocity, though of a more palatable utopian variety? Would Derrida’s nuanced development of philosophical thought be able to affect us deeply enough—we who expose ourselves to his words willingly—that we stop consuming meat? Or if vegetarianism is not the point of this call for compassion for the animals, then what is? Costello is shown to be troubled by this inability of rigorous philosophical reflections, or even a halting one like her own, to alter moral failings and thwart the world’s endless cycles of suffering. During the reception dinner afterwards, Costello acknowledges to her table that she still uses leather shoes and purse: ‘I wouldn’t have overmuch respect [for me] if I were you’ (89).

Costello’s personal vulnerability is not confined to the physical sphere but implies also her spiritual vulnerability to temptations. Ethically, she is also one of the animals. Costello compares her vulnerability to an intractable wound, which she covers up under the clothes of her pseudo-rational discourse but senses more acutely as her faith in the power of human rationality to cure it is dwindling: ‘I am not a philosopher of mind,’ she utters—imagine also this sentence conveyed by Coetzee’s voice from a podium—‘but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak’ (71).

⁸² Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 80.

But what kind of speech is generated from such a position that is halfway between breast-beating and a philosophical discourse? Costello herself outlines the problem of her imperfect rejection of rationality:

And that, you see, is my dilemma this afternoon. Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God... And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers? (67)

By accepting the invitation to give the lectures, Costello and Coetzee have partially acceded to reason, but only partially. For Coetzee, his use of fictional techniques to frame the philosophical discourse obviously saves him from the charge of self-contradiction. But Costello's lecture itself is also dotted with blocks of private experiences that have not been conceptualised into transferable knowledge. In the above passage, her 'seven decades of life experience' stands impenetrably alongside reason as supports of her claim. Later on she says:

'...although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself, like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason, *something in me* resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle.'⁸³

Here again, there is a dead spot in an otherwise incisive picture—the 'something in me' that remains unyieldingly private and unexplained. The tail end of Costello's lecture is further scattered with unanswered questions that are half-rhetorical but also half-real. One paragraph ends with: 'If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?' (68).

⁸³ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 69 (emphasis mine).

At this prompt, one expects that Costello is about to justify how she differently subjects her discourse to reason, but the following paragraph drops the matter and relates instead a new case study of the gifted mathematicians Srinivasa Ramanujan. Perhaps to logically explain herself would be too much of a concession to reason.

So despite its engagement with reason, Costello's lecture neither offers an alternative philosophical position nor the authority of one. Costello lives, thinks, and speaks under the burden of her vulnerability. As I have related earlier, pressed by her son in private, she says that she gives the animal lectures because she cannot stand being silent. It is the kind of non-reason behind actions that one finds in many of Coetzee's characters—stemming from a private imperative that will never be explained. By all accounts, this is not a place from which a clear assertion can be made, but if Derrida is right that vulnerability is the true and inevitable basis for compassion, then this state of being and speaking may be where the sympathetic souls find themselves all of the time.



Besides Derrida's thinking on the animal, Costello's sense of the sympathetic imagination also challenges the socially-engaged wing of philosophy that came out of 1980s America through philosophers like Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, whose names have since dominated discussions of sympathy in literature. Their arguments for the edifying influence of sympathy through literature certainly gathers momentum as the art form, and by extension the humanities, becomes more entrenched as cultural practices and is under pressure to justify its existence in the modern capitalist marketplace.⁸⁴ Their

⁸⁴ Coetzee's awareness of the declining status of his medium may inform his self-conscious treatment of literary sympathy to some extent. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, he remarks haltingly that

... speaking now, at the turn of the century, there is a sense in which all writers, finally, are underrated or not read enough or about not to be read enough. We are, dare I say it, moving into, or have already moved into, a phase of history or post-history where the idea that writers are important has begun to seem odd or slightly old-fashioned... I think that, more seriously, writing in general is becoming underrated. And let me add that I speak from the bosom of an educational institution which is in

views belong also to a tradition of social theories that, contrary to the untrusting poststructuralists, positively aspires for social impacts and is driven by ideals of a good society. Novelistic sympathy is subsequently assimilated by such discourse as a channel through which narrative art can lay claim to concrete impacts on the world.⁸⁵

While it would be easy to accuse this practical discourse of naivety, its sense of urgency that something can and should be done to lessen the world's sufferings nevertheless resonates with Costello's lecture, even if the site and the nature of required actions are conceived of differently. To begin with their similarities, Costello's plea for sympathy shares the focus on imagination with Richard Rorty's description of his utopia. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty advances a vision of a society that is based on the work of imaginative understanding:

In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away "prejudice" or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the

the process of turning itself from one that studies writing to one that studies all kinds of other cultural artifacts, some of them exceedingly transitory in nature.

See Eleanor Wachtel, 'The Sympathetic Imagination: A Conversation With J.M. Coetzee', *Brick* 67 (2001): 40.

⁸⁵ The alternative to this socially operative mode of academic discourse is, of course, the textual and ideological analyses as inspired by continental poststructural theorists like Derrida. Coetzee's fictions, with their inherent theoretical self-awareness, generally attract this latter approach of criticism, in which the critical voice stands exempt from socio-political forces that wash over the characters and can examine their representations in the narratives with clarity and sangfroid and without having themselves to deal with concrete social decisions. Costello's animal lectures and her radical refusal to depart from the complexity of her own life do not seem to align themselves completely with either camp.

particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.⁸⁶

In a way more like Rorty than Derrida, Costello cannot remain equable about the colossal amount of suffering in the world. Her lecture exhibits an urgent yearning for a more just arrangement in the world that is fierce enough to spawn a public endorsement of what she considers to be a less violent mode of knowing. But besides their similar predilection, Rorty's theoretical proposal stems from a fundamental confidence in human impact on a world, which, notably, is populated by other 'people' rather than animals. This human confidence occasions his thinking to regularly transcend the realm of one's living being to which Costello confines herself. Costello probably would not have evoked terms such as 'fellow sufferers' or 'solidarity,' seemingly inoffensive as they are, since they would mark the beginning of the expansion of the self. The expansion entails a boundary for Rorty's imagination to improve upon and he would advance the clichéd goal to 'see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them"' (xvi), with the non-human animals being again part of neither groups.

In the Coetzeean world, human decisions are rarely what determine the state of the world. Coetzee's 2008 novel *Diary of a Bad Year*⁸⁷ provides a memorable case of sympathetic thinking and action that are contained within finite beings. One of its chapters, entitled 'On Compassion,'⁸⁸ shows the author (whose initials are incidentally 'JC') pondering over a seemingly pointless action of his neighbor. The neighbour Bella Saunders is concerned for the wellbeing of river frogs during an unusually hot and dry period in Australia. Daily, she leaves a bowl of water out in the creek '[i]n case the little ones get thirsty.' JC writes:

⁸⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xvi.

⁸⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008).

⁸⁸ I view Coetzee's use of the terms 'compassion' and 'sympathy' to be interchangeable since his evocations of both terms tune out their specific etymological history and similarly gesture at affective affinity with another being. It is conceivable that Coetzee intentionally chooses a different word for *Diary* in order not to build 'sympathy' into an authoritative term that would outshine the experience of the body-soul.

It is easy to make fun of people like Bella, to point out that heatwaves are part of a larger ecological process with which human beings ought not to interfere. But does this criticism not miss something? Are we human beings not part of that ecology too, and is our compassion for the wee beasties not as much an element of it as is the cruelty of the crow?⁸⁹

Like Costello, JC senses something missing in rational judgement against someone like Bella, a judgement in which human figures are elevated above the fray, thinking and overseeing the ecological system. His personal sense seems to be that we are part of it and, in our actions, are as blinded about how the world works as the other creatures.



Though Costello's lecture forecloses a rational rebuttal against those she disagrees with, her impassioned plea disturbs the philosophers' clarity and decorum in the manner of Freud's return of the repressed. By its entry in our consciousness, it irreparably spoils the atmosphere. Freud has interestingly drawn a similar analogy of the lecture room to elucidate his concept of repression in a lecture at Clark University in 1909. In Freud's lecture, which Coetzee is no doubt aware of, he compares desire to an unruly member in the audience:

Let us suppose that in this lecture-room and among this audience, whose exemplary quiet and attentiveness I cannot sufficiently commend, there is nevertheless someone who is causing a disturbance and whose ill-mannered laughter, chattering and shuffling with his feet are distracting my attention from my task. I have to announce that I cannot proceed with my lecture; and thereupon three or four of you who are strong men stand up and, after a short struggle, put the

⁸⁹ Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 211.

interrupter outside the door. So now he is ‘repressed’, and I can continue my lecture.⁹⁰

But according to Freud, these attempts at repression can never be wholly successful since ‘the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious,’ waiting for a chance to spring back up again.⁹¹ Costello is that unruly audience member who takes the podium and stirs up repressed meanings for the occupants of that lecture hall and for the list of philosophers and scientists whose names she calls up.

But what someone like Nagel or even the unnamed Derrida represses is by no means unusual or particularly blameworthy. Their writings cannot help but be an exercise of authority, for otherwise no one will care to read. The Costello lecture similarly rests on the authority of Coetzee as a renowned writer of fiction. What is original and worth highlighting, however, is rather Costello’s manner of responding that inventively performs an uncompromised resistance to the throng of human logic. To lucidly summarise Costello’s argument would mean to forfeit its unique achievement and would result, as Costello says, in ‘the concession of the entire battle.’ So for a piece of discursive writing such as mine to remain sensitive to the refrains of Costello’s performance, it might be necessary to admit that, rather than capturing the gist of Costello’s ‘argument,’ one is in fact constructing the kind of philosophical debate that could have occurred if Costello (and Coetzee behind her) had been less successful. The blanks left by Costello are being filled here not with what has been left unrepresented, but a different and more restrictive form of enquiry that takes its cue from her.

⁹⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1981), XI, 3–56.

⁹¹ Freud, ‘Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis’, 27. In ‘Realism’ the first chapter in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee does not spare Costello from the experience of her own return of the repressed. After Costello’s award acceptance speech, a member of the audience tries to pose a question to the author but is snubbed by Costello’s silent disregard: ‘There is a hush. All eyes are on Elizabeth Costello. Frostily she gazes into the distance.’ Afterwards, the narrative registers a lingering acrimony: ‘the incident leaves a bad taste; say what one may, the evening has been spoiled.’ J.M. Coetzee, ‘Realism’, in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 21.

To this purpose, I will return to explore Costello's comment on Nagel with more focus on what her lecture says. Costello writes that '[Nagel's] denial that we can know what it is to be anything but one of ourselves seems to me tragically restrictive, restrictive and restricted.'⁹² She regards the aim of Nagel's project 'to experience bat life through the sense modalities of a bat' to be 'a false trail' (77). Why it should be false Costello does not elaborate but instead becomes caught up in describing 'the embodied soul.' Now that we are somewhat familiar with Costello's argument, we can go back to place her idea of the body-soul in relation to Nagel's writing to determine how the inceptions of their utterances differ.

In 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?', Nagel states that he hopes to develop 'a method of expressing in objective terms much more than we can at present, and with much greater precision.'⁹³ Coming from our contact with the refrains of Costello's performance, Nagel's preference here for comprehensive knowledge and the objective character over the subjective may strike one as strangely incautious. What is unexamined in Nagel's entire piece—the inexplicable 'something in me' that he keeps submerged under tautological explanation—is the basis behind the pedantic desire to better describe his object in 'objective' terms. All our academic endeavours are so often justified with similarly tautological structure: 'I want to describe this because I want to describe it better,' which serves uninspiringly to hide the more unsightly human ambitions and insecurities. Nagel's piece is in effect driven by the age-old expansionist goal, which is now being applied to the boundary of human experience through the subsuming of a foreign species' experience. The interesting specificity of the bat in his title is revealed within his essay to be borne by abstracted considerations rather than a genuine interest in the creatures. As Nagel explains, he settles on bats because they represent for him 'a fundamentally *alien* form of life' from 'our own case' of human beings while still being a mammal species close enough to us that 'we all believe that bats have experience.'⁹⁴

⁹² Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 76.

⁹³ Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', 449.

⁹⁴ Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', 438 (emphasis original).

The unfeelingness of this explanation appears jarring with Costello in the back of our mind. While Costello concedes that ‘Nagel strikes me as an intelligent and not unsympathetic man,’⁹⁵ yet even a person of such quality, writing in 1974, is not immune to a closedness of the heart to his subject. Animal studies within philosophy has certainly developed much more nuanced sensitivity with regards to the non-human animals since Nagel’s time. But as long as one adopts a purely discursive method that only partially accommodates the human experience, the tautological blind will always be there somewhere, covering up the more private and immediate impulses that sustain the discourse.

Psychoanalysis may be pointed to as an obvious method for uncovering these hidden impulses, but the process is time-consuming and its success determined by uncontrollable factors, when the animal suffering for which Costello speaks is harrowingly in the now: ‘the horrors of [animals’] lives and deaths’ being played out ‘at this moment in production facilities... in abattoirs, in trawlers, in laboratories, all over the world’ (63).⁹⁶ The sympathetic imagination in turn represents for Costello a mode of exploration that she believes, contrary to rational thinking, immediately engages the heart: ‘The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another’ (79, emphasis original).

This ardent contention of Costello’s is made in a complex web of context that is not often considered. From its first sentence, the lecture has been conducted on the back of different texts from various disciplines. It begins with a mention of Franz Kafka’s ‘A Report to an Academy’ and, from then on, never strays beyond a few sentences from making references to human history and philosophical thoughts on the animals. Then comes the part of Costello’s treatment of the term ‘sympathy,’ during which Costello’s speech suddenly turns ahistorical and uncritical. As I have mentioned, Costello makes no examination of the varied history of sympathy as a concept within the arts, philosophy or

⁹⁵ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 76.

⁹⁶ A more detailed discussion of psychoanalysis’s limitations and its relevance to Coetzee’s works can be found in Chapter Four, where I argue that, in his three fictional memoirs, Coetzee thinks through the problem of analysis’s indeterminability that Freud has identified.

psychology. Adding up to the minor blips of lecture, this part defines Costello's lecture as an incomplete theoretical discourse, but it more importantly serves to cement Costello's refusal to let sympathy be incorporated into the greater Western stream of rational discourse.

It is a compliment to the spell of Coetzee's writing that despite the various logical loopholes he places in Costello's lecture, the lecture within the lecture is still regarded by the academic audience as an exceptional contribution to the current philosophical debate on the animal. If 'The Philosophers' can be accused of one thing, it would be that, for its own purpose, it has misrepresented contemporary academic audiences as representatives of the rational discourse, when the facts on the ground suggest that they have acquired enough distance from the theoretical heyday to be rather willing to submit to the emotive words of Costello.⁹⁷ McKay, for example, voices a positive appraisal:

Elizabeth's lecture as quoted is perfectly clear, coherent, and compelling, to judge by my own response; and this is confirmed by most critical readers, even those who eventually disagree with her claims. Her extremely self-aware discussion of the pitfalls of reason as a theoretical discourse, which nonetheless prefaces her strategic use of it, is close enough to orthodox deconstructive methodology to demand at least recognition and respect, if not agreement, from a university audience.⁹⁸

I have of course argued that Costello's lecture is strictly speaking *not* perfectly clear, but it is understandable that the logical ambiguities within the lecture would be conceptually perceived from McKay's perspective as a deconstructive

⁹⁷ Admittedly, it is difficult for anyone to explicate his/her response to Costello's lecture proper from the impression made by its metafictional framing. It is conceivable that if Coetzee had stepped onto the stage and said only what Costello says, he would not have gained this level of acceptance. But it is unlikely that the audience would have gotten to the level of Costello's daughter-in-law Norma, who feels that Costello is old and confused and 'has lost her thread.' Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 75.

⁹⁸ McKay, 'Metafiction, Vegetarianism', 76.

‘staging’ of Costello’s critique against the theoretical discourse, hence allowing her argument to continue to make sense schematically. This well-meaning identification ironically testifies to how the theoretical position can always reappropriate any challenge posed to it, but it nevertheless still detracts from the seriousness of Costello’s embodied disruption of the rational discourse. The Costello piece works by the facts that Costello’s speech is fundamentally unclear, that her despair at the possibility of changing the course of the world comes across in the speech as real and unabating, and that these feelings cannot be subsumed into abstract thinking. In taking her leave, Costello parts with a diatribe: ‘Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything it seems, and come away clean.’⁹⁹ Her ending illogically condemns everyone and sends uneasiness into the room that would have an unshakable effect on the rest of the story. This overflowing of emotion suggests, I think, that Costello is rather more indignant than self-aware.

Costello and Franz Kafka

The next thing to consider is how Costello verbalises sympathy in her lecture and eludes it becoming a part of rational discourse. We still find traces of opaqueness in this part of her speech as she employs various names to refer to the site of sympathy. As I have previously quoted, Costello explains that ‘[t]he heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*’ (79). But the heart is a metaphor that stands in for what Costello calls, to name but a few of her terms, the ‘body-soul’ or ‘embodied soul’ (78), which refer similarly to what is not the thinking mind in human beings. Further proliferations of similar terms and phrases can also be observed in italics in the following sentence:

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose *fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being* – not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the *sensation – a heavily affective sensation – of being*

⁹⁹ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 80.

a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. (78, emphasis mine)

If naming is an exercise in power, Costello does not possess the power to name. Still, there is no internal uncertainty as to what she is referring to; the confusion is only created in her attempt to select one exact term for it. The marks left in Costello's words are thus of a certainty of experience in the flux of unstable and multiplying word signs.

One of the most important qualifications Costello makes regarding sympathy is to contend that it 'has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object' (79). This is one of the key distinctions that, conceptually speaking, prevent Costello's sympathetic experience from slipping into the abstract and from requiring some kind of mediation either through language, scientific advancements, or the talent of artists. Seated within the subject's experience of being itself, the sympathy that Costello gestures at relies on no external conditions. She offers a model of parallelism for sympathy that 'to be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being' (77).

The phrase 'be full of being' is itself a tautology within Costello's lecture and, as in the discourse of philosophers, it signals a private lived experience that her words cannot reach. To say that 'I am full of being' or, more pointedly, 'a being being full of being' seems to collapse the subject, verb, and object separation in language into a single unit focalised around the subject. The sympathy that results from this basis can therefore be more inclusive than one based on shared attributes or even, in Derrida's case, a shared lack of one—though it is worth reiterating that no matter how well or how badly sympathy is described, Costello would likely contend that our experience of it remains unaffected.

Costello's sense of sympathy's boundlessness turns out to involve letting go of the need, which we have identified in Nagel, to produce infinitely more accurate descriptions and to pursue affective truth instead. Her lecture's imprecise exposition of sympathy is a case in point, but Costello also further

cites as proof one of her novels titled *The House on Eccles Street* that fleshes out the character Marion Bloom of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, similar to how Coetzee's *Foe* reimagines the origin of Robinson Crusoe. 'If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed,' asserts Costello, 'then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.'¹⁰⁰ It would seem that the shared embodiment many critics have latched onto is nonessential to Costello's sympathetic imagination. According to her, the ability to sympathise does not even belong to all humans: 'There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it' (79). No basis, then, and no guarantee that it will be exercised, merely the occasional experience—it is little wonder that Costello's lecture ends with such pessimism.

What little hope there is in 'The Philosophers and the Animals' is placed on the figure of Red Peter, the great ape from Franz Kafka's short story 'A Report to an Academy.' Kafka's story is summarised by Costello as pertaining to 'an educated ape, Red Peter, who stands before the members of a learned society telling the story of his life—of his ascent from beast to something approaching man' (62). Costello says that standing on stage, she feels 'a little like Red Peter myself' (62). This comparison, she emphasises, is not meant ironically: 'It means what it says. I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean' (62).

Why is it that Costello is able to relate to Red Peter in a way that she perhaps could not do with real animals which only feature peripherally in her lecture? Kafka's talking ape seems to represent a product of the sympathetic imagination that is interestingly more riveting to her than real animals. 'Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behaviour,' declares Costello, 'but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars' (70). Costello's allusion to Red Peter crucially tries to ground him in reality by presenting a hypothesis that Red Peter is modelled after

¹⁰⁰ Coetzee, 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 80.

the apes in the experiment of the psychologist Wolfgang Köhler in the early 20th century. Costello introduces Köhler's star pupil named Sultan and relays the experiments he was put through in detail. On the strength of this connection, Costello proceeds to regard the surreal work of Franz Kafka not allegorically but as a sympathetic thinking through of the real and heartbreaking tribulation of an ape who was forced to dispense with his ape sensibility.

A common alternative reading is reported by Costello to be to view the story as 'an allegory of Kafka the Jew performing for Gentiles' (62). The tone of the story in such allegorical reading is ironic and the details about physical sufferings inflicted on Red Peter by the hunt inevitably lose some of its gravity to the comic effect. On the other hand, Costello has provided us with a reading that is sympathetic to the animal himself—that refuses to be torn away from the ape experience into the knowing ironic stance often adopted when animals are deemed but vehicles of allegories. Rereading Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy' in this light, the story is transformed into a tragedy and conveys a tremendous sadness that few writings can lay claim to. This short story seems to provide a proof, for Costello, of the kind of affective power that is possible through application of the sympathetic imagination.

By mentioning the literary examples of Kafka as well as her own novel, Costello obliquely suggests the possibility of comparing sympathy with the act of fiction writing, but she does not in fact make the comparison explicit. The analogy, if pursued, would work on the ground that both are acts of creation that bring into being something new within the subject's sensibility rather than a strict identification with a given external object. At its most successful, the result of this imaginative act is a hybrid of the body-soul and the thinking mind that mirrors the inherent hybridity of its creator. But in her discussion of Red Peter, Costello details only the hybridity of Kafka himself:

Kafka saw both himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies. The stare that we meet in all the surviving photographs of Kafka is a stare of pure surprise: surprise, astonishment,

alarm. Of all men Kafka is the most insecure in his humanity.

This, he seems to say: *this* is the image of God?¹⁰¹

In this section—as in most of her lecture—Costello refuses to leave the specificity of her example. For Costello, the immensity of Red Peter seems to be born of the specific immensity that belongs to Franz Kafka, which is not fully communicable in clear statements. While this would normally have been the natural point in the argument to extrapolate from Kafka to an ideal model of the sympathetic imagination, Costello refuses to make the leap and abruptly moves on to another example. At this point, Norma in the audience says to her husband, ‘[s]he is rambling. She has lost her thread’ (75). But to Costello, it would seem that the thread has in fact run out—it does not connect—and for her to go on beyond Red Peter and Kafka would be to leave behind the true ground of sympathy itself.

Costello nevertheless at least manages to incorporate Kafka’s hybrids in a further disruption of Nagel’s continuum. Her delineation of Nagel’s diagram, which I have earlier quoted in abbreviated form, appears in full as follows:

So we have set up a continuum that stretches from the Martian at one end to the bat to the dog to the ape (not, however, Red Peter) to the human being (not, however, Franz Kafka) at the other. (76)

Nagel’s linear diagram is here broken up by the examples from Kafka, held in parentheses, whose particular experiences do not serve or conform to Nagel’s abstracted blueprint of the species—(Which bat? Which dog? Which ape?). Speaking theoretically, this disruption by Costello is congenial to Derrida’s fierce objection to the notion of ‘homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal.’¹⁰² Derrida proposes that human and what s/he calls the animal is separated by an ‘abyssal rupture’ which cannot be presented as a single indivisible line but are multiple limits existing both

¹⁰¹ Coetzee, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, 75.

¹⁰² Derrida, *The Animal*, 30.

internally and externally (30). Instead, Derrida advocates a picture of ‘a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living’ that disproves any attempt to sweepingly name ‘The Animal’ (31). But Derrida’s language unfortunately thinks but does not live the multiple ruptures and, in effect, it leaves Costello to fend for herself at the conference dinner table.

III. Sympathetic realism

In his discussion of *Elizabeth Costello*, Derek Attridge identifies the novel as an attempt to address a problem it poses in the first chapter: ‘can the tradition of realism (on which Coetzee’s writing... depends for the readerly empathy that is crucial to its purpose) deal with ideas?’¹⁰³ In relation to the sympathetic imagination, this question seems to address the constraints of Costello’s sympathetic approach itself. Given that she has to piggyback on the works of various writers, does she manage to communicate a meaningful idea that is still her own without betraying the truth of her body-soul? Or has its articulation in a common language already defeated the effectiveness of the whole enterprise?

At the risk of appearing evasive, rather than trying to answer the question for Costello, I find it more helpful to reflect upon the appropriateness of demanding an answer to such questions from Costello. ‘Can your sympathetic writing deal with ideas?’ is by no means a question that can be answered fully without Costello having to abandon her embodied stance. In its generalising demand to see ideas in their pristine and detached forms, it would already have failed to accommodate Costello’s project. A more sympathetic question can be formed and posed, not to Costello, but to ourselves: ‘Do I sense what Costello is trying to communicate?’ for which the answer is certainly individually available.

The first chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, ‘Realism,’ raises the issue of ideas in fiction directly, but presents it neither in the form of a question nor a problem. The peculiarity of Coetzee’s writing in the chapter deserves a closer attention, and in order to do so I will reproduce in full here a passage in which the

¹⁰³ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 201.

omniscient narrator of 'Realism' interjects a lucid observation on literary realism into an ongoing story of Costello's trip to receive a literary award:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world – for instance, the son's concern that his mother not be treated as a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer, or Wheatley's concern not to seem an old-fashioned absolutist.¹⁰⁴

The meta-narrative method of this section is an anomaly among the fictions of Coetzee. The independent existence of a narrator is not found in any of his other novels where the narrating voice has always seemed transparent and regimentally focalised through one character at a time. At first glance, the narrator here appears to command an authority over the progress of the story since he¹⁰⁵ is the one able to determine the matrix of interests of the characters and align them with a larger and more coherent theory of realism. He seems to have the authority, also, because he has the clearest message. Contrary to realist narrative itself, this narrator is a philosophical creature who is not only comfortable around ideas, but also possesses all the answers.

There is, however, one paradoxical statement in this account of the omniscient narrator: 'realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no

¹⁰⁴ Coetzee, 'Realism', 9.

¹⁰⁵ For convenience's sake, I shall be referring to the narrator of 'Realism' as a *he* even though 'his' sex is actually not prescribed.

autonomous existence.’ There are two possible explanations for this paradox: first, that it comes out of an inconsistency within realism, which hypocritically is still based on a floating idea; or, second, the paradox is caused by the weakness of the narrator’s generalising discourse which is incapable of portraying anything as being more fundamental than ideas. Which way does the deconstruction really run—does the commentary deconstruct the narrative or does the narrative force trouble the commentary? An image from Coetzee’s *Slow Man* comes to mind of the old and frail Elizabeth Costello being helped to a sofa by her one-legged character Paul Rayment: ‘*The halt leading the halt*, he thinks.’¹⁰⁶

In my eyes, the central juxtaposition of this chapter is not limited to the literary genres of the self-aware fiction and the realist. As in ‘The Lives of the Animals,’ it is between two manners of knowing and expression: one that operates through objective enquiries (philosophical discourse, intellectual debates, lectures, literary criticism) and the other that burrows more into the murky experiences (sympathetic narrative). Costello’s son also attempts to sum up the two strands, saying that his mother is ‘[a] writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers... fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish or the fowl? Which is her medium: water or air?’¹⁰⁷

Coetzee’s ‘Realism’ comprises a mix of three narrative techniques: (1) the omniscient narrator, (2) the free indirect discourse of the son’s consciousness, and (3) Costello’s acceptance speech. As with ‘The Lives of Animals,’ the piece was originally composed by Coetzee to be delivered at a real public lecture, this time in Bennington College in November 1996.¹⁰⁸ The lecture’s original title ‘What is Realism?’ helps give us a rough idea of Coetzee’s point of entry into its writing. He must have been dealing with the problem of how to do justice to realism through the inhospitable discourse of a lecture format. The traditional approach of defining realism as a literary genre will be unavoidably anti-realist, and will ask of realism to produce what it by nature does not do: to articulate the idea that it represents. Under the omniscient narrator’s meta-commentary, for

¹⁰⁶ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Coetzee, ‘Realism’, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 194.

example, the truth-value of the characters' opinions, which are the currency of realism, is severely diminished. As soon as the commentator mentions 'the son's concern that his mother not be treated as a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer,' the son's wish that the award would recognise his mother's writing for its own merits suddenly feels trivialised. By splitting his narration into three, Coetzee can somewhat balance out the unfairness inherent in the examination of one position with the discourse of another. It is understandable that Coetzee would want to cut the title down from 'What Is Realism?' to 'Realism' since the former still implicitly favours the objective answer.

The narrator of 'Realism' lucidly credits Daniel Defoe as the pioneer of the method of 'moderate realism' in literature. As is his discursive custom, he also gives an illustrative example: the idea of death in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which is not directly referred to but becomes embodied in the pieces of abandoned clothing that are swept ashore: 'Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves... No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes.'¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, in an award acceptance speech titled 'What is Realism?,' Costello again speaks of Franz Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy', but—in a way that is also usual for her—does not make any clear connection from it to the concept of realism in her title. The Kafka's story is not fashioned into an instance of anything and the word 'realism' never occurs outside the repeating of the lecture's title. The focus of Costello's talk is not on the literary genre or even on how the Kafka's story may have been composed. It instead tracks 'us' readers and our changing perception of the same Kafka's narrative: 'We don't know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on in this story: whether it is about a man speaking to men or an ape speaking to apes or an ape speaking to men or a man speaking to apes...' (19). Through Kafka, Costello notices the demise of an old belief, implicitly aligned with realism but is still evident in the omniscient narrating voice, that there is one true set of meaning. While once 'we could say who we were,' 'it looks to us like an illusion now', she says, 'Now we are just performers speaking our parts' (19).

¹⁰⁹ Coetzee, 'Realism', 4.

Coetzee presents to us, then, two ways of answering a question, or two types of constative speech act: one being the divine truth of the narrator; and the other the monologue of the confused and uncertain Costello who is placed in an authoritative position she is uncomfortable with. Between them stands the figure of Costello's son who does not have to speak, housed in the style of free indirect discourse common among Coetzee's novels. Passages on the son offer a third alternative to Costello's confused speech and the rarefied commentary, one that is not an attempt at constative speech but an embodied representation that still acknowledges the character's personal desires.

This additional aspect becomes especially evident in the son's tête-à-tête with an attractive female academic Susan Moebius. Their conversation is an exchange of ideas about the difference between men's and women's writings, but the opinions each of them voices carry sensuous subtext of their desire for each other. Moebius says '[w]omen are good at mimicry, better at it than men. At parody, even. Our touch is lighter,' after which follows what appears to be the thought of John in free indirect discourse: 'She is smiling again. *See how light my touch can be*, her lips seem to say. Soft lips.'¹¹⁰ This scene is realist if we accept the narrator's definition, that is to say it contains an inseparable conflation of ideas and their embodiment. The references to touch, the smile, and the lips that said those sentences about women's writing are 'the hats and caps and shoes' that here communicate seduction. The two characters spend the night together, but when the son wakes up in the middle of the night, he experiences an intense sadness. The body that lies next to him that had previously engaged his desire is now empty of meaning: 'He runs the hand down her body: breast, flank, hip, thigh, knee. Handsome in every detail, no doubt about that, but in a blank way that no longer moves him' (26). This scene is again realist, but the meaning of the same body has disconcertingly changed. The same set of particulars may be supplied within the same embodiment, but the significations cannot be trusted to stay the same.

Realism in Coetzee's 'Realism' seems rather whatever is alive to each moment of living. It is not embodiment that impedes free-floating ideas but the

¹¹⁰ Coetzee, 'Realism', 23.

constant change of the characters, who at another moment may generate another idea set and let the old one float away. In this night, for example, rather than succumbing to despair that there is no meaning, the son soon registers his desire to sleep, bringing the matter down briefly to the level of his body, before drifting away again on the idea of sleep through the words of Shakespeare:

Sleep, he thinks, *that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care*. What an extraordinary way of putting it! Not all the monkeys in the world picking away at typewriters all their lives would come up with those words in that arrangement. Out of the dark emerging, out of nowhere: first not there, then there, like a newborn child, heart working, brain working, all the processes of that intricate electrochemical labyrinth working. A miracle. He closes his eyes.¹¹¹

This passage about the miracle of creation can be compared to the chapter's final scene when the mother and son are on a plane heading to Australia. Borne through the air by a feat of human engineering, John is in the mood to observe his mother with a rational pair of eyes. What he sees repudiates his sleep-induced image of the miracle of creation:

She lies slumped deep in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. She is snoring faintly... He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it (34).

¹¹¹ Coetzee, 'Realism', 27.

Which vision of life is the true one, the beguilingly beautiful or the meaningless mundane? The answer seems to be that they have all been true in their limited time frame.

Coetzee's references to Defoe and Kafka, two disparate authors who are brought together in 'Realism,' helps somewhat quell this anxiety of unstable meanings. Coetzee has shown admiration for both Defoe and Kafka for their exceptional attentiveness that makes their works essentially 'realistic' within themselves. In Coetzee's introduction to the World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1999), he elaborates on Defoe's ability to masterfully dedicate himself to his practical subject:

For page after page—for the first time in the history of fiction—we see minute, ordered description of how things are done. It is a matter of pure writerly attentiveness, pure submission to the exigencies of a world which, through being submitted to in a state so close to spiritual absorption, becomes transfigured, real.¹¹²

Coetzee's alter ego Costello, on the other hand, speaks of Kafka's relation to realism in terms of the same complete attentiveness, if not to a whole world this time, then at least to his character:

Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping. That is where Kafka fits in.¹¹³

¹¹² J.M. Coetzee, 'Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*', in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002), 24.

¹¹³ Coetzee, 'Realism', 32.

Coetzee's own practice resembles Kafka and his smaller scale operation. His fiction believes in the characters' living beings, and believes that if it can remain attentive enough, they can become a real evolving being.

As for Elizabeth Costello, her insistence on the boundlessness of the sympathetic imagination also continues to evolve with her. Her lecture implicitly accuses meat-eating human beings of a failure of the imagination; yet, at the same time, Costello knows that people are no great monsters. At the close of her visit to Appleton College, she reveals to her son: 'I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*'¹¹⁴ The figure of speech 'making a mountain out of a molehill' is uttered to provide comfort, but it does little to appease Costello, for there is real immovable contradiction in her life that figurative language cannot cover up. Coetzee is so good at invoking these unsettling moments beyond the territory of empirical knowledge and the arts, an instant of realisation that one's firmly-held, richly-argued beliefs are incomplete. Despite the scene's bleak overtone, the faltering and doubt-ridden Elizabeth Costello is one 'example' of an especially Coetzean vulnerability and strength. One could argue that it is the novel's self-conscious moments such as this one that unveil the full extent of Costello's sympathetic imagination: it is never finished as long as one's alive. For every character, there is a different set of embodied truth to be sympathetically imagined.

¹¹⁴ Coetzee, 'The Poets and the Animals', 115.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Stories in which you lead, I follow’: Writer-character Relationship in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*

Life & Times of Michael K,¹¹⁵ a story of Michael K’s journey in the South African hinterland, may be read as Coetzee’s trialing of the idea of solitude as a route to freedom during a time of political oppression. K’s lone wandering in the vast and empty Karoo following the death of his mother produces irresistible passages of silence that counteract the novel’s apocalyptic vision of the apartheid regime’s neurotic surveillance. But critics have noted that the free indirect passages that relay K’s solitary existence in the Karoo expose the impossibility of the novel’s narration, for silence and solitude are experiences that should be outside language. For Michael Valdez Moses, this impossibility results in *Michael K*’s ‘postmodern’ characteristics: ‘a heightened self-consciousness of presentation and a deliberate disruption of conventional (unselfcritical) forms of narrative representation.’¹¹⁶ But there is a hollowness to this line of explanation that does not account for the vividness of the scenes. In the passage that follows, we witness K daydreaming of owning a piece of silent land in the Karoo. It is an immensely attractive vision, but we are troubled by the question of whether our reading contaminates the pure silence of K’s dream:

I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say... He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence: he could understand that they

¹¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004).

¹¹⁶ Michael Valdez Moses, ‘Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1994): 151. See also Maria Michelle Kelly, ‘“So I Sing for My Keep”: J.M. Coetzee and Confessional Narrative’ (PhD Thesis, The University of York, 2008), 126–27.

should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity. (47)

As beautiful as the silence of the Karoo is in this passage, irony breaks through in the fact that a voice is narrating K's 'silent' thought to the reader. This sense only grows stronger as K retreats further into the mountain range:

Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to find me, surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost.¹¹⁷

But K is not lost to the world as his story is being narrated by the above narrative voice and read by us. The voice and the readers have been traversing over the plains, the mountains, and the rocks with him. Already, the repetition of 'surely' in the passage carries K's doubt of his success in securing isolation, as well as the narrative's own self-consciousness about its illusion of solitude and silence.

In addition to aligning *Michael K* with postmodernism, Critics have persuasively written of *Michael K*'s self-conscious representation of silence as Coetzee's strategy to unsettle the unreflexive narratives of the dominant discourse. But it seems to me that the passages above are powerful not only because they push back against oppressive ideologies, but also because it poignantly conveys K's desperation for peace to come right then and there. To bring our consideration of the writing back to the body-soul's urgent yearnings, I would like to instead ask a different embodied question of the self-reflexive scene that, if we establish that K is neither alone nor silent in the mountain, who is with him and who speaks? What kind of companions to Michael K are this narrative voice that we hear and, equally important, what kind are we readers?

In Coetzee's fiction, human relationships on the ground are so often restrictive. As Carrol Clarkson rightly observes of Coetzee's narratives, 'the process of "drawing together"... often comes with negative connotations of

¹¹⁷ Coetzee, *Michael K*, 66.

exclusion, or of coercion, a loss of individual freedoms.’¹¹⁸ The characters in Coetzee’s apartheid era fiction often find themselves trapped in oppositional social and racial roles—of master and slave in *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*, the civilized and the barbaric in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or white and black in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*—that restrict their relationships and their identities to seemingly unshakable patterns. But the relationship between the implied author and the character that I am trying to draw out here seems at least to hold out the possibility of being a positive one.

This chapter will be tracking the living beings of the writer figure and character in Coetzee’s fictions, which interestingly occur not as part of a ‘drawing together’ but rather according to the motif of ‘following’ another character through the sympathetic imagination. In most of Coetzee’s narratives—as is the case in *Michael K*—the narrating body that follows the characters remains largely obscure to the readers, but in a few works this intimate relationship becomes the subject of the fictional dramatisation. This chapter will look at three of Coetzee’s works in particular that feature both the character who writes and the character who is written; namely, *Age of Iron* (1990) with Mrs. Curren’s written account of Vercueil, Coetzee’s metafictional Nobel Lecture ‘He and His Man’ (2003),¹¹⁹ and *Slow Man* (2005) with the author Elizabeth Costello’s involvement in the life of her character Paul Rayment. By taking advantage of these embodiments of writer-character relationship, I hope to arrive at a more meaningful account of self-reflexivity in Coetzee’s narratives that expresses the need to tell stories as being part of the desires of the vulnerable body-soul.

Storytelling as ‘following’

Despite being fifteen years apart and belonging to disparate genres, *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man* intimately speak to each other as representations of the act of storytelling. In *Slow Man*, Costello writes Paul Rayment as Mrs. Curren of

¹¹⁸ Carrol Clarkson, *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 177.

¹¹⁹ J.M. Coetzee, ‘He and His Man: The 2003 Nobel Lecture’, *World Literature Today* 78, no. 2 (2004): 16–20.

Age of Iron can be said to write Vercueil in her letter to her daughter, and, interestingly, both narratives produce the metaphor of leading and following in their attempts to describe the characters' act of writing. In *Slow Man*, the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello infiltrates into the fiction she is writing and befriends her protagonist Paul Rayment, hoping to guide him towards an exciting life that will be worthy of a book. The metaphor of 'following' is used by Costello to explain to Paul why she has chosen him for a protagonist. She chants: 'For me alone Paul Rayment was born and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his of acting, mine of writing.'¹²⁰ Costello lifts this sentence almost verbatim from the final part of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in which the fictional historian Cid Hamet Benengeli says to his pen 'For me alone was Don Quixote born, and I for him; he knew how to act, and I to write.'¹²¹ By evoking this passage, Coetzee recalls the novelistic desire behind writing that has manifested itself ever since Cervantes's first modern novel—an ambivalent longing for guidance that harks back to the days of religious faith and its one true text. In Cervantes's novel, God has been imperfectly replaced by these imaginative acts of writing and of Don Quixote's self-creation.

In *Age of Iron*, this desire increases in urgency as a result of its protagonist's losing battle with cancer and apartheid's violent reality. The novel also repeats Cervantes's formulation of the character being tightly bound up with the writer. As Mrs. Curren nears death, her writing of Vercueil becomes a search for spiritual salvation. To the vagrant, Mrs. Curren reveals:

So I have continued to tell myself stories in which you lead, I follow. And if you say not a word, that is, I tell myself, because the angel is wordless. The angel goes before, the woman follows. His eyes are open, he sees; hers are shut, she is still

¹²⁰ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 233.

¹²¹ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 939. The false writer in question is Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, writer of the false second part of *Don Quixote* published one year prior to Cervantes's authentic version.

sunk in the sleep of worldliness. That is why I keep turning to you for guidance, for help.¹²²

Storytelling takes on a spiritual dimension for Mrs. Curren and becomes a vehicle that she uses to explore her own spiritual life. In my reading of the novel, I will further show that, as the novel progresses, the question of who leads and who follows gets ever more complicated; the writer-character relationship in Coetzee becomes a sympathetic space for both parties without an overseeing authoritative figure.

Coetzee seems to value highly his writing's capacity to allow this sympathetic following to take place. In a *Doubling the Point* interview, he speaks of *Age of Iron* as offering a sympathetic venue for its characters to speak. Coetzee says that within the novel 'a contest is staged... a contest about having a say' of which the result is to him 'irrelevant.' Rather, '[w]hat matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. So even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced.'¹²³ With his own works, Coetzee has consistently negotiated different modes of address where he does not occupy the position of authority. Yet in criticism of Coetzee we can still do more to understand this careful positioning of writer and character in order to finally give the characters' voices the weight due to them. In one of his most revealing passages on writing, Coetzee presents serious writing as a business of relinquishing one's hold on authority and venturing into a relationship with 'the countervoices' within oneself:

Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down

¹²² Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 168.

¹²³ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 250.

from the position of what Lacan calls ‘the subject supposed to know.’¹²⁴

Thus, in this chapter, I advance the argument that the figurations of the relationship between writer and character in Coetzee’s novels offer a unique view into the motivation of Coetzee’s art and offer a basis for more sympathetic reading of apartheid texts like *Age of Iron*. Reading Mrs. Curren’s letter as a fiction with a character named Vercueil, I trace how Mrs. Curren’s desire to tell stories is connected with her concern for the fate of her body-soul after death. The stories she tells about Vercueil enable her to leave something of her outmoded existence behind in a wrapping that would slip through the South African age of iron. As Mrs. Curren says, her stories are ‘like sweets for my daughter... Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time,’¹²⁵ and my reading hopes to unpack some of these truths. This is followed by an examination of Coetzee’s Nobel lecture ‘He and His Man,’ in which Coetzee traces the continuity from the writer-character relation to the intertextual relationship with literary forebears, specifically the figure of Daniel Defoe. ‘He and His Man’ posits these different levels of relationship as figurations of the same set of human desires. The text is significant in helping to open up the possibility of reading different forms of the novel back and forth to the embodied being behind them. Following in the footsteps of this examination, I end with a reading of *Slow Man*, a novel that features a prominent metafictional relationship, and identify Elizabeth Costello and Paul Rayment as representations of two novelistic genres—the postmodern novel and the Realist novel—whose fortune is fast fading in the twenty-first century. In a sense, *Slow Man* is Coetzee’s unflinching rumination on the future of the novel form.

Through the explorations outlined above, we can return to Coetzee texts like *Michael K* with an awareness of the presence of an implied author who follows K on his solitary wandering and reports back to us. Under this figuration, our engagement with the text can be conceptualised without precluding our own

¹²⁴ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 65.

¹²⁵ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 8.

sympathetic stake in the scene, as would be the case when we say that the text is self-conscious about its own fictionality. K's impossible thought that 'surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost' can be absorbed not as an ironic or misguided statement of an other, but rather as a sentence brought out through the sympathetic matrix between the character, the writer and the readers who, when they allow themselves, no less share in K's frustrated desire for the ever elusive freedom.

I. Age of Iron

Mrs. Curren's realism

Age of Iron, Coetzee's novel of 1990, arguably produces one of the most sustained relationships in Coetzee's fiction between the protagonist Mrs. Curren and the vagrant Vercueil; yet in contrast with this vital relationship, the novel is delivered entirely in the monologic form of a long letter written between 1984 and 1986 by Mrs. Curren, a retired professor of Classics. The letter is addressed to her daughter, who has permanently emigrated from South Africa to the US out of distaste for the nation's apartheid policy. The letter begins with Mrs. Curren relating her discovery of two things in quick succession: the news that she is terminally ill with cancer and the appearance of a derelict named Vercueil who has set up a cardboard shelter in the alley next to her home. Interpolated into this personal drama is the State of Emergency in South Africa in the late 1980s that puts a strain on the domestic lives of the novel's characters. Apart from her daughter's relocation, Mrs. Curren witnesses the violent deaths of her domestic's son and his young friends at the hands of the South African police for their part in the black revolutionary movement. Only the listless Vercueil, a being outside society and its race politics, is left behind to act as the messenger for Mrs. Curren's parting letter.

The fact that we read this private letter without any external interjection or framing is an unexplained logical implausibility similar to what Coetzee creates for *Michael K*. The readers are placed in the unlikely position of observers who are engaged with Mrs. Curren's letter without any indication of how it got into our hands. Little in the letter itself calls attention to this unrealism

of our reading. There is no hint of paranoia from Mrs. Curren that her message could be intercepted, and her first-person account exhibits no doubt as to the reality of South Africa that it inhabits. Though critics have variously commented on *Age of Iron*'s lack of self-reflexivity,¹²⁶ there has been only limited attempt to understand the reason behind the letter's internal realism and how it may embody Mrs. Curren's entrenched state of existence. In this section, I endeavour to bring Mrs. Curren's classicist position into sharper focus and argue for its limited legitimacy, which is capable of challenging our grasp of the complex situation no less than the silence of Vercueil.

From Coetzee's Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech in 1987, the year leading up to the publication of *Age of Iron*, one can get a sense of how the social and political context of *Age of Iron*'s writing informs its claustrophobic space. On the occasion, Coetzee speaks of South African literature as 'literature in bondage.'¹²⁷ *Age of Iron*'s premise is reflected in his description of a milieu in which one's body, acts and thoughts are aggressively invaded by the political: 'The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life' (98). The Jerusalem speech has a distinctly bitter tone, as Coetzee admits that his grim portrait 'applies to my self and my own writing as much as to anyone else.' It strongly suggests that Coetzee's instinct is to resist the brute subjugation of his intellectual freedom and to enter 'the vast and complex human world that lies beyond' (98). But South African writers, says Coetzee in a famous closing off, are prevented from ignoring the reality of their situation:

[w]hat prevents him is... the *power* of the world his body lives
in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination,

¹²⁶ Mrs. Curren's realist account can at times come across like a fault that criticism wishes to explain away. Mike Marais, for instance, states in defence of the novel that Coetzee's self-reflexive energy has not disappeared but is internalised into his exploration of the stunted inner life of Mrs. Curren. Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible*, 103–4. See also Jean-Philippe Wade, 'Doubling Back on J.M. Coetzee', *English in Africa* 21, no. 1–2 (1994): 212.

¹²⁷ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 98.

which, whether he likes it or not has its residence in his body. The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. (99, emphasis original)

Already in the Jerusalem speech, elements of Elizabeth Costello's interest in the body-soul are present in Coetzee's acknowledgement of his inexplicable physical and moral receptivity to the South African situation. The piece touches on how Coetzee's writing bears the mark of a reality of existence that lags behind his Western education—an essentially colonial experience impinging upon the Western novel form. Mrs. Curren's classicist education clearly heightens this conflict between daily experience of crudity in South Africa and the classical origin of Western civilization itself.

If we consider that the modern novel was born with Alonso Quixano's transformation into Don Quixote, the valourous knight, out of a desire to give meaning to his drab existence in a quiet Spanish rural town, Coetzee's *Age of Iron* signals a markedly different reality. Mrs. Curren's reality is a monstrosity that does not need the stage make-up of her imagination. Instead, the imagination is paralysed under the weight of apartheid experiences and this condition is interestingly refracted through the novel's stifling realist space. If the Western novel has since progressed to entertain 'more sophisticated' self-reflexivity, *Age of Iron* reminds us that this development is conditioned by more progressive societies outside the experience of Mrs. Curren's generation—the generation of Coetzee's parents¹²⁸—who grew up in the apartheid system and has never left. Postmodern influence and the outside world can still be felt in the peripheries of *Age of Iron*, mainly in the implausibility of our reading the text or in mentions of Mrs. Curren's daughter in America whom one suspects is a reflection of Coetzee's own expatriate spell in the States. However, the text seems to lay

¹²⁸ In Attwell's account of *Age of Iron* manuscripts, he reveals that Coetzee is prompted by his mother's death to write the novel. Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 170.

down a mandate that it will not leave behind the body-soul of Mrs. Curren and her unique experience of South Africa, an experience whose natural form is ineluctably realism.

Mrs. Curren's sojourn in the black township of Guguletu represents the moment when the authority of reality over the Western collection of literary tropes becomes the most forceful. The episode is as thick in literary allusions and metaphors as any in Coetzee, but none of them are remotely convincing. In an unreliable Hillman car nicknamed 'Rocinante'¹²⁹ after Don Quixote's old horse, Mrs. Curren sets off with her domestic Florence and her daughters Hope and Beauty in search of Florence's missing son Bheki. 'Hope and Beauty,' Mrs. Curren remarks, 'It was like living in an allegory' (90). They are then joined by Florence's cousin, Mr. Thabane, a former teacher whose learned air recalls 'the cousin' who guides Quixote and Panza to their quest at the Cave of Montesinos.¹³⁰ Also unmistakably, as David E. Hoegberg details, the description of the scene at Guguletu reworks Dante's journey through hell in *Inferno*, with the irony that the destructions are 'a brute fact' on earth.¹³¹

During this journey, Mrs. Curren sees the shanties of the township being torn down and set on fire by a gang of men as a sighing crowd watch on. The residents are forced out bodily and a chaos of shouts and fights is breaking out all around her. Terrorised by the crudity and at the limit of her physical endurance, Mrs. Curren lets out that she wants to go home, to which Mr. Thabane retorts 'But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?'¹³² The question is a heavy blow to Mrs. Curren's previous 'civilised' critique of the black characters' readiness to take part in violent resistance. Her literary rendition of the scene is further acknowledged as insufficient when she declares to a crowd that has gathered to watch their argument: 'These are terrible sights. They are to be condemned. But I

¹²⁹ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 16.

¹³⁰ For a comparison of *Don Quixote*'s 'the Cave of Montesinos' episode and *Age of Iron*, see Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 149.

¹³¹ David E. Hoegberg, "'Where Is Hope?': Coetzee's Rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*", *English in Africa* 25, no. 1 (1998): 33.

¹³² Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 97.

cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth' (99). It is clear that Mrs. Curren is painfully aware that her parade of allusions is not performing efficiently to illuminate this reality, yet has not the access to better alternatives. Like her British car that occasionally will not start (yet another allegory, 'From the time when British was Best'), her allusions cannot ignite real understanding between the racial divide. The tropes of Dante and Cervantes are failing to communicate the truth of Guguletu. If anything, the scene's urgency feels muffled by reproductions of classical, universalising themes. Despite Mrs. Curren's powerful protest: 'But what do you expect?... To speak of this... you would need the tongue of a god,' she registers in her letter a man in the crowd repeatedly saying: 'This woman talks shit' (99).

Thus, Mrs. Curren's doubtful voice is duly confined in her letter of reportage; with her mortal clock ticking in the background, trapped also under the weight of South Africa's sinister colonialist legacy and in a white, old and undesirable body with outmoded humanist views for what many see as a decisive time for action. Neither the reader nor Mrs. Curren will ever know if this letter, this voice, is ever delivered to her daughter. Thus, the experience of release from this enclosed space is infinitely postponed for the reader as it is for the character—except, of course, for the fact that Coetzee is sympathetically releasing it through his novel and that Mrs. Curren still has Vercueil. The novel, the letter and Vercueil, in other words, function in the same way; they provide a space to keep alive the spirit of humour and understanding during a dark time. No matter how invalidated her stance may be, Mrs. Curren's views are still given a voice in her letter, meant for her daughter to whom she is more than an allegory of white South Africans.

That the shackles of Mrs. Curren's self deprive her of the authority to speak and to be heard in apartheid South Africa is especially apparent in her relationship with a boy who goes under the *nom de guerre* of 'John.' Mrs. Curren is brought into close contact with him through her bearing witness to a police car knocking the boy and Bheki off their bicycle in front of her house. Mrs. Curren finds herself holding down John's head wound as they wait for an ambulance; his

thick, flowing blood stirring her into a sense of human commonality that is to be short-lived. It occurs to her that she must stop the blood ‘[b]ecause blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent, not given, held in common, in trust, to be preserved.’¹³³ But upon visiting John at the hospital, her utter social alienation from the boy becomes evident: ‘My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white’ (79).

This restrictive self of Mrs. Curren is depicted not merely as imposed upon her but as constituting her very mode of being. It is her reality as apartheid was the reality of South Africa. Both are too immovable to be changed by quixotic imagination or rational appeals, as their roots go deeper than imageries and thoughts. To draw on Costello’s term, they are registered in the body-souls of the characters. Mrs. Curren feels the rupture of apartheid physically during her visit to John. As she reaches out to touch the boy’s hand—‘it was the merest brush, the merest of lingering of my fingertips on the back of his hand’—she feels his body stiffen, ‘[feels] an angry electric recoil’ (79). From this bodily repulsion, Mrs. Curren becomes acutely aware of her irredeemably despicable position to the boy. She begins, even, to be infected with it: ‘Though it does me no good, I flinch from the white touch as much as [John] does; would even flinch from the old white woman who pats his hand if she were not I’ (80). Unfortunately, this ‘she’ is Mrs. Curren in a way that she cannot transcend. Between her and the boy, there is an impasse that stems from centuries of oppression and warfare beyond the reach and validity of her ideas.

Mrs. Curren’s background in the classics serves to highlight the discrepancies between the daily struggles of conflict and the realm of universal ideas—the result of which is only temporarily conclusive. Ideas are outmuscled all around Mrs. Curren, restrained and invalidated. Faced with John’s ingrained distaste of her, Mrs. Curren breaks into a lecture on the Athenian historian Thucydides, a figure who embodies a rationalist and humanist understanding of historical events. Thucydides’s major work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*,

¹³³ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 63.

pioneers an objective approach to history that looks to synthesise from varied accounts the true causes of war that will be superior to the subjective narratives of specific sides. What Thucydides has to say about war is still found to be highly relevant to world conflicts today, but his name interpolated into the heat of the South African conflict, specifically into John's daily struggle to fight and stay alive, is sidelined by a truth of a more vital order. John's reaction is as if he does not hear her or that he trusts more the immediate truth of his body: 'Quite deliberately he put his good hand under the sheet, in case I should touch it again.'¹³⁴

John and his revolutionary community represent a force of action that Mrs. Curren recognises as being even more timeless and authoritative than the classical wisdoms she rehearses. Though she cannot submit to its brutalist ideology, she cannot help staring in horrified fascination. Late in the novel, Mrs. Curren has a vision of her domestic Florence as an ancient barefoot and bare-breasted goddess from time before Aphrodite: 'an older figure, a figure of urgency, of cries in the dark, short and sharp, of blood and earth' (178). Her description of Florence also recalls the image of the goddess of liberty that was formerly evoked during the French revolution as leading a crowd of people towards a fight. But Florence is described as walking without the goddess's Phrygian cap that signifies freedom: 'her head bare.' She carries her surviving daughters Hope and Beauty and walks with her eyes fixed forward past the burning Mrs. Curren. In the vision, Mrs. Curren fails to follow the family: 'Forever the goddess is passing, forever, caught in a posture of surprise and regret, I do not follow' (178). As the fight for liberty trudges forward, purposeful, Mrs. Curren's transcendental views stand burning and paralysed, appearing as an empty spectacle for the gathered crowd. What is most intriguing, however, is how the narrative maintains the undecidability between the two ideologies that are embodied in Mrs. Curren and in the black revolutionary movement.

Critics have variously noted the inappropriateness with which Mrs. Curren airs her opinions. For Gilbert Yeoh, her letter betrays her 'presumptuousness, her propensity to stereotype and, in a symbolic sense, her

¹³⁴ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 81.

myopia and *blindness* amidst political crisis.’¹³⁵ Yet such a critical stance elides Mrs. Curren’s ever growing embodied awareness of her unjust position that is intensified by John’s recoil and the death of Bheki. Mrs. Curren’s grasp of the situation eventually penetrates into a realm inaccessible by our external perception and judgement. Her agony speaks not of her oblivion of the reality of violence around her, but of a fuller realisation that her life has been the embodiment of an ugly truth, its vitality blotted out by the ignominy of colonial oppression: ‘In blood and milk I drank [my mother’s] body and came to life. And then was stolen, and have been lost ever since.’¹³⁶ Her memory is becoming intertwined with an awareness of the persecuted absences. A picture of her family in a flourishing garden brings to mind the thought: ‘Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in?’ (111). Perversely, Mrs. Curren finds her cancer an apt metaphor: ‘I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside’ (112).

It does not escape Mrs. Curren that this impassioned conflation of body and history is empty, but her feeling of impurity nevertheless has a kernel of psychic truth. Her self—its body and thought—is a cause for shame and a prison that cannot be escaped by her developing more precise understanding or even more intense feelings of shame. Mrs. Curren is beset with the impossible problem of how to get outside her tarnished self on her own. This difficulty is best captured in one of her several contemplations on suicide where she finally concludes that external help is required:

But how hard it is to kill oneself! One clings so tight to life! It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. You have to become

¹³⁵ Gilbert Yeoh, ‘Love and Indifference in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38, no. 3 (1 July 2003): 120 (emphasis original).

¹³⁶ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 110.

someone other than yourself. But who? Who is it that waits for me to step into his shadow? Where do I find him?¹³⁷

Age of Iron contains various moments like this one when Coetzee gives voice to a desire to be saved, or seen off, by an external entity, a desire which, to Mrs. Curren, always points to the vagrant Vercueil.

Critics have suggested, following the Levinasian model, that Mrs. Curren's salvation indeed lies in her opening herself up to be affected by the figure of 'the Other' as embodied in Vercueil.¹³⁸ However, in the next section, I will argue that the Coetzee's text and its characters are in fact more clueless in the matter of salvation. Rather than the alterity of Vercueil, Mrs. Curren is drawn by his abjectness and vulnerability that reflects her own, and the two are involved in an interdependence relationship which leads not to salvation, but to a brief yet affecting respite. I can be taken to echo Rachel Ann Walsh, who, in her article on *Age of Iron*, objects Levinasian 'universalising metaphors,' which she sees as having the effect of diluting the novel's South African context.¹³⁹ However, whereas Walsh trades Levinas's ethical paradigm for Judith Butler's more circumspect thinking about the body under the concept of 'creaturely precarity,' I will be highlighting Coetzee's novels' sympathetic mode of knowing, which requires not more accurate conception of the truth but rather an acceptance of the inborn limits of living beings. In Coetzee's novels in particular, these limits become the most pronounced in the struggles of the author figure in the writing of her text.

Writing Vercueil

At various points in *Age of Iron*, it is suggested that Vercueil is partially Mrs. Curren's willed creation; that she does not open up to him as who he is, but plays a crucial hand in fashioning him into the role of her angel of death. In

¹³⁷ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 119.

¹³⁸ Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible*, 115.

¹³⁹ Rachel Ann Walsh, "Not Grace, Then, but at Least the Body": Accounting for the Self in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, *Twentieth Century Literature* 56, no. 2 (2010): 189.

writing of Vercueil, Mrs. Curren has cast her own angelic saviour out of a stranger who shows up in her driveway. The literary template for the derelict's role is laid down early on in her letter when Mrs. Curren expresses a desire to stumble upon a divine saviour as in a short story by Leo Tolstoy, 'What Men Live By.' Tolstoy's story tells of a shoemaker who takes into his home a naked stranger freezing by the roadside. After six years together, the stranger is revealed to be one of God's angels of death, banished down to earth as a punishment for failing to take the life of an ailing mother. It is given to the angel to learn what men need, and the lesson appears to be that men's individual knowledge is limited but their kindness is universal: 'I understood that God does not wish men to live apart, and therefore he does not reveal to them what each one needs for himself; but he wishes them to live united, and therefore reveals to each of them what is necessary for all.'¹⁴⁰ In Tolstoy's parable, the people save each other in life through their love and kindness, while in their deaths the angel delivers their faithful souls to God.

Tolstoy's angel arrives naked but pristine: 'his body was clean and in good condition, his hands and feet shapely, and his face good and kind' (759), all of which are contrary to Vercueil with his 'horsy, weather-beaten face,' 'three crooked fingers' and 'their dirty nails' (11). Mrs. Curren in fact reads Tolstoy's story and laments:

What chance is there, if I take a walk down to Mill Street, of finding my own angel to bring home and succor?... When a ragged stranger comes knocking at the door he is never anything but a derelict, an alcoholic, a lost soul. Yet how, in our hearts, we long for these sedate homes of ours to tremble, as in the story, with angelic chanting! (14)

It is possible that her longing drives her to transform reality, transform the unlikely Vercueil into her angel of death and final messenger. Her description of

¹⁴⁰ Leo Tolstoy, 'What Men Live By (1881)', in *Collected Shorter Fiction*, trans. Louise Shanks Maude, Aylmer Maude, and John Bayley, vol. 1 (London: Everyman, 2001), 778.

‘his high, peaked shoulders’ is reminiscent of an angel’s wings. Vercueil through Mrs. Curren’s pen is a testament to her idealistic desire for a life outside politics and contestations that, amidst her immediate reality, seem entirely inappropriate. She invests hope in him to release her from the shackles of her shameful state when she does not know how. Near the end, Mrs. Curren confesses to Vercueil the role she has cast him in:

The day I first saw you behind the garage was the day I had the bad news about myself, about my case. It was too much of a coincidence. I wondered whether you were not, if you will excuse the word, an angel come to show me the way. Of course you were not, are not, cannot be—I see that. But that is only half the story, isn’t it? We half-perceive but we also half-create. (168)

As a flight of fancy housed in a story without the absolute Christian faith of Tolstoy, Mrs. Curren’s creation of Vercueil remains in a sense transitory. On this point, it is important to recognise a parallel model of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as another counterbalancing intertext with *Age of Iron*, which helps Coetzee to reconstitute the imagination as a secular substitute for divine faith. Harold Bloom considers *Don Quixote* to provide ‘secular and literary, and not Catholic,’ transcendence.¹⁴¹ Cervantes’s self-fashioning knight is a model of the a fictional construct that, though afflicted by Alonso Quixano’s mortality, can be productive in its own limited way. Even from its secular stronghold, *Age of Iron* suggests that Mrs. Curren is investing the product of her creative imagination with an important spiritual role. As Mrs. Curren writes, ‘[t]his was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses.’¹⁴²

So let us entertain the thought that, in her letter, Mrs. Curren is writing into shape Vercueil, who, beside descriptions of his physical grubbiness, remains an essentially nebulous character to his writer. Through his lack of definition, his

¹⁴¹ Harold Bloom, ‘The Knight in the Mirror’, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2003.

¹⁴² Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 185.

irrelevance to the rule of the political,¹⁴³ Vercueil is the unmarked page that enables Mrs. Curren to create and to lay down her unloved self into writing:

He watches but does not judge. Always a faint haze of alcohol about him. Alcohol, that softens, preserves. *Mollificans*. That helps us to forgive. He drinks and makes allowances. His life all allowances. He, Mr. V., to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write. While to the rising generation who do not drink, I cannot speak, can only lecture.¹⁴⁴

Conversing with and then writing about Vercueil are for Mrs. Curren a reflective process of unburdening the self into a forbearing receptacle that then takes a shape of its own. Through interpersonal communication, she is hopeful of learning the lesson of Tolstoy's angel about what is necessary for all, of setting down a truth that will finally be larger than her circumscribed life and, because of that, will outlast her. Addressing her daughter, Mrs. Curren reveals: 'Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. Otherwise what would this writing be but a kind of moaning, now high, now low?' (9).

Coetzee occasionally turns the metaphor of writing into the organic image of procreation. The 'responsibility towards something that has not yet emerged' in writing becomes the responsibility of speaking to a hypothetical newborn who arrives fresh, pure and willing. Towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Curren gradually recognises that Vercueil's openness owes its effect to the man's innocence rather than divine wisdom or alterity: 'He does not know how to love as a boy does not know how to love' (196). Vercueil gazes and listens as a child with childlike curiosity; since he does not know, he also does not judge.

¹⁴³ At the end of *Michael K*, K imagines himself leading an old apolitical man who is ostensibly a precursor of Vercueil, to a life in the countryside away from the country's turmoil. The man 'with a stoop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard, the kind of old man the police ignored' seems to represent an ambivalent image of freedom that captivates Coetzee. Coetzee, *Michael K*, 183.

¹⁴⁴ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 82.

Precisely because, like her, he does not have the answer, Vercueil brings Mrs. Curren back to the forgiving and playful atmosphere of childhood, which recalls Coetzee's expression in *Doubling the Point* that, when writing, he tries to keep in mind how 'we are children unreconstructed...., to be treated with the charity that children have due to them.'¹⁴⁵ Mrs. Curren thus gets to briefly experience the mercy preserved for the young in an Iron Age when children such as John and Bheki cannot afford to wallow in innocence. About them, she says 'children scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul' (7). On the other side of the world, her two grandchildren in America feel to her like children who are not allowed to play: 'soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons' (7). In a sense, Vercueil is a surrogate for them and for Mrs. Curren's daughter, whose ultimatum never to return to South Africa until the regime has fallen has fractured her family ties. Vercueil provides solace for the here and now: 'Him, not you. Because he is here, beside me, now' (162).

Mrs. Curren only confronts the reality of Vercueil's stupefied innocence—as opposed to his angelic patience—near the end of her letter. After the outpourings of her grievances have subsided, the story of Vercueil's mortal vulnerability begins to emerge, which severely dampens the hope that this man possesses any saintly power to deliver her soul across. Vercueil relates to Mrs. Curren how he once worked in a boat and, through an accident, got his hand crushed by a pulley and had to wait for rescue at sea under severe pain. 'I'll never set foot in a boat again,' he declares. When Mrs. Curren presses optimistically: 'If you had faith in yourself you could walk on water. Don't you believe in the doings of faith?,' Vercueil simply falls silent. This silence has a different ring than his many previous ones. With the unveiling of his own story of fear and pain, Vercueil appears to be as lost as Mrs. Curren in the matter of faith, and as full of fear of death and the unknown. Mrs. Curren then writes to her daughter that 'I am going to release you soon from this rope of words. There is no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly' (197). This characterisation

¹⁴⁵ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 249.

discloses Mrs. Curren's acceptance that Vercueil would do badly in the role of either Charon or the archangel Michael. Though in life he has led and accompanied her, Mrs. Curren concedes that 'he needs help too' (196). The leader and the follower in this narrative are revealed to be interchangeable.

It can be said that, in watching over him, Mrs. Curren has been giving an obscure life, 'as obscure as any on earth' (187), a prolonged existence in a text along with her own. Now she begins to worry about what would become of Vercueil when she is gone, when the story is finished and when we stop reading: 'What is in store for him next, I wonder, when the episode of the old woman in the big house is over with?... Alone: *stoksielalleen*: a stick in an empty field, a soul alone, sole. Who will watch over him?' (187). We can additionally ask the same question of the unlovable Mrs. Curren; that, without this text of Coetzee, who will watch over her? Perhaps the existence of the novel comes from a much less ambitious desire than to offer insights into the possibility of ethics during an iron age. Perhaps it wants to bear witness to this life that, before the novel, is also 'as obscure as any on earth' from a sympathetic position and, in that complex act of writing as following, be watched over too. Mrs. Curren's revised view of her relationship with Vercueil near the end of her letter wonderfully embodies the deeper value of creative writing. She writes: 'I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, nor I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled and risen since then in the flights and swoops of that mutual election' (196).

II. Metafictional relationships: 'He and His Man' and Slow Man

While in *Age of Iron* Coetzee may have felt constrained to monologic realism by the reality of apartheid; by the time of his enigmatic 2003 Nobel address, 'He and His Man,' and 2005 novel *Slow Man*, he finds himself in the mood to revive the Cervantes project of exploring the interstice between the real and the imaginary and takes on the subject of the metafictional relationship between the novelists and their principal characters. These narratives reinforce Coetzee's preoccupation with the relationship between creator and creation that has been only implicit in *Age of Iron*. While Coetzee's fiction has always

exhibited a certain level of self-consciousness, he only puts authors and characters into the same literary orbit in these two texts, which are also the first full-length fictional works after his relocation to Australia in 2002. The burst of metafictional activities is likely to be related to the freedom Coetzee experienced in the wake of his emigration, which allows his career of fiction writing to be turned into a central metaphor. I will first briefly examine Coetzee's enigmatic 2003 Nobel address, 'He and His Man,' written while Coetzee was also preparing *Slow Man*. The Nobel lecture importantly destabilises the traditional perception of the relationship between an author and his creation. In the story, the author is no longer a Godlike figure who creates and reigns over his character. Instead, the two parties are depicted in a fundamentally dependent relationship that, like the one between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil, produces moments of transcendence but no eternal salvation.

'He and His Man'

On 7 December 2003, the day of his Nobel lecture, Coetzee candidly feigned confusion about the word order in his lecture's title. He told his Stockholm audience that he would read them 'the piece called "He and His Man" or "His Man and He", I can't remember which comes first, He or His Man.'¹⁴⁶ Given the unlikelihood of someone with a copy of his speech in front of him to forget its title, it is clear that Coetzee was concerned to dispel the linearity and hierarchy of the coming story as thoroughly as he could. Once the lecture began, Coetzee picked up the life of Robinson Crusoe after Daniel Defoe's version of the story has ended. Crusoe, now a writer famous for having published an account of his time on a deserted island, is leading a quiet gentrified life on the waterfront of Bristol. The fictional Crusoe assumes the position of the 'he' in the title and perceives himself the master of 'his man' Daniel Defoe.¹⁴⁷ Crusoe would receive written reports from his man from his travels around Britain.

¹⁴⁶ 'Nobel Lecture by J.M. Coetzee', online video, 35:36, filmed in Stockholm, *Nobelprize.org The Official Web Site of the Nobel Prize*, (7 December 2003), <http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/?id=555>.

¹⁴⁷ While Daniel Defoe's name does not feature in the story, it can be clearly deduced from Coetzee's lecture preamble as well as from long quotations from

Thus, the story presents a reversal of traditional roles; the author is now ‘his man,’ out on adventures that serve the interests of the ‘he,’ who sits with a pen in front of his desk and feels himself responsible for the texts that come forth. On a basic level, Coetzee suggests a sense in which the writer’s identity is being written and altered through the authority his character commands. The character of Robinson Crusoe has been so impressively realised by Defoe that it is possible to imagine him as real—or at least as real as Daniel Defoe himself. But the lecture as a whole goes on to paint an even more complex picture. The writer’s authority in the story is an evanescent state that is endlessly being recycled. One passage relates how Coetzee’s Crusoe feels he is not always wiser than Defoe in the area of writing but, in demonstrating this claim, he gives an example of a phrase Defoe did not entirely invent. The phrase comes, firstly, from Defoe’s *The Journal of the Plague Year* and describes people’s fatal struggle against the plague: ‘it was like charging Death itself on his pale horse.’ For Crusoe, ‘those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields himself up to this man of his do such words come.’¹⁴⁸

The figure of death riding a pale horse is in fact borrowed from the New Testament in which it is written, arguably in a less dynamic arrangement: ‘And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.’¹⁴⁹ The scripture, the fictions, and the non-fiction writing of Defoe are hence placed in a matrix over which no texts claim full authority. In the context of the Nobel Prize, it is possible to see Coetzee as acknowledging the pervasive debt every writer owes to the corpus that has gone before him and, more surprisingly, the indebtedness he owes to the works he ‘created.’¹⁵⁰

Defoe’s travel writing *Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* and his fictional work *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

¹⁴⁸ Coetzee, ‘He and His Man’, 19–20.

¹⁴⁹ Revelation 6:8 (King James Bible)

¹⁵⁰ In this latter point, Coetzee’s anti-parable recalls a point made by Milan Kundera in his Jerusalem address, which Coetzee mentioned during his own acceptance of the same prize. Kundera speaks of ‘the wisdom of the novel’ that is independent from the author’s limited abilities: ‘Every true novelist listens for that suprapersonal wisdom, which explains why great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors.’ See Milan Kundera, ‘Jerusalem Address:

Since little is truly new in their writing, especially when the fabulist Defoe is involved,¹⁵¹ Coetzee's Crusoe begins to develop a sympathetic attitude in his reading and writing practice, placing less emphasis on the originality of specific works and more on the desire behind the writing. Each representation appears to Crusoe to tap into the same limited repertoire of fundamental experiences, yet all equally deserve to be voiced:

[T]here begins to creep into [Crusoe's] breast a touch of fellow-feeling for his imitators. For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old, then they must sit forever in silence.¹⁵²

Crusoe recognises a repetition of themes in all the stories he reads and the experiences he encounters. All seem to him different figurations of 'the dark side of the soul and the light' (20).

In *The Life of Writing*, David Attwell senses that, in presenting this story on the grand occasion of the Nobel lecture, Coetzee was signalling his waning interest in the specific social issues that once had a stranglehold on his attention. In writing terms, he was losing interest with the chore of fashioning a distinct verisimilitude of people and scenes for each of his fictions.¹⁵³ Additionally, from Attwell's commentary on the drafts of *Slow Man*, there seems evidence that Coetzee himself found the stories that arise out of Adelaide, Australia to be but different versions of his South African themes. Attwell reports that initially the drafts of *Slow Man* realistically address the Australian social issues of migration and belonging, before Coetzee later decided that the novel needed the

The Novel and Europe', in *The Art of the Novel.*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber, 1990), 158.

¹⁵¹ In an essay on *Robinson Crusoe* collected in *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee maintains that Defoe hardly belongs to the tradition of literary realism: '[he] is in fact something simpler: an impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger.' See Coetzee, 'Daniel Defoe', 22.

¹⁵² Coetzee, 'He and His Man', 20.

¹⁵³ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 242.

metafictional intrusion of Elizabeth Costello. Attwell provides a synopsis of the realist version of *Slow Man* as follows:

Coetzee had written a thoroughly consummated relationship between Rayment and Marijana, which would have put his erotic life more clearly at the centre. The Jokićs were also going to prove to be a more dubious conquest, pilfering from Rayment and abusing his hospitality more obviously.¹⁵⁴

Though this summary is limited, we can immediately recognise repeats of Coetzee's apartheid themes in a different social context. *Disgrace* had already addressed the question of inappropriate erotic desires, while unconditional hospitality features centrally in *Age of Iron*. In fact, to pursue further the line that 'He and His Man' has given us, there are in Coetzee reproductions of received themes from Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Cervantes, Beckett, Rousseau and many others as critics are wont to identify. After a career of roaming over these thematic terrains, perhaps Coetzee too would like to retire to the waterside with Crusoe and engage in what Attwell calls the 'second-order questions' (241), which involves a self-reflection on his own craft as a fiction writer.

The ending of 'He and His Man' prefaces the form of the second-order question that *Slow Man* will take up: the metafictional form. Crusoe expresses a longing to meet Defoe in person, but 'he fears there will be no meeting.'¹⁵⁵ No explanation is given for this fear but it is not difficult to infer that the biggest obstacle is their realist affiliations. In lieu of an explanation, Crusoe offers an allegory of he and his man that depicts the unremitting toil required to maintain their illusion of realism:

[T]hey are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by

¹⁵⁴ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 246–47.

¹⁵⁵ Coetzee, 'He and His Man', 20.

the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.

(20)

In the calm sea of *Slow Man*, on the other hand, the writer and her realistic character get brief a respite from their lonely adventures. The metafictional relationship between Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello provides the first direct figuration in Coetzee of the significant choices a writer makes regarding novelistic genres. But ironically, at its core, it remains a story consistent with other works by Coetzee in its replays of familiar themes. Depending on how we read the novel, it can be a story about the relationship between ‘the dark side of the soul and the light’; the tragic and the comic; the real and the imaginary; love and lost, or life and death. ‘He and His Man’ serves as an important disclaimer that metafiction is still fiction, and the second-order question is really the same order as before.

Slow Man

Slow Man begins innocuously enough as a realist narrative about a retired and divorced French emigrant, Paul Rayment, living in Adelaide, Australia. Paul¹⁵⁶ has a bicycling accident and undergoes a right-leg amputation. He is then required by the state’s welfare system to engage the service of a string of carers with whom he is unhappy, until he is assigned the Croatian-born Marijana Jokić, a woman with an old-world self-possession he finds particularly attractive. Despite the fact that Marijana is married with three children, Paul imprudently confesses his love and asks for permission to pay for her son Drago’s private school fees. It is at this awkward impasse in Paul’s life that the novel presses the metafictional button and Elizabeth Costello, the eponymous protagonist of Coetzee’s previous novel, rings Paul’s doorbell, becoming a character in a novel she herself is purportedly writing. The newly-arrived Costello informs Paul that

¹⁵⁶ Since several characters in *Slow Man* share the family name ‘Jokić,’ in this discussion the novel’s characters are referred to by their first names. However, for consistency with the rest of the thesis, Elizabeth Costello remains ‘Costello.’

unless he picks ‘a course of action’ with regard to his desire, she will remain with him.¹⁵⁷

In this arrangement, Coetzee brings into full-embodied contact two novelistic tropes usually seen as operating on two oppositional impulses: realism and postmodernism. Reminiscent of ‘He and His Man’ with its metaphor of writers as deckhands, Paul finds Costello pictured on the jacket of one of her novels ‘wearing a windbreaker, standing against what appears to be the rigging of a yacht’ (120). Their meeting seems facilitated by the fact that neither figure is at the height of their old powers. The two characters, along with the novelistic illusions embodied in them, are both physically challenged. To Melinda Harvey, what survives of realism in Coetzee’s Australian novels can be compared to the disabled Paul, whose mimetic credence is undercut by the metafictional imperative in the figure of Costello.¹⁵⁸ We can push Harvey’s apt metaphor further: for when Costello, a figure of the metafictional, climbs up the stairs to Paul’s flat for the first time, panting heavily, she says, ‘Bad heart... Nearly as much of an impediment as... a bad leg.’¹⁵⁹ Thus, Coetzee also satirises the impediment that plagues the genre of postmodern metafiction: its weak affective apparatus, its inability to take seriously the matter of love, life and death.

Most commentaries have ignored the extensive satire that Coetzee performs on metafiction. The realist façade that begins *Slow Man* is instead seen as successfully broken by the metafictional trick of Costello’s intrusion. The point of the novel, such readings say, is to expose the real as another of the many possible illusions. For Zoë Wicomb, Costello’s arrival ‘throws into question the very nature of mimesis.’¹⁶⁰ The real in *Slow Man* is viewed through the postmodern prism to be ‘renewable, substitutable, supplementary, and

¹⁵⁷ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 136.

¹⁵⁸ Harvey, ‘“In Australia You Start Zero”: The Escape from Place in J.M. Coetzee’s Late Novels’, 24–25. Additionally, the playful link between Paul Rayment and realism is further hinted at when Paul explains that his last name rhymes with ‘vraiment,’ which is French for honestly, truly. Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 192.

¹⁵⁹ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 80.

¹⁶⁰ Zoë Wicomb, ‘*Slow Man* and the Real: A Lesson in Reading and Writing’, in *J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities*, ed. Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 219.

characterized by slippage between reference and phenomenalism' (227). Peter Vermeulen's reading of *Slow Man* also finds a postmodern multiplicity where 'desire and empathy,' which are mechanisms he identifies with the traditional novel, are rendered 'inoperative, in order to make room for the exploration of different forms of life.'¹⁶¹ But the novel in fact makes this metafictional/postmodern point only lightly. Hardly with any pause, the drama of Paul's love for Marijana continues to chime on in spite of Costello's presence. Attridge's observation in relation to Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is pertinent here: for Attridge, postmodernism has always known how 'the realistic illusion can survive the author's showing of his or her hand.'¹⁶² A more interesting question is, once we have established that realism is an illusion, what is next.

As Costello settles into Paul's life, the stress on the novel's mimetic illusion gets thoroughly absorbed into their relationship. Instead of disrupting meanings, Costello is intent on producing a traditional novel and she tells Paul to act on his passion: 'So that you may be *worth* putting in a book. Alongside Alonso and Emma. Become major, Paul. Live like a hero.'¹⁶³ Rather than employing the technique of metafiction to correct realism, Coetzee endows both the metafictional of Costello and the real of Paul with an equal level of gritty corporeality and unleashes them into the modern Australian context to see how they fare. The two characters represent, on the one hand, two humourously struggling novelistic genres, while, on the other, they are living beings facing genuine existential crisis and obsolescence. These two strands of meaning are inextricably intertwined in the novel. The question of genre is also an autobiographical question. Paul had a respectable story he tells about himself that is shaken by the loss of his leg and of his physical autonomy. His actions and desires seem to have lost their proper weight as a consequence and now appear harrowingly light and comical. Correspondingly, he is losing control of his life narrative to this author figure Costello, who is there to tell him: 'Losing a leg is not a tragedy. On the contrary, losing a leg is comic' (99) and to point out the

¹⁶¹ Pieter Vermeulen, 'Abandoned Creatures: Creaturely Life and the Novel Form in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*', *Studies in the Novel* 45, no. 4 (2014): 657.

¹⁶² Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 201.

¹⁶³ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 229 (emphasis original).

obsolescence of his chivalric love for Marijana. Costello at one point half-ironically comments: 'One is embarrassed... to find oneself in the presence of true, old-fashioned love. I bow before you' (94).

Coetzee's interweaving of novelistic metaphors into Paul's physical and existential disability is particularly discernible in Paul's angry fantasy in which he beats Costello with his crutch. The fantasy recalls the horrific murder in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when Raskolnikov brings down his axe repeatedly on the skull of the pawnbroker's sister and kills her. The menace of that original realist scene is, however, entirely dispelled in Paul's imagined scenario that is played out in an efficient welfare state where one's actions are no longer a matter of life and death:

[Paul's] hand tightens on his crutch. If it were a proper, old-fashioned crutch of ash or jarrah, with some weight to it, instead of aluminium, he would bring it down on the old hag's skull, again and again, as often as might be necessary, till she lay dead at his feet and her blood soaked the carpet.¹⁶⁴

The murder that in Dostoevsky's milieu evokes real terror is turned into this quixotic fantasy that has no weight behind it. When compared to *Age of Iron*, death is a much less palpable presence in *Slow Man*. The bodies of Paul and Costello may remain vulnerable as ever, but their lives are ultimately protected by a dependable system that renders the above vision implausible, even slightly comical. In a sense, the quixotic has already replaced the real as the order of Paul's day even before Costello arrives to exacerbate his condition.

Alongside the literary metafictional-realist tension between Costello and Paul, Coetzee also constructs another narrative style for the Jokićs, an attractive family of unself-conscious individuals, who appear characters out of plot-driven genre fiction rather than a novel by J.M. Coetzee. The Jokićs are portrayed as an honest, well-adapted family of immigrants from Dubrovnik, Croatia, who are labouriously climbing the Australian social ladder. Their inner lives are perfectly

¹⁶⁴ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 89.

consistent with their outer forms. The children are preternaturally good-looking as if to reflect their good hearts. To Paul, the youngest, Ljuba, is ‘a true beauty, with dark curls and a perfect skin and eyes that glint with what can only be intelligence’ (31). The oldest boy Drago has ‘one of the angelic smiles that must have the girls swooning’ (216)—where else in Coetzee would we find such good-looking characters? Occasionally, the narrative of *Slow Man* stresses the Jokićs’ matter-of-factness to quite comic effect; for instance, “‘We must go,’” [Marijana] says, and is gone’ (127) or when Marijana, in her own house, tells Paul and Costello ‘I make tea’ and then come back with ‘tea, but no cake’ (243). Not a group to delay action, the Jokićs parents get into jealous fights, physically hit each other, but then make up. One of the children runs away from home. Another steals trinkets from a store, but again, as in popular sitcoms, they are back together by the end: a heartwarming image of a family, in itself unencumbered by irony.

The Jokićs face their own threat of obsolescence in Australia where their old-world skills are not valued. Back in Dubrovnik, Marijana and her husband Miroslav are skilled craftsmen, the former trained in painting restoration and the latter a technician of ‘antique technology’ (86) who gained moderate fame by successfully reassembling a mechanical duck for an art institute. Marijana is not immune to a pang of nostalgia and loss: ‘In Australia nobody hear of mechanical duck,’ she reveals to Paul, ‘Don’t know what is it. Miroslav Jokić, nobody hear of him. Just auto worker. Is nothing, auto worker’ (92). Yet the Jokićs differ from the figures of Paul and Costello in that, pragmatically or perhaps out of necessity, they adapt themselves to the new material-oriented environment. Unable to restore old things, they turn to nursing and auto work for the cliché reason, one would guess, of providing a better future for their children.

Needless to say, the Jokićs’ popularised modern story is categorically different from the grim and idealistic realism of Paul Rayment. Rather than ‘slow,’ the family are adaptable modern folks. In *Slow Man*, their conventional story occupies the pivotal role that the chivalric romance occupies in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*; that is, it serves as the natural object of desire which fuels the writing. This positioning allows Coetzee to refocus on the Manichaeian nature of

the novel as a distant descendent of *Don Quixote* and test the relevance of the lineage in contemporary Australia. While Cervantes's great novel desires to recreate the chivalric fantasy but is held back by historical reality, Costello desires to write a winning story like that of the Jokićs with Paul as her protagonist. She becomes exasperated with Paul's slow ways and lashes out at him to become more like the Croatian family:

Have a proper scene! Stamp your foot (I speak metaphorically)! Shout! Say, "I will not be treated like this!" That is how normal people behave, people like Marijana and Miroslav. Life is not an exchange of diplomatic notes. *Au contraire*, life is drama, life is action, action and passion!¹⁶⁵

However, what holds her and Paul back is not the reality of Australia per se, but their own inflexible natures that are entrenched in high Western European culture. In an important sense, the relevance of the Cervantean novel rests on the discrepancy between fantasy and reality, but, for better or for worse, the modern fantasy has become a real possibility for the Jokićs and this phenomenon renders the novel form strangely redundant. Enamoured with the family, Paul checks out a book called 'People of the Balkans' from the library. It has a subtitle suggestive of the family's versatility: 'Between East and West' (64).

The most difficult aspect to come to terms with in *Slow Man* is precisely that, despite some perfunctory satire, the novel contains barely any damaging jibe against the storyline of the Jokićs and its 'illusion' of a good life. The jokes are not on the family in the same way that it was on Quixote's chivalric fantasy. Their family name even comfortably assimilates the ridicule. In an unreservedly idyllic final scene that features the Jokićs, the family collectively gift Paul with a recumbent bicycle made by Drago and welded by Miroslav, the father. Paul notes that 'Out of nowhere Ljuba has appeared. Even Blanka, who disapproved of him from the first, has joined the group' and he becomes overtaken by this unexpected gesture of generosity, especially when he has gone to their home to

¹⁶⁵ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 227.

demand back a vintage photograph that Drago has taken from him without permission. His protectiveness of a piece of cultural heritage suddenly appears unjust in relation to the Jokićs' personal, though culturally meaningless, gift: the gift is '*Much more than [he] deserves.*' Paul feels 'a blush of shame', which 'is what he deserves' (254). With the recumbent that replaces the broken bicycle, the family seem to be guilelessly urging Paul to adapt and embrace his new condition, instead hankering over what was.

One is forced to consider that Coetzee acknowledges the Jokićs' way of being to be a real possibility in Australia or, if one is to be more cautious, that a happy and prosperous life is a real possibility for some blessed people; even if, along with Paul and Costello, Coetzee cannot himself share in the dream. When Costello visits the Jokićs' home in the suburb of Munno Para and sees their loud white leather sofa and a big screen TV, she assures Paul: 'I'm not sneering. On the contrary, I'm full of admiration' (243). Her words come across as half-ironic—that is after all her unique metafictional curse—yet by that stage, it is clear that this family has been the object of admiration that accounts for this narrative's existence. When it comes down to it, the Coetzeean pair yearn to join the Jokićs' world.

In its failure to slay its object of desire, *Slow Man* departs from its urtext of *Don Quixote*. When Quixote and his appointed squire Sancho Panza set out to enter the world of chivalric romance, that old genre gets fatally satirised and, in a sense, slain to make way for a new birth of the modern novel. But the true object of satire in *Slow Man* is the Manichean novel itself. There is no new birth to speak of, only childless old age as the novel yields its ground to popular fantasy from a different lineage altogether. As indicated, *Slow Man* offers genuine admiration for the Jokićs that has been left to stand, like the following articulation of Costello's esteem for the family:

[Marijana] is bursting because she is loved, loved as much as one can expect to be in this world... the reason why the children too make such an impression on you, the boy and the

little girl, is that they have grown up drenched in love. They are at home in the world. It is, to them, a good place.¹⁶⁶

If their lives are a fiction, it is at least a desirable one. Alternatively, Paul and Costello, who represent literary tropes that deal, respectively, in suffering and skepticism, are depicted as the unfortunate fictional beings. Not only are they not closer to the truth, fatally, they are also an unattractive vision for the mass: ‘We are both of us ugly, Paul, old and ugly,’ Costello comments, ‘As much as ever would we like to hold in our arms the beauty of all the world. It never wanes in us, that yearning. But the beauty of all the world does not want any of us. So we have to make do with less, a great deal less’ (236).

The prime evidence of this yearning is, of course, Paul’s love for Marijana, but one finds this undying desire for beauty in Costello as well, like when she makes a proposition to Paul that they form an alternative ‘marriage of a kind’ (232), and that the two of them should embark on an epic adventure like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Costello suggests that if they can procure suitable vehicles, ‘[t]hen we will be ready to set out on our adventures, you and I. You already have your nice orange flag and I will get another for myself, with a design’ (263). And in the excitement of her vision, Costello exclaims ‘What a capital idea! Is this love, Paul? Have we found love at last?’ (263) But her metafictional words always come across to Paul and to us as unconvincing, as ‘sincere, or half sincere’ (232)—they do not have the conviction of the real thing. Paul replies decidedly: ‘this is not love. This is something else. Something less’ (263). On his part, he is too idealistic in his morose and ‘tortoise’ way to settle for less. The quixotic/novelistic adventure is aging fast. Ultimately, *Slow Man* dramatises not the familiar crusade between literary realism and postmodernism—that tension is almost a subplot—but the sense of their mutual and fated decline. Their death will be neither tragic nor comic for, when it comes, no one will notice their disappearance. So despite the Jokićs’ brightness, *Slow Man* shows Coetzee in a distinctly pessimistic mood about his own legacy.

¹⁶⁶ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 87.

Conclusion

From our discussion in this chapter, Coetzee's novels may be said to discriminate between two manners of writing: a writing *to* and a writing *of*. The first is the communicative, undertaken to deliver content; while the other is imaginative and engaged in imagining different beings. Attridge rightly notes that '[t]here are no communicative breakthroughs in Coetzee's fiction.'¹⁶⁷ His soliloquies and dialogues are home to crippling doubts over the validity of linguistic expressions. Rather, it is in the sympathetic application of his prose—the writing that conjures another being—that Coetzee's narratives find their concrete foothold. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren's embodied writing of herself and Vercueil gradually takes precedence over her writing to her daughter: 'One must love what is nearest. One must love what is to hand, as a dog loves.'¹⁶⁸ More explicitly, given its textual framework, Costello's writing of Paul in *Slow Man* gradually edges out the drama that follows his confession of love to Marijana.

These two novels are further evidence that the issues of the body-soul are never far away from the surface of Coetzee's narratives. Even though death that is imminent in *Age of Iron*, and which brings together Mrs. Curren and Vercueil, grows faint in *Slow Man*, this slump is picked up by the ever more intense play of Paul Rayment's erotic desires for Marijana. Paul's love for the amiable Croat is a testament to his irrational body-soul, and it supersedes the place of God in his worldview in the same fashion that Vercueil has been turned into Mrs. Curren's angel of death. For Paul, '[h]e cannot imagine loving God more than he loves Marijana at this moment,'¹⁶⁹ this love is 'no different from his love of God' in that it 'fills what would otherwise be a vast, all-devouring hole' (187). Of course, as we have seen, Paul's novelistic and authentic love is waning along with the realist genre he inhabits, but the desire of the body-soul never disappears as long as the writing continues. It in turn gives way to another layer of metafictional love from Costello to Paul—another figuration of the same underlying desires. Uncertain of his own worth as an object of attention, Paul

¹⁶⁷ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 29.

¹⁶⁸ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 190.

¹⁶⁹ Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 186.

wonders if the Australian author is ‘starved for love’ and, therefore, turns to him ‘for relief’ (237)—he has earned his protagonist’s place, after all, by a literal accident rather than a heroic deed. But the answer for what connects him and Costello is shown to be unsayable:

Almost at random [Costello] has lighted on him, as a bee might alight on a flower or a wasp on a worm; and somehow, in ways so obscure, so labyrinthine that the mind baulks at exploring them, the need to be loved and the storytelling, that is to say the mess of papers on the table, are connected. (238)

The only knowable truths are the need to be loved felt in Paul’s breast and the mess of papers in which he is written. Alternatively, for us, the truth starts with these printed novels that we can hold in our hands. Coetzee’s novels are, in this sense, objects that testify to the desires of the body-soul.

CHAPTER THREE

The Confessions of John Coetzee: *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime*

We have so far explored the non-rational truths that emerge from Coetzee's fiction as he develops narratives that are as much a product of the body-soul's vulnerabilities as they are of calculative constructions. From Costello's ill-defined idea of illimitable sympathy with other beings and her attachment to Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* to Mrs. Curren's slightly desperate shadowing of Vercueil, we have come across author figures whose control over their own narratives is never securely established, but whose written truths become fuller than their intentional, rational expressions can hope to be. The name 'J.M. Coetzee,' on the other hand, seems to conjure up a very different persona. Beyond his fiction, Coetzee has penned a large body of esoteric critical writings under the same name and, combined with his reputation in the press of being a private person, Coetzee has a firm public image described by David Attwell as 'a cerebral writer, a weaver of clever palimpsests.'¹⁷⁰ So despite a body of fiction that pierces into the vulnerabilities of beings and despite the opening of the Coetzee archive that to Attwell reveals a man 'more human or, at least, less Olympian' (25), the name 'J.M. Coetzee' continues stubbornly to evoke an aloof mastermind behind an increasingly complex literary and critical oeuvre. The body-soul's vulnerability is lodged in every Coetzeean character but not in the man we think of with the name J.M. Coetzee.

Within this context, we find Coetzee's three fictional memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, unexpectedly slipping through the fortress of Coetzee's reputation as rational and evaluating author, and releasing from it the sensitive truths that pertain to the given name 'John Coetzee' rather than to the self-assigned textual presence of 'J.M. Coetzee.' Most of these three memoirs are autobiographical narratives of a clarity interestingly distinct from Coetzee's other fiction, enabled by the autobiographical configuration in which the narrating voice, the character, and the author share the same full name. This arrangement,

¹⁷⁰ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 25.

however, unravels in *Summertime*, where John Coetzee is said to be dead, and the reader enters again into the territory of Coetzee's fiction that provides a different kind of truth.

I should clarify that I do not see the memoirs as providing exclusive inner truths of John Coetzee that cannot be found in his novels, since the memoirs are as biographically true, and as fictional, as some of Coetzee's novels themselves.¹⁷¹ Rather, their crucial difference lies in the memoirs' firm evocations of Coetzee's real name and the real places and people from his life; these correlations have never been as strong in his fiction. The use of real names—names that are not created by the author himself—with a third-person present tense narration in *Boyhood* and *Youth* crucially removes a layer of caution from our reading of the stories and lessens our sense of being under authorial control.¹⁷² While the memoirs do not actually deconstruct the persona of 'J.M. Coetzee,' they manage at least to get around it. There is a real sense in which J.M. Coetzee will always remain to his readers a separate textual being constructed out of his written works and public performances, untouched by the mortality of the body-soul that has given rise to it. Instead of this author figure, however, the memoirs' attention is turned towards the living being that is John Coetzee—the one who knows death and, thus, is impelled to get his stories told.

The ultimate test to any autobiographical attempt is whether it can relate the subject's difficult truths fully and clearly, and this has generally been the

¹⁷¹ For an illustration of the novel's autobiographical truths, one only has to compare the memoirs' representations of John Coetzee to *The Master of Petersburg's* portrayal of Dostoevsky mourning his son to see that both genres are capable of housing a comparable amount of biographical truths about Coetzee during different periods of his life, though in the novel the people and the places are presented under vastly different names. For a discussion of *The Master of Petersburg*, see Chapter Four.

¹⁷² According to Derek Attridge, Coetzee acquiesced to his American publisher's request to change the real proper names in *Boyhood* to made-up ones for legal reasons, but the book's first proofs use people's original names. Nevertheless, the change should not alter most readers' conception of the text since the only name that we personally recognise as real is that of the unchanged 'John Coetzee.' The original names continue to be preferred by Coetzee as can be seen from the fact that the boy John's favourite female cousin is under her real name of 'Agnes' in *Boyhood*. See Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 148–9.

yardstick used to read and determine the success of *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. In my own readings, however, I will alternatively begin with Coetzee's acknowledgement that perfect autobiographical fullness and clarity may be an impossible ideal. In his early essay on the autobiographical trope, 'Confession and Double Thoughts,' Coetzee articulates that the main stumbling block of autobiographical writing is that the self always stands in the way of the full truth: 'Because of the nature of consciousness, ... the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception.'¹⁷³ In a later article, 'A Fiction of the Truth,' Coetzee would come to espouse Freud's quantitative view towards self-truth, which recognises the truth-value of each incomplete self-revelation. Taking this view will enable us to better appreciate that the memoirs' narrations of difficult or shameful episodes possess startling—sometimes even pitiless—forthrightness, even when what is said may not be the perfect truth. With closer readings, I further show that the narrations across the three volumes are not all uniform, but are performed with different levels of fictionalisation, self-reflection and tone, giving rise to varying perspectives of John Coetzee, from the incisive portrait of *Boyhood* to the sentimental fragments of *Summertime*.

The fictionalisations of the memoirs represent an important part of Coetzee's response to the congenital blindness of autobiographical writing. I shall trace how, by fictionalising various elements in the narration including the narrating voice, the self is no longer telling its own story in these memoirs. Within this larger strategy, Coetzee is additionally alert to the limits of any given viewpoint, even that which is fictional, and the three memoirs are written in different registers and levels of historical accuracy. Finally, with the Coetzee Archive in Austin, Texas, as a model, I propose that Coetzee does not discount the values of imperfect discourses or discriminate between them. Rather, he seems to invest in each according to the occasion at hand. His academic papers, letters, lectures, short stories, novels, memoirs, etc., are different elements of one archive that testifies to his existence. The true autobiography of John Coetzee may be said to be the expanding archive itself.

¹⁷³ Coetzee, 'Confession and Double Thoughts', 291.

As indicated in the introduction, Coetzee's memoirs are arguably a site of the greatest clarity within Coetzee's oeuvre. The issue of truth in autobiography has been cropping up in Coetzee's discursive works for most of his writing career, beginning with the influential article 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' written during the years 1982-83. Then in 1984, Coetzee delivered the lecture 'Truth in Autobiography,' in which he looks again at Rousseau's *The Confessions* from a slightly different angle. In 1986, he translated Marcellus Emants's *A Posthumous Confession* from Dutch for publication¹⁷⁴ and went on to write throughout the 1990s multiple reviews of life writings by a diverse group of novelists and poets such as Robert Musil, Breyten Breytenbach, Josef Brodsky, and Doris Lessing.¹⁷⁵ In November of 1999, the year of *Boyhood*'s publication, Coetzee still found more to say on the topic in an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'A Fiction of the Truth' where he again revisits Rousseau's *The Confessions* and the effects of autobiographical pact to the telling of the truth about oneself.¹⁷⁶

Such unconcealed, even perversely publicised, interest in an area of inquiry that would culminate in his subsequent 'fictional' works points to a fault within Coetzee's public persona as an impenetrable writer. For along with his ardent refusal to elaborate on his fiction, one encounters revealing clarity in the fiction itself and a ready availability of its attendant texts. This discrepancy highlights the problem of trying to pin an identity—for example, of an inscrutable recluse—onto Coetzee as an author, which seems inseparable from the critical desire to uncover a final interpretation from his works. The Coetzee Archive at the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, offers an alternative model to this search for the one ideal truth. The archive, whose vast content stretches from Coetzee's family albums and personal correspondence to lecture scripts and the novels' manuscripts—collected by Coetzee and acquired

¹⁷⁴ Marcellus Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, trans. J.M. Coetzee (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011).

¹⁷⁵ Collected in J.M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002).

¹⁷⁶ J.M. Coetzee, 'A Fiction of the Truth', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 November 1999.

by the Center¹⁷⁷—shapes the name ‘J.M. Coetzee’ into a site of constant evolution. By accepting Coetzee’s works in all their stages, the ever growing archive adds complications to Coetzee’s oeuvre of finished works; for in light of it, nothing that pertains Coetzee can appear truly finished or complete. As Derrida suggests in *Archive Fever*, the archive is the house of ‘transgenerational memory’ that positions the subject within a line of ancestry and passes the collection on to the new generation to interpret and make their mark.¹⁷⁸ By the archive, Coetzee perhaps hopes that he can live on.

Even J.C. Kannemeyer’s biography can be seen as an adjunct to Coetzee’s autobiographical project. Kannemeyer is known from his biographical works on Afrikaans writers for his solid and traditional approach, and he provides an external perspective that does not threaten to supersede Coetzee’s own texts. Kannemeyer reveals that Coetzee’s main concern about his project is that the biography ‘should be factually correct,’ beside which ‘[Coetzee] would in no way interfere with my interpretation of the data.’¹⁷⁹ The fictionalisation of Coetzee’s life interestingly remains the proprietary right of Coetzee himself.

In contrast to single volume autobiographies as written by Barthes or Rousseau, this sprawling archived information does not direct us towards a single impression of the author. The figure is neither an unknowable subject nor

¹⁷⁷ The conditions under which the archive at Austin, Texas came into being are beyond the scope of this study, though it would be relevant to trace the authority that underpins and determines the running of the archive. Notably, Coetzee appears to be comfortable with the involvement of power in the creation of the archive. He sanguinely writes of the charges laid at the Ransom Center in the 1960s for being funded by ‘oil money’ and for its predatory acquisition of materials, and comments: ‘I am not sure that such supercilious attitudes would find much traction nowadays’ as the center has become the home of ‘one of the world’s great collections of twentieth-century manuscripts.’ Coetzee’s accepting attitude here is of a piece with his acceptance of the secret that underlies every type of discourse, which I have outlined in the thesis introduction. For Coetzee’s comment on his relationship with the Ransom Center, see ‘J. M. Coetzee’s Association with The University of Texas at Austin’, *Cultural Compass*, accessed 23 July 2015, <http://blog.hrc.utexas.edu/2013/03/21/coetseeopen/>.

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.

¹⁷⁹ John Christoffel Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, trans. Michiel Heyns (Melbourne: Scribe, 2012), 7.

its opposite. Coetzee writes of the content of the archive as ‘the work of my hands’¹⁸⁰ and which suggests that the archive’s principle of selection is simply whatever John Coetzee, a person in history, has produced. An archive that collects all of Coetzee’s writing is, of course, necessarily autobiographical since, to quote it once again, ‘all writing is autobiography.’ The constant expansion of an archive is further a great metaphor for autobiography. Coetzee touches on autobiography’s essential lack of an ending in ‘A Fiction of the Truth,’ writing that ‘A story, says Aristotle, has a beginning, a middle and an end. An autobiography, by definition, does not have an end.’¹⁸¹

There is no question that the vastness and clarity of Coetzee’s current oeuvre can feel like an overbearing patriarchal presence to literary critics; yet, as Coetzee reminds us, this sense may have more to do with criticism’s anxiety at the loss of its privilege to disclose the truth of literature than with any menace meant by the oeuvre itself. The reciprocal economy between literature and criticism that has been based on their founding secrets is necessarily disrupted by genuine achievement of clarity. Coetzee’s protagonists have already performed their own unrelenting self-interrogations. As Coetzee himself suggests, there is rarely a deeper level or plane to get to in his fiction than what is already written. Certainly, there is endlessly more to know and references to follow; but it does not seem possible for any authority to enjoy a special right to the deeper truth within the oeuvre of J.M. Coetzee. I find that, as discussed in the introduction, it is only fair to acknowledge that the ideal condition for truth—which Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* calls the ideal condition of grace ‘in which the truth can be told clearly without blindness’¹⁸²—feels quietly possible in his fiction thanks to the evolving viewpoint afforded by the fictional narratives.

In his Cape Town lecture on autobiography, Coetzee draws attention to Freud’s moderate stance on the possibility of self-knowledge expressed in one of his last papers on the subject of psychoanalysis, ‘Analysis Terminable and

¹⁸⁰ ‘J. M. Coetzee’s Association with The University of Texas at Austin.’

¹⁸¹ Coetzee, ‘A Fiction of the Truth.’

¹⁸² Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 392.

Interminable.¹⁸³ Reflecting on his life's work, Freud confronts the possibility that psychoanalysis may not possess the power to achieve complete self-knowledge since the time required for the task appears to him to be longer than a lifetime. Despite Freud's confidence in psychoanalytic progress grounded upon his extensive clinical practice, Freud admits that overall the breakthroughs have occurred only by degrees. Based on this paper, Coetzee suggests that this 'spirit' of Freud, which Freud himself identifies as a quantitative approach, may be better for consideration of autobiographies:

I think it may sometimes be necessary to approach an autobiographical project in some such spirit as Freud's: that getting to the core of yourself may not be feasible, that perhaps the best you can hope for will not be the history of yourself but a story about yourself, a story that will not be the truth but may have some truth-value, probably of a mixed kind—some historical truth, some poetic truth. A fiction of the truth in other words.¹⁸⁴

This achievement of fictional truth is not closure, which would spell the demise of both narratives and criticisms. Instead, it represents a more integrated account of a life that remains active. That Coetzee has not laid down the whole truth in his fictions and memoirs should be considered as self-evident because there will always be too much living truth for a book, or a lifetime of writing, to hold.

I. Fictionalising autobiographical writing

The lessons from Roland Barthes

David Attwell reports from Coetzee's notebook that Coetzee considers Roland Barthes's postmodern autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*

¹⁸³ Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1964), XXIII, 216–53.

¹⁸⁴ Coetzee, 'A Fiction of the Truth.'

to be the father text that he needs to overcome in order to write his own.¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, of all the autobiographical works we know Coetzee has engaged with, Barthes's is the only one whose workaround for autobiographical self-deception has been to consider itself pure fiction rather than to insist on its own truthfulness, while still using the real name of 'Roland Barthes.' Barthes's book opens with a disclaimer that 'It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel,'¹⁸⁶ which is reiterated again inside the text: 'The substance of this book, ultimately, is therefore totally fictive... let the essay avow itself *almost* a novel: a novel without proper names.'¹⁸⁷ From his experience as a novelist, Coetzee must have found in Barthes's radical approach at least the theoretical affirmation of his own sense about writing and the self. A brief survey of Barthes's strategies will help prepare us for Coetzee's less conceptualised construction of his own memoirs.

For Barthes, to be fictive means specifically to yield to inconsistency. His autobiography can be described a series of images and brief passages on disparate topics that refuse to serve up one single image of the self. Barthes writes in it that 'if we find consistency insupportable we cut ourselves off from an ethics of truth' (58), and become finally fictional. To this end, the writing self and the written self of the autobiography are treated as ephemeral constructions that are being made in each instant of the text. The speaking voice in each of his topics alternates without pattern between the first person, the third person, and a disinterested discursive voice, and it is set free to roam where it pleases.

Barthes's method of fictionalisation through radical inconstancy nevertheless still receives criticisms for failing to shed the confines of the self as it proposes to do. For Phillippe Lejeune, Barthes 'remains locked in his identity' in the text,¹⁸⁸ for while he may have destabilised his writing voice and the written self, his text still demands that the reader views it in a certain way. The reader is

¹⁸⁵ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 28.

¹⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), 1.

¹⁸⁷ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 120.

¹⁸⁸ Phillippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 44.

directly reminded of the self's fluidity in many of the book's entries, not to mention the opening page disclaimer that it *must* all be read as spoken by a character. This coercion becomes self-determination—the fluid self becomes a new identity that defines Barthes and his project. As Lejeune writes, 'this game of flight from [Barthes's] "imaginary" turns out simply to become in our eyes his imaginary's essential characteristic.'¹⁸⁹ We are asked to judge his identity by its inconstancy, only to then find that it is still very much a fixed one.

Taking Barthes as an example, Coetzee does it differently, and we will be considering if he manages to escape the same charge. Fictionalisation that is a matter of formal shifts in Barthes becomes John Coetzee's literal mode of being in *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. The character's story gradually departs from the real personal history of his author, and becomes fiction told in the third person and present tense by an implied author. In the previous chapter, we have seen how the implied author of Coetzee's fiction sympathetically 'follows' the fictional character and, through the mutually non-objectifying process, allows a greater quantity of both their embodied truths to surface. In this autobiographical project, fictionalisation and characterisation remain crucial in allowing Coetzee to release the speaking voice of the author from itself and from some of its inherent blindness. They seem to enable piercing self-revelations that Coetzee would not otherwise be willing to divulge. We shall see in our discussion that follows how Coetzee's use of the third-person, present tense narration in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, enables him to fulfill Barthes's thesis and preserve the immediacy of the fictive self as it is being constructed in the writing.

Coetzee's fictional memoirs

With his three fictional memoirs, Coetzee is ostensibly working in relation to the Christian-derived trope of autobiography properly begun with Augustine's *Confessions*. The autobiographical goal is to uncover the essential truth about the subject via the retelling of the life. Coetzee expounds in 'A Fiction of the Truth' that it is a genre whose 'intellectual roots...., at least in the

¹⁸⁹ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 44.

West, are bound up with soul-searching and the confession of sins.’¹⁹⁰ Traditionally, autobiography is a result of the negotiation between the past and the present moment of writing in which the writing subject provides a perspectival look into his/her past, and illuminates it with the ‘advantage’ of the present knowledge. Compromises are an inevitable part of any autobiography on account of its being pulled between two temporalities. In a book-length study on this trope, Roy Pascal comments that autobiography’s original sin is its predilection to distort the truth of past moments via the application of the present knowledge of writing.¹⁹¹ The more the writing subject tries to draw a clean causal line from his past self to the present self, the more the past is subjugated and reshaped from its full experience.¹⁹²

With respect to its affiliation with confessional discourse, autobiography enters into a contract with the reader to convey the truth in return for absolution. As Coetzee iterates in ‘Confession and Double Thoughts,’ the ‘indispensable goal’ of any confession is absolution.¹⁹³ The confessional text invites the reader/interlocutor to judge the perfect truth of the writing. Therefore, the reader’s relationship with it differs greatly from one with fiction, which in most cases leans towards identification and sympathy. As Lejeune observes, ‘[c]onfronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract.’ For Lejeune, the presence of this contract is the cause of the myth that fiction is ‘truer’ than autobiography,¹⁹⁴ when in fact the difference may largely be down to the reader’s shifting standards of evaluation.

From these observations, one could imagine how fictionalisation can unlock for Coetzee a means of writing a richer account of his younger selves. As

¹⁹⁰ Coetzee, ‘A Fiction of the Truth.’

¹⁹¹ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 16.

¹⁹² It should be noted that, for Pascal, truthfulness is not an essential trait of a good autobiography. In the best autobiographical works, he says, the reader should be liberated from the obligations to historical facts ‘in order to savour the quality of the central personality,’ which is what Rousseau’s *The Confessions* impressively achieves. See Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 20.

¹⁹³ Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, 252.

¹⁹⁴ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 14.

Michelle Kelly notes, *Boyhood* and *Youth* are fictional ‘closed worlds’ that renounce ‘obvious connection to the author and even to the protagonist of the other volume.’¹⁹⁵ They are not entirely subjugated to the author’s historical facts or to any objective besides the following of its chosen subject. Through fictionalisation, his memoirs do not fully invoke what Lejeune terms ‘the autobiographical pact’¹⁹⁶ with the readers—in fact, they seem to demand nothing from the readers beyond their reading. So fiction allows for a self-forgetting and a singularity of focus that would have been unachievable under the conditions called up by the genre of autobiography or confession. But to say that Coetzee’s autobiographical project is a work of fiction would be an oversimplification. Pure fictional discourse is not without a measure of intentional blindness, particularly with regards to the hidden truths of its real-life author. Ever since his first novel, *Dusklands*,¹⁹⁷ which relates the colonial exploits in eighteenth-century South Africa by a possible ancestor of Coetzee, Jacobus Coetzee, Coetzee has shown a propensity to conflate his own reality with his fiction. In the fictional memoirs, as in most of his other ‘fictions,’ Coetzee resorts to moving his narrative across different generic terrains; a decision that troubles our critical attempts at its classification, but is central to the narratives’ claim to their living truths.

Boyhood, *Youth* and *Summertime* involve varying degrees of fictionalisation. *Boyhood* is the only book in the series that does not present any obvious contradictions of what we know of Coetzee’s life. It can, in a sense, be read as a regular memoir except for the fact that it has an unrealistic mode of address: the third person and present tense. In the aspect of address, the book reads like fiction. Consider, for example, the following sentences that describe the scene of the boy trying to swim across a river at a Boy Scout camp: ‘By midstream he is exhausted. He gives up swimming and tries to stand, but the river is too deep. His head goes under. He tries to lift himself, to swim again, but

¹⁹⁵ Kelly, “‘So I Sing for My Keep’”: J.M. Coetzee and Confessional Narrative’, 238.

¹⁹⁶ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 13.

¹⁹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (London: Penguin, 1996).

he has not the strength.¹⁹⁸ If we think of the author, narrator and the character as being the same person and replace the pronoun ‘he’ with ‘I,’ this present tense becomes false; for if the subject is drowning at the moment of the utterance, then how can he be relating the story? Additionally, commenting on *Boyhood*, critics such as Collingwood-Whittick¹⁹⁹ and Lenta²⁰⁰ detect word choices and sentence arrangements that are unlikely to have come from a ten-year-old boy.²⁰¹ One is forced to deem the narrator to be a distinct consciousness from the boy and from the mature Coetzee, who should actually write of his past self in the past tense. More accurately put, *Boyhood*’s narrative voice is a fiction. It is a non-referential voice with no real world presence, created entirely to house the boy’s story.

Youth sticks with the same mode of address while adding the fictionalisation of certain facts, mainly portraying a single John Coetzee at the time when he was in fact married. Then, by *Summertime*, the fiction spreads everywhere. This final instalment abandons the familiar narrating voice as it breaks out of the autobiographical mould by going beyond the author’s death. In it, we learn that John Coetzee has passed away, and without the unity provided by the autobiographical impulse of the author, *Summertime* fragments into excerpts from John Coetzee’s notebook from 1972-1975 and a series of interviews conducted after the author’s death with five people who knew him.

By calling the three works fictional autobiographies, I am only loosely invoking the characteristics of autobiography and fiction, as these should be understood as changing within and with each new work. The first two retain the characteristic of the autobiographical genre principally via the shared name and family history of the author and the principal character. In *Boyhood*, the boy is referred to as ‘John’ and he belongs to a family of ‘the Coetzees,’ and we can

¹⁹⁸ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 16.

¹⁹⁹ Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, ‘Autobiography as *Autrebiography*: The Fictionalisation of the Self in J.M. Coetzee *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*’, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 24, no. 1 (2001): 19–20.

²⁰⁰ Margaret Lenta, ‘*Autrebiography*: J.M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* and *Youth*’, *English in Africa* 30, no. 1 (2003): 164.

²⁰¹ This is an observation that is quite common in commentary on Coetzee’s use of the third person. Attridge also comments that the language in *Michael K* at times appears like it does not belong to the protagonist. (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 50.)

easily identify the historical circumstances of the boy with what we know of Coetzee himself. In other respects such as pronoun choice, tense, and mode of address, Coetzee seems devoted to his familiar fictional method of imaginative following that is here applied to his younger self. *Boyhood* thus carves out a deeply private and tight scene of address—perhaps only possible in a hybrid between fiction and autobiography—that anticipates little response from its readers and allows no room for self-doubt, giving just enough space for the self to continue to evolve as it speaks of itself to itself. The effect is that Coetzee is able to condense split consciousness, temporalities and identities onto a ‘single plane’ within the sphere of the autobiographical.

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee plays with the idea of writing a particular kind of autobiography: ‘a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history,’ where ‘You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose.’²⁰² The idea has a lot in common with *Boyhood*, which appears to collect vivid memories from Coetzee’s childhood, from his sense of alienation from the social groups of South Africa, his deep love for the Coetzee family farm, his mother’s brief spell on her bicycle and her smothering love, etc. With the present tense narration, the moment of memory selection, the present moment of the narrative, and the present moment for the boy, all fall within the same narrow temporal confine. Attridge succinctly describes the narrative as having a ‘singular immediacy, one might almost say a depthlessness,’²⁰³ which is distinct from the feeling one gets with the past tense that conjures a mature author selecting what memory goes in his autobiographical chest.

By the end, however, *Boyhood* acquires the thickness of a small collection. Certain passages in the book give us a glimpse into the unique purpose of this most autobiographical volume in the series, which is to become a secure home for a selection of John Coetzee’s memories. One section in particular narrates what the boy considers to be his secret first memory, one that he refuses to reveal to his friends ‘who would trumpet it around the school and

²⁰² Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 18.

²⁰³ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 140.

turn him into a laughing-stock.’²⁰⁴ The memory is of a cold bus ride he takes with his mother through ‘the wild and desolate Swartberg Pass.’ During the ride, the boy lets a sweet-wrapper go into the wind: ‘The scrap of paper flies up into the sky. Below there is nothing but the grim abyss of the pass. Ringed with cold mountain-peaks... “What will happen to it?” he asks his mother; but she does not comprehend’:

That is the other first memory, the secret one. He thinks all the time of the scrap of paper, alone in all that vastness, that he abandoned when he should not have abandoned it. One day he must go back to the Swartberg Pass and find it and rescue it. That is his duty: he may not die until he has done it. (31)

As we read this passage, the wrapping paper is in a sense being saved from the abyss of oblivion by the narrative. The boy’s desire is laid down in the passage, and then fulfilled within the same instance. As readers, we need not acknowledge its completion, for even in our oblivious reading, the desired effect has already been achieved. The Swartberg mountain range seems additionally to occupy an important place in Coetzee’s memory. Fourteen years before *Boyhood* in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Michael K sneaks away from the Visagie grandson and tries to lose himself in the Swartberg, hiking ‘in dark shadow wearing his mother’s coat against the chill.’²⁰⁵ But the mountain’s formidable image can be traced backward (or forward) to this childhood memory where it sits beside Coetzee’s desire to save things in his writing.

Boyhood’s final scene—which is set at the funeral of the boy’s elderly maternal aunt, Aunt Annie—would strengthen the desire in the boy to preserve things and foreground his writing career. Prior to her death, Aunt Annie has devoted herself to the distribution of a book written by her father Balthazar du Biel. She has personally translated the book from German to Afrikaans and paid for its printing, but has failed to get it accepted into bookshops. The boy has also

²⁰⁴ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 30.

²⁰⁵ Coetzee, *Michael K*, 65.

read the book and found it ‘too boring’²⁰⁶ and its unwanted copies fill the shelves and boxes in Aunt Annie’s storeroom. At her death, the book is about to lose its last connection to the world. When the boy asks his mother at the funeral ‘What has happened to Aunt Annie’s books?’, he does not get a satisfactory answer:

His mother does not know or will not say. From the flat where [Aunt Annie] broke her hip to the hospital to the old age home in Stikland to Woltemade no. 3 no one has given a thought to the books except perhaps Aunt Annie herself, the books that no one will ever read; and now Aunt Annie is lying in the rain waiting for someone to find the time to bury her. He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will? (166)

The books, the people, the stories are here kept in the narrative. If his head is not enough, the boy will have to resort to writing—which, again, is precisely what the memoir is doing.

But this scene also has a shadow cast over it. From the lost copies of Balthazar du Biel, it is possible to sense a worry that even writing may not be enough. A day will come when books like *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* will also be lost, or the world will lose interest in them. This possibility of eventual distinction is a loose end that *Boyhood* cannot tie up, a fear that it has not fully confessed to. If there is one sure sign of the discourse’s incompleteness—an unspoken secret that can disturb its illusion of clarity—this fear of not being read is it. But the secret of the discourse is of no particular interest beyond that it is what is required for the discourse to keep going and keep devising ways of engaging the reader. Rather than dwelling on the omissions made, it is equally valid to attend to the rest of the boy’s truths that have been so lucidly conveyed by the narrative. *Boyhood* brings to light the things that have existed only in one person’s memory and safeguards them against time’s ravages in the manner of an

²⁰⁶ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 118.

archive. By this account, it is possible to perceive the limit of *Boyhood* as a merely quantitative one, and there are rooms left in the house of writing for Coetzee's other works, written in other discursive registers, to eventually take up the loose ends.

The fear of oblivion appears in fuller form in the chapter 'Realism' of Elizabeth Costello, which looks to have been written alongside *Boyhood*, as it was first published as a journal article in 1997, the same year that Coetzee finished his first fictional memoir. The chapter relays Costello's acceptance speech for an award 'made biennially to a major world writer' (2). In it, Costello speaks at length about the various misfortunes that can befall the published books, and reveals her inquiry with her publishers to make certain that her first novel has been safely deposited into the British Museum:

What lay behind my concern about deposit copies was the wish that, even if I myself should be knocked over by a bus the next day, this first-born of mine would have a home where it could snooze, if fate so decreed, for the next hundred years, and no one would come poking with a stick to see if it was still alive.
(17)

But this relief is only temporary, for Costello knows that 'the British Museum or (now) the British Library is not going to last forever... as the demand for space grows, the ugly and unread and unwanted will be carted off to some facility or other and tossed into a furnace, and all trace of them will be liquidated from the master catalogue. After which it will be as if they had never existed' (17). This is the alternative vision that *Boyhood* as a text refuses to imagine. J.M. Coetzee, on the other hand, is still left to acknowledge the fear in this other work of another discursive register.

II. Truth-telling in confessions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Paul de Man

In turning our attention to the truth-telling of the memoirs, a closer look at Rousseau's *The Confessions*²⁰⁷ and Paul de Man's critique of it in *Allegories of Reading*²⁰⁸ will provide the general context to understand Coetzee's use of different narrative styles from *Boyhood* to *Summertime*. Coetzee's memoirs incorporate both the raw and unreflexive intensity of Rousseau's autobiography and de Man's sharp awareness of the effect of style on truth. One must begin by establishing that, as far as truthfulness is concerned, Rousseau's autobiography is a highly questionable text to anyone who reads it. Its first page declares hyperbolically: 'I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature.'²⁰⁹ Coetzee observes that this first statement is clearly untrue, for Augustine's *Confessions* is its precedent and Rousseau has since had scores of imitators.²¹⁰ Paul de Man considers Rousseau's *The Confessions* not to be a confession at all because of its extravagant style, its author's penchant for over-decorating his truth.²¹¹ Coetzee himself has conducted various deconstructive readings of the text in his lecture 'Truth in Autobiography,' the essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts' and 'A Fiction of the Truth.' Yet somehow, Rousseau's text endures all these beatings and continues to have a hold on Coetzee's interest.

Rousseau's famous stolen ribbon episode, in particular, is obliquely rewritten in the 'confessions' made in *Boyhood* and *Summertime*. Rousseau's version of the story concerns the end of his time as a valet at an aristocratic house. In the confusion that ensued after the lady of the house passed away, Rousseau stole 'a little pink and silver ribbon' and, when caught, accused an innocent girl servant named Marion of giving it to him. Faced with the

²⁰⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1953).

²⁰⁸ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

²⁰⁹ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 17.

²¹⁰ Coetzee, 'A Fiction of the Truth.'

²¹¹ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 285.

accusation, the girl is described as remaining calm and defending herself sincerely without turning to condemn Rousseau, while Rousseau adamantly repeated his false accusation and persuaded the audience in his favour. The petty theft was however not pursued further and the matter ended with both of them being dismissed. The guilt from this crime is emphasised by Rousseau in his usual embellished language: ‘This cruel memory troubles me at times and so disturbs me that in my sleepless hours I see this poor girl coming to reproach me for my crime, as if I had committed it only yesterday.’²¹² He attributes to it his resolution to write *The Confessions*, where he claims to unburden the memory from his conscience for the first time. Not satisfied with simply telling the story, Rousseau also gives an excuse for his action and famously attempts to reveal his ‘inner feelings’: ‘Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment’ (88). He claims that he had intended to give the ribbon to Marion as a token of affection and, with her being already on his mind, hers was the first name that came to him. He then rounds off his confession with an affirmation that the incident ‘has secured me for the rest of my life against any act that might prove criminal in its results’ and ‘May I never have to speak of it again’ (89).

Paul de Man expresses many reservations about this particular confession of Rousseau. He finds that Rousseau’s combining of confession and excuse into one account causes confusion between referential truth of the crime (confession) and the ‘inner feeling’ (excuse) for which we depend entirely upon Rousseau’s words.²¹³ In swinging from one mode to the other, de Man sees Rousseau as ‘[ruining] the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive’ (280) for if the excuse section is successful in exonerating him, then the preceding confession will not have been needed. Second, de Man also takes issue with *The Confessions*’s style: ‘The obvious satisfaction in the tone and the eloquence,’ its ‘easy flow of hyperboles,’ in which he senses Rousseau’s unconfessed desire for a ‘public scene of exposure’ that may be behind his lies and petty larcenies (285). The ideal confession for de Man should be directed at

²¹² Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 88.

²¹³ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 280–81.

the overcoming of ‘guilt and shame in the name of truth’ (279) and it is successful—that is, able to absolve the confessor’s conscience—when it manages to state the truths, no matter how ugly, purely as they are. De Man, therefore, argues that the retelling of the ribbon theft ten years later in Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* confirms that this writing has failed to achieve what it is meant to do as a confession.

While in ‘Confession and Double Thoughts,’ Coetzee has considered de Man’s method of analysing Rousseau’s text through its hyperbolic style to be ‘incautious,’²¹⁴ he does concede to the Romantic ideology behind de Man that closely associates truth with beauty and hence believes that the style of a confession will be made more beautiful by its truthfulness. De Man and Rousseau can be taken to represent two different sets of autobiographical ideals that inform Coetzee as he writes the memoirs. The former demands the full truth in an elegant articulation, while the latter commands a beguiling intensity that is neither truthful nor beautiful.

Boyhood: stating the truths

Boyhood is an anti-Rousseau text in its pursuit of the truth. Coetzee states in ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’ that the goal of secular confession is ‘to tell the truth to and for oneself’ (291). It follows that to secure the ideal condition for confession, the narrative’s mode of address needs to be reworked to make sure that, at each moment, it is *addressed to* and *written for* oneself and avoids the excuses and exhibitionism of Rousseau. The account of the memory at Swartberg Pass does approximately achieve this tightness in which the readers find themselves outside the mode of address and assigned to no other role besides their reading. Coetzee’s autobiographical tales are able to strike Attridge as showing ‘no interest in *making a case*, in convincing the reader of the unimpeachability of his motives or the fullness of his repentance.’²¹⁵

However, if we strove to judge Coetzee’s fictional autobiographies under the standard of confession, we would need to acknowledge that alongside

²¹⁴ Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, 267.

²¹⁵ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 148.

Coetzee's pursuit of self-truth lies a rival desire to be read and be remembered. While this is a minimal version of Rousseau's wish to be recognised as extraordinary, it nevertheless similarly competes with the narrative's claim to self-truth. To become interesting enough to be read, the writing arguably needs to be stylised beyond what truth requires. Maybe it has helped the cause of *Boyhood* that it displays some of the provincial charm and local colouring expected of a book from South Africa in vivid descriptions of scenes from the small town Worcester. This charm is turned on early in the memoir, for instance, in a passage describing the ochre dust that 'whirls in under the door, seeps through the cracks in the window-frames, under the eaves, through the joints of the ceiling'²¹⁶ and later in the account of boy's early morning bicycle ride to school where '[w]ater murmurs in the roadside furrows, doves coo in the bluegum trees' with the wind again 'chasing gusts of fine red clay-dust before it' (55). These picturesque scene settings are not one of Coetzee's usual tricks and they seem to have been placed strategically to satisfy the readers' expectation of a memoir. Perhaps the subtitle of the series, 'Scenes from Provincial Life,' also serves partially as a clever marketing ploy. Coetzee's autobiographical series knows it cannot afford to be 'too boring' like du Biel's forgotten work.

To Collingwood-Whittick, though the sophisticated language of *Boyhood* commands 'intense vividness, realism and emotional authenticity,' its consummation betrays the involvement of the adult author and proves that 'the measures taken by Coetzee to guarantee the inviolability of the narrated self's truth have not been successful.'²¹⁷ Collingwood-Whittick's position would not come as a surprise to Coetzee as it is based on the assumption he identifies in Paul de Man's criticism of Rousseau's 'panache'²¹⁸: 'that confession betrays inauthenticity when the confessant lapses into the language of the Other.'²¹⁹ Coetzee has reasoned subsequently in 'Confession and Double Thoughts' that ultimately in the confessional discourse, '[t]he only truth is silence' (286). In our capacity as readers, we have to acknowledge that, without the narrative's

²¹⁶ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 2.

²¹⁷ Collingwood-Whittick, 'Autobiography as *Autrebiography*', 20.

²¹⁸ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 278.

²¹⁹ Coetzee, 'Confession and Double Thoughts', 269.

minimal desire to be read and an assured narration, there would be no narratives worth reading. One can hardly read and enjoy *Boyhood* without making allowance for the involvement of this vital desire. In fact, if we shift into the reading mode of fiction instead of autobiography, this allowance becomes our most natural mode of reading.

The construction of *Boyhood* and *Youth* may be better described as a realisation of the middle voice, a mode of address that Coetzee takes from Barthes and alludes to in his short essay 'A Note on Writing.'²²⁰ Neither the active nor the passive voice, the middle voice occurs when the subject of the verb is affected by the action signified by that verb. As Coetzee explains, 'To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do writing) with reference to the self.'²²¹ But the middle voice of these two autobiographical volumes is not based on the narrative's grammatical structure, but is a result of their autobiographical mode and the use of third person pronoun. Most 'he's in *Boyhood* and *Youth* occur in active sentences, but the 'he' is always simultaneously the object of the imaginative writing. Given the fact this 'he' further has the same name as the real author, there is a triangle of relationship that repeats itself throughout the narratives. That is to say, the author creates a narrator, who follows the 'he' of the narrative, who is (or was) the author himself. This arrangement solves a central problem in autobiographical writing, where if the 'I' were used, the author, narrator, and the main actor would be falsely signified as one entity. The

²²⁰ J.M. Coetzee, 'A Note on Writing', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 94–95. Previously published in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. J.U. Jacobs, M.J. Diamond, and Margaret Lenta (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), 11–13. This hypothesis I offer in contrast to Anthony Uhlmann's opinion that the use of the pronoun 'he' in *Boyhood* and *Youth* contradicts Coetzee's conception of the middle voice. Uhlmann identifies the middle voice too simplistically with the pronoun 'I' that Coetzee employs in his example of 'I am writing a note' in the essay 'A Note on Writing.' Uhlmann champions the multi-perspective technique of *Summertime* over the uniformity of the 'he' in the first two books. For Uhlmann's argument; see Anthony Uhlmann, 'J.M. Coetzee and the Uses of Anachronism in *Summertime*', *Textual Practice* 26, no. 4 (August 2012): 747–61.

²²¹ Coetzee, 'A Note on Writing', 94.

mature author's presence that Collingwood-Whittick finds inauthentic may in fact be a mark of *Boyhood's* sincerity.

In the readers' perception, the image of each participant in this triangle changes in the present of the narrative as more stories are revealed. The character is lodged in the fictional force field of the narrative along with the author; both acting and being acted upon in the writing. The pairing of third-person pronoun and autobiographical concern enables Coetzee's writing to create the undecidable subject position of the middle voice on a larger scale.

In this dynamic and internal voice, the revelation of personal secrets has a markedly less dramatic overtone than in a scene of confession. The voice already half-knows the secrets it is revealing to itself as the author, though the writing then plays the indispensable role of giving them a public platform. For example, chapter four of *Boyhood* tells of the boy's unintentional conversion to Catholicism because his teacher has only given him three choices, between being a Christian, a Roman Catholic or a Jew when his family is agnostic. The chapter opens unceremoniously as follows: 'The great secret of his school life, the secret he tells no one at home, is that he has become a Roman Catholic, that for all practical purposes he 'is' a Roman Catholic.'²²² Despite the repetition of the word 'secret,' this sentence reads almost as if it is not unveiling anything. The suspense before the secret is learned lasts only for one—albeit quite long—sentence. At other times, the secrets of the boy are told even before they are identified as secrets, like his erotic feeling for the beautiful legs of the Afrikaans boys at school, which is described before the voice declares hyperbolically: 'Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst' (57). Cumulatively, reading *Boyhood* gives the sense that all the untold stories from Coetzee's life have been accessible to us all along and the narrative is merely arranging them into temporary displays one by one. This feeling originates, of course, because the voice simulates the position of the insider John Coetzee.

The boy's secret Roman Catholicism may not seriously challenge the self's resistance to revealing its truth. For a more difficult revelation, we can take as a close look at the mealie grinder incident in *Boyhood* when, at the family

²²² Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 18.

farm, the young John Coetzee hurts his brother David while playing around with a mealie-grinding machine. John convinces his younger brother to stick a hand in and proceeds to turn the handle until a finger of his brother is crushed. Judging by the serious consequence of this action and the boy's callousness that is displayed, the event is arguably the most shameful one relayed in *Boyhood*. While the other secrets fall out almost effortlessly, the mealie-grinder incident is told in retrospect and past tense, wedged into the ongoing narrative of the brothers' play at their aunt's book press in Cape Town. In its present tense, the narrative describes how the brothers alternately place their hand inside the press while the other turns the screw to pin it down: 'One or two more turns, he thinks, and the bones will be crushed. What is it that makes them forbear, both of them?'²²³ Then, the narrative suddenly reverts to the previous time when John did not forbear.

The mealie-grinder episode suggests a considered response by Coetzee to Paul de Man's critique of Rousseau's confessions; that is, it addresses how to confess one's crime simply and in full without overstepping into the role of the confessor via excuses and bring the confession to an end without relapse. There is some sign of resistance in the fact that the incident could have been told much earlier—chronologically it must have happened shortly after narrative begins—yet it was withheld until three-quarters of the way into the book when another event occurs that softens its terror. The language that tells of the boy's action is notably reserved in comparison with what has gone before it. Whereas we were earlier afforded plenty of insights into the boy's mind, this bracketed past sticks to the referential and verifiable truth:

While the grown-ups drank tea, he and his brother roamed around the farmyard. There they came upon a mealie-grinding machine. He persuaded his brother to put his hand down the funnel where the mealie-pits were thrown in; then he turned the handle. For an instant, before he stopped, he could feel the fine bones of the fingers being crushed. His brother stood with his

²²³ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 119.

hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled,
inquiring look on his face. (119)

Besides a brief account of a sensory experience—‘he could feel the fine bones of the fingers being crushed’ (119)—there is no mentioning of the boy’s interior thoughts and feelings. It is clear who did what and what happened with little else available. The only interpretation indulged by the narrative is the reading of the brother’s face, his ‘puzzled’ and ‘inquiring look’ that already asks obliquely for us: Why? I trusted you.

Much like Marion, the victim of Rousseau’s false accusation, John’s brother did not complain of being mistreated and has never been apologised to. Thus, the blaming could easily have been internalised by the boy into guilt and shame. However, *Boyhood* does not furnish us with that interpretation. Its language stubbornly stays on a relatively factual level despite several opportunities to become verbose: ‘He has never apologized to his brother,’ the narrative continues, ‘nor has he ever been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding’ (119). ‘Memory’ is an important word for *Boyhood*, referring to an experiential fact with no interpretative content in the way of ‘shame’ or ‘guilt.’ As no additional comments are offered, one is left guessing at the boy’s inner emotions while the narrative switches back to the present tense and pursue other avenues. Again Rousseau’s profuse confession offers an apt contrast of a language that cannot stop interpreting. Rousseau writes of the memory of his crime with plenty of inner feelings: ‘This cruel memory troubles me at times and so disturbs me that in my sleepless hours I see this poor girl coming to reproach me for my crime, as if I had committed it only yesterday.’²²⁴

There is an opportunity here to give a deconstructive reading of the fact that this mealie-grinder incident has been retrospectively inserted. One could argue that an excuse is being made for the offense—though who is making it is clearly problematic since the fictional narrating voice is neither Coetzee’s nor the

²²⁴ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 88.

boy's—by first relaying the book press event that shows how John and his brother have since moved on from that mistake and have established enough trust in each other to alternately entrust the other with the absolute power to crush another's limb at the book press. In other words, the event is insinuated as being excusable because, from the memory of the grinding of bones, a lesson has been learned against physical cruelty. In essence, the juxtaposition of the two episodes can be deduced as the same excuse as one that Rousseau puts forward in his account of the ribbon theft, that the offense 'has secured me for the rest of my life against any act that might prove criminal in its results. I think also that my loathing of untruth derives to a large extent from my having told that one wicked lie.'²²⁵ But as strictly descriptive accounts of two events, Coetzee's version makes no claim towards the future since the narrative voice is still in the present. No promise is made or can be made of 'I will never do or have never done this again,' which more or less means that the interpretation that an excuse is being made has no foothold beyond these two specific events. The episode—as I am reluctant to call it a confession—ends, while, on the other hand, Rousseau's expiating claim allows his confession to prolong itself endlessly. The latter unsurprisingly receives a revision in the 'Fourth Walk' of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*,²²⁶ where Rousseau confesses to having embellished many stories in *The Confessions* and offers yet another excuse for the falsehood.

Outside the confessional mode, the narrative voice of *Boyhood*, which is realised as fundamentally tied to the sensibility of a young child yet without becoming his voice, has found a strategy that makes it possible to state the boy's 'truth' and observe a high level of unimpeachability. The distance afforded by the third-person narration means that, even when one does not agree with the boy's perception of things, one cannot argue against the truth of his personal views. Sometimes the effect of the distance is irony, such as when the boy's opinion on love is relayed: 'He sees no sense in love. When men and women kiss in films and violins play low and lush in the background, he squirms in his seat.'

²²⁵ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 89.

²²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Fourth Walk', in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 63–80.

He vows he will never be like that: soft, soppy.²²⁷ At other times, the distance disappears into novelistic identification that momentarily collapses the separation of the selves, like the scene when the boy thinks of his mother dying: ‘He cannot imagine her dying. She is the firmest thing in his life. She is the rock on which he stands. Without her he would be nothing’ (35). This identification replaces the sense one usually finds in autobiographies of being taken into the author’s confidence. The boy/protagonist is no longer simply historical but is felt to be a symbolic figure, embodying a wider significance of a child’s relationship to the mother.

What does the selection of *Boyhood* tell us about Coetzee’s ‘evolving purpose’ and about the kind of person he wishes to portray himself as? In fact, this question has already been given a satisfactory explanation by Coetzee within the text, an explanation which we can briefly retrace here. The first obvious choice *Boyhood* makes is that it chooses to depict a brief spell of about 3 years in Coetzee’s life when his family lived first in Worcester, according to Kannemeyer ‘a sizable town... about 110 kilometres from Cape Town’²²⁸ where Coetzee’s father had secured a job with a successful canning company, Standard Cannery. Then, near the end of the memoir, they move to Cape Town. The choice of this specific period is significant because, even though the Coetzee family often moved around during Coetzee’s earlier years while his father was enlisted in the war, the majority of Coetzee’s life up until his university graduation in 1961 was spent in the South African metropolis of Cape Town. The focus on Worcester thus becomes a deliberate brushstroke to convey Coetzee’s sense of himself as a permanent bystander of the dominant cultures, which is supplemented by the subtitle of the book ‘Scenes from Provincial Life.’ Coetzee has practised imagining his life story as ruled by a sense of ‘alienness’ since *Doubling the Point*, where he rehearses autobiographical writing in the third person:

A sense of being alien goes back far in his memories. But to certain intensifications of that sense I, writing in 1991, can put

²²⁷ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 121.

²²⁸ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 44.

a date. His years in rural Worcester (1948-1951) as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism... by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality.²²⁹

The boy's estrangement is driven home through nearly all areas of his life in *Boyhood*. There is also Coetzee's 'provincial' position largely in relation to the Western literary world, of which he feels he is a brainchild. For the Western world, South Africa occupies a provincial outpost.



Considering that Coetzee's novels attain a remarkable level of transparency through various means of self-interrogation, his first two fictional memoirs—*Boyhood* and *Youth*—stick out for their lack of self-questioning within the narratives. The autobiographical texts bear no trace of the self-interrogating mechanism that pervades the rest of the Coetzeean oeuvre. In the two fictional memoirs, the driving conflict is between what the external world sees and the shameful 'truth' felt by the self, and both are uncharacteristically stable by Coetzee's standard. In *Boyhood*, in particular, the narrating voice mimics the confident manner of speaking of a self-important child whose judgements within his limited experience appear the only possible ones. Unequivocal declarations about the self abound. Take, for example, the following passage in which the narrative of *Boyhood* confidently describes the contrast between the boy's home life and school life, a contrast that is then reasoned to be the source of his emotional predicament:

At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb, meek and mild, who sits in the second row from the back, the most obscure row, so that he will not be noticed, and goes rigid with fear when the beating starts. By living this double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture. No one else has to

²²⁹ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 393.

bear anything like it... From no quarter can he expect support. It is up to him to somehow get beyond childhood, beyond family and school, to a new life where he will not need to pretend any more.²³⁰

Such causal language is common in autobiographies, but generally the link would stretch all the way to the moment of writing rather than, as in this case, residing in the thinness of the moment that is being related in the present tense. ‘No one else has to bear anything like it’ is Rousseau-like in its self-importance, but here it is not a claim that goes beyond this boy of that time. In Rousseau’s *The Confessions*, one often finds such passages about childhood as the following: ‘Who could have supposed that this childish punishment, received at the age of eight at the hands of a woman of thirty, would determine my tastes and desires, my passions, my very self for the rest of my life.’²³¹ In Rousseau’s work, the future self always bears a definite outline that is connected to its past, but *Boyhood*’s choices of the present tense and limited perspective keep its future open. *Youth* and *Summertime* would carry this implication of openness to their final conclusions as they diverge greatly from the historical version of Coetzee’s life of the same period.

It is curious that Coetzee does not bring over from his fiction the openness that results from the subject’s ability to question itself. It would be difficult to imagine any other characters of Coetzee—Mrs. Curren, Michael K or David Lurie, to name a few—as speaking in the unequivocal way of the young John Coetzee. But the result of its unreflexive stance is that *Boyhood* sheds all self-consciousness and devotes itself single-mindedly to the descriptive function of the prose, to the recording of the boy’s inner life with an intensity only available to a child. He is the living being that the narrative follows. It may be noted that the young John Coetzee is also the only child who has ever been the focaliser of Coetzee’s fiction and this unreflexive quality could be attributed to a

²³⁰ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 13–14.

²³¹ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 26.

child's naïve sensibility as much as to Coetzee's meditation on the trope of autobiography.

Near the end of *Boyhood*, the Coetzee family moves to the city of Cape Town. In the penultimate chapter, we are given a rapid-fire account of the rise and fall of Coetzee's father's new law practice in the city, delivered in a montage that reflects the way the boy has to piece together the events of the adult's world from the names and words he overhears. The change of pace signals the end, in a sense, of his child-like—impetuous, innocent, fantastical—perception of the world. This end is cued by a scene of phantasmic parricide of the boy's father, now disgraced and without a job, lying on his bed as his older son looks in to see his defeated old rival. Between the two, a war has been waged in the boy's mind: 'For seven years that war has ground on; today he has triumphed.' Yet the sight fills the boy with dread as it forces on him the closing of his childhood: 'Unfair! he wants to cry: I am just a child!'²³²

This event is followed by a remarkable passage that describes the boy's growing sensitivity. The enclosed world of childhood opens a crack and allows him intermittent moments of clarity during which his personal dramas subside and, in a sentence that reminds us of Coetzee's definition of grace, 'he can see the world as it really is' (160):

In a moment like this he can see his father and his mother too, from above, without anger: not as two grey and formless weights seating themselves on his shoulders, plotting his misery day and night, but as a man and a woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own. The sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and he is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself. (161)

This transition into adulthood, which is seen as concurrent with the ever-slipping attainment of self-truth, is never completed for Coetzee. To be an adult equals to know oneself, which is a journey he sees as longer than a lifetime. Later in

²³² Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 160.

Youth, when the twenty-something John receives an unexpected news that a woman is pregnant with his child, the narrative registers a lingering juvenility: ‘In his heart he does not feel himself to be more than eight years old, ten at the most. How can a child be a father?’²³³ Nevertheless, such moments of clarity are an ideal that Coetzee’s writings consistently push for through the limits of their embodied perspective—through ‘the only story he will admit.’

III. Between truth and fiction: Youth

As previously mentioned, there have been as yet no reports that *Boyhood* diverges from the truth—that is, apart from its commitment to the blinkered perception of a young boy.²³⁴ JC Kannemeyer’s biography of Coetzee also appears satisfied with the historical accuracy of this first autobiographical instalment judging from its reliance on *Boyhood* to supply the details of Coetzee’s early life, though it remains to be seen how stringent Kannemeyer’s standards are. *Youth* continues to include a selection of details lifted directly from its author’s life. For example, Coetzee’s jobs in England with IBM and ICL and his working conditions there are true according to Kannemeyer. On the other hand, Coetzee’s trip back to South Africa in 1963 where he rekindled an old friendship with Mauna Philippa Jubber and married her on 11 July 1963 is conspicuously left out, replaced by a fiction of his single life.²³⁵

It would take a degree of gullibility to believe the suggestion that in making this omission Coetzee is simply adhering to an intellectual experiment, expressed in his interview with David Attwell, to write an autobiographical

²³³ J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), 32. *Boyhood* contains almost the same sentence: ‘How can a child have children?’ (162), which the boy thought in response to his mother’s threat of ‘Wait until you have children.’ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 162. It is both a foreshadowing of the childlessness of this fictional John Coetzee and a reiteration of Coetzee’s belief, voiced in *Doubling the Point* and quoted earlier, that every human-being is a child. See Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 249.

²³⁴ One example of this coloured perspective is provided by Attridge, who notes that ‘you would never guess from the dispiriting descriptions of *Boyhood* that the view from the front door of No. 12 Poplar Avenue, Worcester, takes in the magnificent range of the Hex River Mountains.’ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 149.

²³⁵ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 130.

account where one is ‘constrained to respect’ a selection of facts. Surely a measure of guardedness—a resistance to full revelation—is involved in Coetzee’s decision to remove this chunk of his personal life while leaving the rest intact. Nevertheless, with that acknowledged, let me for the moment attempt to do justice to Coetzee’s design and address this problem from within the logic of his work. The omission can be explained through Coetzee’s above statement as well as his commitment to the ‘evolving purpose’ of autobiographical writing. *Youth* is ostensibly made of a different commanding passion than *Boyhood*. Its trajectory recalls the genre of *Künstlerroman*, the life story of artist, as it depicts John Coetzee’s solitary life in London from 1962 to 1964 as he goes from one mundane job to another while clandestinely harbouring a desire to become a major poet.

As in *Boyhood*, *Youth* maintains the formula of the third-person, present tense and free indirect style that limits the narrative within the thin unreflexivity of John’s perception of the world, neither openly ironising nor validating his passions. Coetzee’s ‘evolving purpose’ and facts selection have naturally changed from the first book. Whereas *Boyhood* may be said to depict the boy John’s preoccupation with his various secrets, John of *Youth* is preoccupied with the search for passionate love, for the girl who will be ‘[t]he beloved, the destined one,’ and who he believes will help unlock his artistic creation: ‘being dull and odd-looking are part of a purgatory he must pass through in order to emerge, one day, into the light: the light of love, the light of art.’²³⁶ From the twentieth century on, the *Künstlerroman*’s imperative has often been to establish a poetic identity that stands out from the rest of humanity.²³⁷ The genre’s definition of an artist’s development is one in which the artist realises his individual destiny of greatness in defiance of the mass. This seems to be the belief espoused by John in *Youth*: ‘it is the lot of the artist to suffer obscurity and ridicule until the day when he is revealed in his true powers and the scoffers and

²³⁶ Coetzee, *Youth*, 3.

²³⁷ Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 135.

mockers fall silent.²³⁸ This desire to become one day an artist provides *Youth*'s specific focus and dictates its coloured perspective.

By taking the artistic ambition as its overt guiding sentiment, *Youth* makes it a mission to construct a self that is self-actualised, that is fulfilling a unique destiny utterly independent of its historical position and of its familial connections. For María López and Kai Easton, John can be seen retracing the path of his modernist masters who have found in exile the intellectual freedom with which to create.²³⁹ *Youth* announces that '[h]e is proving something: that each man is an island; that you don't need parents.'²⁴⁰ In fact, the last name 'Coetzee' never occurs once in the story apart from its appearance on the cover. The protagonist is only referred to as 'John.' Conveniently, this also provides an excuse with which Coetzee can elide the more un-poetic and ordinary part of his life that does not fall in line with the image of the alienated artist—and, one imagines, also a part that is too close to the bone to be publicised. With the help of Kannemeyer's biography, it can be observed that most of the glaring omissions made in *Youth* concern John's more meaningful relationships such as his visit to South Africa, his marriage and family. The relationships that are left in *Youth* are fleeting and misjudged, but they also leave John the artist as the unchallenged central figure. Additionally, the narrative closes itself off in the summer of 1964 when Coetzee is twenty-four years old, not long before his brother David's move to London in 1965 and their mother's subsequent visit to the UK in the same year. Conveniently, this ending also cut out Coetzee's successful bid for various doctorate scholarships at American universities in 1965, including the University of Texas at Austin where he finally went.²⁴¹

Within this small window, *Youth* presents a familiar story of a young man in revolt against his socially-inscribed yet undeniable identity. However, through Coetzee's use of the third person singular and nothing less than conscious,

²³⁸ Coetzee, *Youth*, 3.

²³⁹ López, *Acts of Visitation*, 233–234; T. Kai Norris Easton, 'Travels to the Metropolis: Cape Town, London, and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 4, no. 1 (2004): 77.

²⁴⁰ Coetzee, *Youth*, 3.

²⁴¹ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 143.

mindful writing, the book manages to depict this youthful denial levelly and with barely any trace of qualifying judgements. The text maintains a singular fidelity to the fever of that pocket of time and, in the process, manages not to descend into the self-perpetuating cycle of concealment and revelation that plagues autobiographical writings that are driven by shame.

John of *Youth* appears to be chasing after a life away from the world's turmoil—the idealistic life of a poet. With self-admitted abhorrence for things South African, he flits along the Anglo-European literary heritage of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, Henry James and various other writers, yet an incongruity lingers between his sensibility and theirs. The reason he gives for his preference of poetry over prose makes clear the ongoing suppression of his own immediate context: 'In poetry the action can take place everywhere and nowhere... Prose, on the other hand, seems naggingly to demand a specific setting.'²⁴² When John's first experiment with prose yields a story set in South Africa, he is 'disquiet[ed]' and dismisses its chance of success:

[H]e sees no point in trying to publish it. The English will not understand it. For the beach in the story they will summon up an English idea of a beach, a few pebbles lapped by wavelets. They will not see a dazzling space of sand at the foot of rocky cliffs pounded by breakers, with gulls and cormorants screaming overhead as they battle the wind.²⁴³

At the time of *Youth*'s publication in 2002, Coetzee was already a household name in the Western literary world. His best-known works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe* and *Disgrace* had

²⁴² Coetzee, *Youth*, 62–3. López observes that this particular association of poetry with unspecified places is merely one of John's passing beliefs, as later on, walking on Hampstead Heath, he would reflect on English poetry's passion for springtime: 'Now, in the land where those poems were written, he begins to understand how deep gladness can run at the return of the sun' (*Youth* 117). It is one of the many contentions in *Youth* that are unequivocally made in themselves, but are transparently provisional at the narrative level. For López's discussion, see López, *Acts of Visitation*, 240–41.

²⁴³ Coetzee, *Youth*, 62.

already enjoyed immense success and accolades ‘despite’ their engagements with distinctly South African and colonial themes. Certain versions of *Youth* contain the blurb ‘Booker Prize-winning author of *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*’ and some bookstores even put an additional ‘Winner of the Nobel Prize’ sticker on their copies. This above quoted passage, then, can be easily recognised by readers who know even a basic background of the author as, if not quite ironic, then true only to a strictly limited sense. This provisionality of truth is, of course, the very condition of a Coetzeean truth.

In the process of being faithful to its subject, the texts of *Boyhood* and *Youth* seem never about to get somewhere, never employing their truths in the service of one improvement or another. John’s constant talk of ‘rebirth’ and of his true talent being ‘revealed’ does not lead out of itself. *Youth* ends instead on a sombre note whose inevitability is rather reminiscent of *Boyhood*’s ‘the only story he will admit.’ The adult John feels that ‘he [is] locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat’ (169), unable to overcome the trappings of the self. López also identifies moments of Joycean epiphany in *Youth* that fail to develop into a transformative experience. In one, John experiences ‘ecstatic unity with the All’ and from which he emerges ‘refreshed, renewed’: ‘If he has not utterly been transfigured, then at least he has been blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth.’²⁴⁴ López keenly notes that the passage contains ‘no irony or mockery,’ yet ‘its value and significance are so brief and evanescent as to have no effect whatsoever on John’s subsequent development,’²⁴⁵ and indeed the next chapter returns to the mundane with John advertising himself as a temporary house-sitter in order to save money on his accommodation.

The memoirs’ provisionality is consistent with what we find in Coetzee’s fiction, yet certain elementary differences can be identified between Coetzee’s autobiographical project and his other fictions. It would appear that autobiography and fiction are, for Coetzee, different interpretative approaches he can take towards the same core material, neither one necessarily more truthful

²⁴⁴ Coetzee, *Youth*, 117.

²⁴⁵ López, *Acts of Visitation*, 237.

than the other. In Coetzee's recently published discussion with the psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, he attests to a writerly sense of his memories' malleability, that '[t]o think of a life-story as a compendium of memories which one is free to interpret in the present according to the demands (and desires) of the present seems to me characteristic of a writer's way of thinking.'²⁴⁶ Coetzee opposes this view to the belief that one's past is fixed and immutable and to the idea of the one true story of ourselves that, sooner or later, will become obsolete with the changing time. Coetzee's fictional memoirs offer a different product of his creative interpretations and we read in them moments that may have been visited by his previous novels, but with markedly different yields.

Chapter twelve of *Youth*, for example, appears to paint the reversed perspective of Coetzee's 1990 novel *Age of Iron*, which, as detailed in the previous chapter, is a letter lovingly written by a dying mother, Mrs. Curren, to her daughter who has permanently emigrated to America in defiance of South African apartheid rule. 'She is like iron', Mrs. Curren says, and 'has made a vow' never to return.²⁴⁷ From its first sentence, *Youth*'s chapter twelve recalls the tragic tension that provides the premise for *Age of Iron* between the blinding love of a mother and the idealism of her headstrong child. The chapter begins: 'Each week a letter arrives from his mother, a pale blue aerogramme addressed in neat block capitals... Will his mother not understand that when he departed Cape Town he cut all bonds with the past?'²⁴⁸ As is the rest of *Youth*, this episode is told within the vehemence of John's rejection of his past without either validating or invalidating it. The letters, 'evidences of her unchanging love for him,' are said to cause John 'exasperation' (98). Rather harshly, it is stated: 'What does she hope to achieve by her letters, this obstinate, graceless woman?,' but she also affects him greatly as, fearing of his mother's boundless grief, John resolves that '[a]s long as she is alive he dare not die. As long as she is alive, therefore, his life is not his own' (99).

²⁴⁶ Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, 13.

²⁴⁷ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 75.

²⁴⁸ Coetzee, *Youth*, 98.

It is in a way startling to place John's cold-hearted rejection in the context of *Age of Iron*'s many longing passages of a dying mother left behind in South Africa. Of these, the following are particularly heart-rending words from the pen of Mrs. Curren:

[H]ow I longed for you! How I long to be able to go upstairs to you, to sit on your bed, run my fingers through your hair, whisper in your ear as I did on school mornings, "Time to get up!" And then, when you turned over, your body blood-warm, your breath milky, to take you in my arms in what we called "giving Mommy a big hug," the secret meaning of which, the meaning never spoken, was that Mommy should not be sad, for she would not die but live on in you.²⁴⁹

It is a startling connection because the two positions stem from the same imagination and memory bank in equally sympathetic a fashion. Each occupies its own textual space without yearning to be compared, contrasted, or reconciled into one ideal text.

The autobiographical approach seems to be employed by Coetzee as a position utterly ensconced in the confines of the self, while his fictional endeavours begin with a promise of freedom to imagine an alternative position, which is not without eventual confines of its own. It would be presumptuous to read the two narratives together as advocating the moral efficacy of sympathising with another being since, as both *Boyhood* and *Youth* admit, the moments in which things are revealed as they are, can only be sustained momentarily, before one is forced back into 'the only story one will admit.' The fiction that housed Mrs. Curren inevitably ends. Additionally, Coetzee's novels are in general highly cautious of laying claims to the representations of actual others, relying instead on creating fictional beings. In fact, apart from her letter writing, Mrs. Curren cannot be said to resemble Coetzee's mother at all. They hold vastly different political opinions. Mrs. Coetzee as described in *Youth* appears to be relatively

²⁴⁹ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 6.

sympathetic to the Afrikaners' government: 'She thinks South Africa is misunderstood by the world. Blacks in South Africa are better off than anywhere else in Africa. The strikes and protests are fomented by communist agitators.'²⁵⁰ Mrs. Curren, contrarily, is unequivocally full of disgust for the regime.

How does this specific discovery of recurring autobiographical motifs affect our experience of Coetzee's works in a larger sense? For me, its value lies in the affirmation we get that the irrational, unintentional, uncontrollable element has been a part of Coetzee's work from its conception. While Coetzee has often been lauded for accommodating the irrational forces of alterity in his fiction,²⁵¹ one harbours a suspicion that these insights may have been reached by means of the rational, that Coetzee's well-formed novels are ultimately a triumph of thought and reason to grasp even their antithesis, and that the only reason why we cannot easily get behind them is because they have managed to out-think us most of the time. At times, it feels well nigh impossible to get beyond the intentionality of the Coetzeean oeuvre, to find a truth that—to borrow a phrase from *Michael K*—comes 'unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them.'²⁵² Coetzee's autobiographies are revealing yet exceedingly crafted, and this extends even to the J.M. Coetzee Archive at the University of Texas and to J.C. Kannemeyer's biography, on which Coetzee still leaves his mark by personally providing access to his papers and then putting Kannemeyer in touch with people to interview.²⁵³ I should add that the phrase quoted from *Michael K* belongs to a passage in which K compellingly asks if one can tell the truth by the manner of its arrival—that is, is an effortless truth necessarily truer than the ones that have large amounts of work behind them? Yet this pointed question seems not enough to quell the suspicion of the reader, as well as of the self-conscious Coetzee himself, that his oeuvre may be too overwrought for truth.

²⁵⁰ Coetzee, *Youth*, 100.

²⁵¹ Carrol Clarkson among others highlights 'a sustained interrogation throughout Coetzee's oeuvre of the supposed sovereignty of a rational self.' Carrol Clarkson, 'Remains of the Name', in *Literary Landscapes from Modernism to Postcolonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 131.

²⁵² Coetzee, *Michael K*, 183.

²⁵³ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 7.

Against this backdrop, the recurrence of certain autobiographical details in Coetzee's writing reveals the decisive influence of the irrational and unintentional in his work. As in his novels, Coetzee's fictional memoirs contain multiple passages in which one senses the author's intellectual and linguistic interpretations circling around traumatic experiences that lie outside the closed systems of his medium. By an inner imperative, it seems, he is impelled to keep attempting to capture them. When autobiographical references crop up in the novels, one can still optimistically assume that 'J.M. Coetzee' is making use of his experience for art; but here in the openly autobiographical writing, his own figure is trapped inside the text along with his given name, lapped around by the family and places from his life, and by the contingencies from the past that he has no command over. In essence, the irrepressible return of Coetzee's personal experiences in his writing may be said to be his saving grace from self-consciousness. It is finally what he does not create or intend, the body-soul from which he seems unable to escape.

South Africa is one of the main presences that challenge the authority of J.M. Coetzee. Following *Youth's* relating of his mother's letters, a small paragraph reads: 'South Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so he can begin to breathe.' But immediately after comparing the country to his albatross, we find out that John regularly follows the *Manchester Guardian*, a British newspaper that, he says, never fails to report on the atrocities in South Africa: 'Reading the *Manchester Guardian*, he can at least be sure he knows the worst.'²⁵⁴ A little later on still, we read that while researching for his Master's dissertation, John takes pleasure in 'dipping into books about the South Africa of the old days... it is his country, the country of his heart, that he is reading about' (137).



The irrational side of John Coetzee is brought out with remarkable clarity in the memoirs, which allows me to thematise it more directly than with the novels. The contradiction of John's reading what he wishes to forget requires no digging to discern. John's illogical action is casually displayed without any

²⁵⁴ Coetzee, *Youth*, 101.

resistance or panache. As with the confessions, no self-conscious explanation or analysis accompanies the contradiction. Throughout the volume, no neurotic tics are allowed to muddy the current of the telling, which admirably strains to remain as empty and impersonal as possible no matter how embarrassing certain memories in *Youth* may be. We see John's loss of control clearly and often, and given the autobiographical catch, we also perceive the part of the author that is not an unaffected and enlightened entity.

Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be said to devote themselves to the truths of the evolving self—to the task of facing them squarely, that is, without wincing and even with occasional humour. While I have been focusing on the memoirs' articulation of resistant truths that marks the confessional, the memoirs also contain many lighter moments. Attridge rightly notes that certain episodes of *Boyhood* and *Youth* are 'extremely funny,'²⁵⁵ while at other times the stories of John's embarrassments can be 'painful to read,' which are where 'the protocols of confession are most severely tested' (160). What produces the comic effect is not always easy to pinpoint, but it would not have been possible without the equable narrative voice. The comic in Coetzee is not marked by a lighter tone, for its delivery is always deadpan, but by some absurd contradictions with what we know beyond the characters' blinkered perspectives, certain passages tickle, while the others come across as troublingly real.

In *Boyhood*, the boy's allegiance to the Russians during the Cold War is thoroughly funny. The particular chapter states early on: 'Preferring the Russians to the Americans is a secret so dark that he can reveal it to no one. Liking the Russians is a serious matter. It can have you ostracized.'²⁵⁶ These hyperbolic statements must have felt true in the boy's mind—we all have ridiculous convictions in our childhood—but to adults' eyes, they are humourous. As the chapter draws on, the matter's seriousness does become more understandable, since this unusual opinion alienates the boy from his immediate society: 'Then came the realization, from the disapproval of his parents, from the puzzlement of his friends, from what they reported when they told their own parents about him:

²⁵⁵ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 150 and 159.

²⁵⁶ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 26.

liking the Russians was not part of a game, it was not allowed' (28). But the impression made by that pure comic beginning remains indelible and it troubles one's attempt to define the memoir by its confessional impulse.

Arguably, the narrative work to maintain an untroubled surface may exist in some of Coetzee's novels as well, but, there, it is much less conspicuous since the author and his character are separate people; David Lurie, for instance, can only be distinct from J.M. Coetzee. If any commonality happens to exist, the separation will still triumph by, among other things, the book's belonging to the bracketed-off genre of fiction. What is remarkable about the autobiographical undertaking is that, unlike what we find in his novels, the experience implicates the author of the writing much more directly and, thus, it imparts a materiality simply unavailable within the myth of free-floating fiction or the allegories of political fiction. This elemental force provided by a referent in reality is especially palpable in such episodes as the ones concerning the memory of Coetzee's mother, in which we are faced with raw emotions that no amount of thinking has been able to resolve, and of which interpretations can be thrown at tirelessly in different works, without any of them mastering the primitive experience. Through his family line and his heartland, as figures in writing as well as living truths, Coetzee can be said to experience most profoundly the limit of himself and his intellectual prowess.

In the end, however, the rational, unclouded voice of both *Boyhood* and *Youth* is one of the fictions that eventually cease to be. A scene towards the end of *Boyhood* powerfully captures the embodied finitude of this clear vision. It depicts John's mother's levelled, unsympathetic gaze at her son. The mother is described as washing the dishes when

[s]he turns from her chore; her gaze flickers over him. It is a considered look, and without any fondness. She is not seeing him for the first time. Rather, she is seeing him as he has always been and as she has always known him to be when she

is not wrapped up in illusion. She sees him, sums him up, and is not pleased. She is even bored with him.²⁵⁷

Whether or not the boy is correct about his mother's thought at that moment, the unceremonious unmasking of self-truth by another's gaze is what the boy particularly dreads. The thought that the clarity and totality of understanding which is sometimes granted to him can also occur in another, especially in his mother who loves him unconditionally, gives him a terrible fright: 'He fears her judgement. He fears the cool thoughts that must be passing through her mind at moments like this, when there is no passion to colour them' (161).

The rational gaze exposes his bare and imperfect self that is in every sense outside his control; it strips him down without coaxing and without mercy. His mother has seen his vulnerable beginning, has 'had a life before he came into being' (162) so the 'enlightened' version of her verdict will surely be more than he can withstand: 'This is what he fears from her, from the person in all the world who knows him best, who has the huge advantage over him of knowing all about his first, most helpless, most intimate years' (161). Much more deeply felt than the mealie grinder episode, this scene is Coetzee's confession of his fear of cold judgement and, thus, of losing narrative control in no uncertain terms. One can rewrite this confession in the hyperbolic and autobiographical style of Rousseau that: this fear has secured Coetzee for the rest of his life against any writing that might prove uncharitable in its portrayals. But in a Coetzean universe, it may be better to say that the fear provides embodied meaning to his fiction's deep sympathy for imperfect protagonists as it connects his narrative's sympathy to the person of John Coetzee.

Would that judgement by Vera Coetzee, if it had been expressed, really be the truest truth about John that is unobstructed by the blindness of the self? If we take to heart our preceding discussion of Coetzee's oeuvre, the answer would most likely be no, since the cold light of rationality always reveals a partial truth, not the embodied truth, and Mrs. Coetzee is bound to have a blindness of her own. But coming from Coetzee himself, can that formulation be trusted when its

²⁵⁷ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 161.

alternative—the rational judgement—is professed here to constitute young Coetzee’s greatest fear? In one sense, *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be seen as another attempt by Coetzee to ensure control over the story of his own life, a way of protecting it from the cold gaze of unknown biographers who have no reasons to be charitable in their accounts. Replacing others’ cold gaze with his own, Coetzee gives us truths that do not have the softness of his fiction, but have the definition and clarity that make possible the confession of his life’s vulnerabilities.

IV. A return to Rousseau: Summertime

Summertime turns against the first two memoirs’ lucid voice. If it had continued the work of its predecessors and found a way to bring the truth-telling to an end, one could say that the objective view of oneself at a point in time is the goal of Coetzee’s fictional autobiographies. But instead, the truth-telling act of the self ends with *Youth*. In direct contrast to the neatness of the voice in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, *Summertime* offers a confusing polyphony of voices that appears to have been assembled after John’s death, though by whom it is not made clear. The book is made up of a selection of John’s notebook sketches for the third memoir and the transcriptions of five interviews with people who knew him—lovers, friends, colleagues and a cousin—conducted after his death by a British biographer named Mr. Vincent. In the background of each section is the figure of John’s widower father, strangely featureless in comparison to the other characters. From the interview with Martin, John’s former colleague at the University of Cape Town, we get the confirmation that John had in fact meant to compose a third memoir in the same third-person singular format as *Boyhood* and *Youth*, but did not finish it. So with *Summertime*, Coetzee has devised a situation where mortality—the true limit of the body-soul—has interrupted the work of truth-telling by the self.

Attwell keenly observes that the impersonal voice found in *Boyhood* and *Youth* is ‘not an a priori quality inherent in a work of art, nor is it simply a function of the aesthetic. It is an *achievement*, an effect of labour in which the

self is partially but not wholly buried beneath the superstructure.²⁵⁸ By contrast, the disorganised narration of *Summertime* can be viewed as Coetzee's alternatively imagining the disintegration of the self-control that had been holding up the crystallised narratives of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Instead of control, *Summertime* exhibits a crafted haphazardness. Instead of royalty to truth, it is driven by the inventiveness of a fictioneer. One finds that biographical details of the characters and their dramatic scenes together are mostly made up, even when this does not feel necessary. For example, the third 'memoir' contains an interview with Coetzee's female cousin who is obviously the same person as the young cousin Agnes in *Boyhood*, but here her name is inexplicably changed to the untrue 'Margot.' The most glaring changes again concern Coetzee's family. Coetzee's mother was actually still alive all through the 1970s while Coetzee himself was married with children. Kannemeyer sums up the situation succinctly: 'anybody who reads *Summertime* as "truth" will have been gulled.'²⁵⁹

Given the extensive fictionalisation, one suspects that Coetzee is exploring in fictional form a question he raises at length in his exchange with the psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz in *The Good Story*,²⁶⁰ whether the Freudian conviction that the truth can set the patient free, is accurate. In the correspondence, carried out around the time of *Summertime*'s publication, Coetzee asks: 'is the truth the only avenue to freedom? Will a *version* of the truth... not do equally well, if the goal is to get the patient back on the rails'²⁶¹ He contrasts this psychoanalytic goal with the notion of poetic truth which is 'in part a matter of internal consistency, elegance, and so forth – in other words, a matter of satisfying autonomous aesthetic criteria' (7-8). By these definitions, *Summertime* interestingly belongs to neither camp, being neither truthful nor elegant. It challenges both Freud's truth-as-freedom and the poets' truth-as-beauty with a life's death, at which point the question of truth in autobiography

²⁵⁸ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 33.

²⁵⁹ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 607.

²⁶⁰ According to *The Good Story*'s 'Authors' Note,' the correspondence began in 2008 even though the collection was only published in 2015. Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, viii.

²⁶¹ Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, 7 (emphasis original).

that so preoccupied J.M. Coetzee ceases to be meaningful. In other words, the third memoir imagines the limited shelf life of the autobiographical enterprise that has ruled the Coetzee's oeuvre for so long. It shows the stories of John Coetzee gradually becoming instead the prerogative of other living body-souls and their access to his unfinished, fragmentary works; and allows us to ask a non-autobiographical question about whether these non-autobiographical texts also contain some truth-value, and, if so, of whom.

Like its precursors but in an even more striking way, the narrative of *Summertime* invokes no single author figure. According to its premise, its revelations are made possible by the author's death—Barthes's famous death of the author perversely made real. While some critics have construed that the biographer Vincent is responsible for putting together *Summertime*,²⁶² several details in the book problematise this attribution. For one, Vincent's full name is not provided to compete for authorship with 'J.M. Coetzee' on the book's cover. When Vincent gives an extended narrative portrayal in his interview with John's cousin Margot, it is shown in an unfinished state. The authority of this particular writing is further diminished by his interview repartee with Margot, who expresses strong reservations about the piece: 'You can't write that. You can't. You are just making things up.'²⁶³ In addition, *Summertime* opens with a page titled 'Author's note' that precedes all the chapters and is presumably written in Coetzee's own voice, thanking the people who have helped him with the book.²⁶⁴

²⁶² J.U. Jacobs writes of Vincent as the person behind *Summertime*'s arrangement: 'Vincent uses dates and undated extracts from Coetzee's notebooks to frame transcripts of his own interviews with five people who had known John Coetzee during this period.' See J.U. Jacobs, 'J M Coetzee as Ambivalent South African: *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*', in *East Meets West*, ed. Reiko Aiura, J.U. Jacobs, and J. Derrick McClure (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 184.

²⁶³ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 137.

²⁶⁴ In its entirety, the note reads: 'My thanks to Marilia Bandeira for assistance with Brazilian Portuguese, and to the estate of Samuel Beckett for permission to quote (in fact to misquote) from *Waiting for Godot*' (n.p.). Strictly speaking, the author of *Summertime*'s 'Author's note' is uncertain as Vincent could also have received the help with language and the permission to quote from Beckett. But the note still most likely belongs to Coetzee since *Summertime* contains many Afrikaans sentences for which the British Mr. Vincent should have required additional assistance.

This is an unusual set-up for Coetzee, since in his other works of similar experimental nature such as *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*, the appreciations have always been expressed at the end under the more conventional heading of ‘Acknowledgements.’ Therefore, the appearance of ‘Author’s note’ at the beginning can arguably be perceived as a gambit to immediately cast doubt over Vincent’s authorship status. In fact, the person behind *Summertime*’s arrangement and presentation is closer to the fictional one we find in *Age of Iron*—that is, a completely featureless and discreet messenger. And like that novel, this collection of writings feels hardly meant for our eyes.

Despite the role of Vincent the biographer being kept in check, he nevertheless represents a strong oppositional position to the fictional principle that underpins *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Vincent believes that the extensive fictional writings by J.M. Coetzee obstruct our view of his personal truth. He points to the fictionalisations that pervade even the personal documents that John Coetzee leaves behind²⁶⁵ and contends that ‘if you want the truth you have to go behind the fictions [the documents] elaborate and hear from people who knew him directly, in the flesh.’²⁶⁶ That truth for Vincent has to be accessed in the real world outside of writing in order to touch on actual emotions rather than fictional ones. His biography is meant to ‘reveal a very different person’ from John’s public image of ‘a cold and supercilious intellectual’: ‘not necessarily a warmer person, but someone more uncertain of himself, more confused, more human’ (235). Vincent also describes the sum of Coetzee’s oeuvre as one ‘massive, unitary self-projection’ (226), which he hopes to provide an alternative to.

But Vincent is only one part of Coetzee’s posthumous picture. *Summertime*, in fact, deconstructs *Boyhood* and *Youth* not with the figure of Vincent, but with the body-soul’s death. The book gives death the credit of being the eventual deconstructor, with the true power to dissolve the authoritative voice

²⁶⁵ Vincent contends that ‘[w]hat Coetzee writes [in his letters and diaries] cannot be trusted, not as a factual record—not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity’ in Coetzee, *Summertime*, 225.

²⁶⁶ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 226.

of the preceding volumes. In this final instalment, John's life sprawls out without a unifying narrative voice to give it an appearance of clarity. The various voices that replace the author's are made to appear more haphazard than usual. Questioned as to how he settled on his five interviewees, the biographer Vincent gives an answer that reveals a mixture of John's lingering control and happenstance:

Basically I let Coetzee himself do the choosing. I simply followed up on clues he dropped in his notebooks – clues as to who was important to him at the time. The other criterion you had to meet was to be alive. Most of the people who knew him well are, as you must know, dead by now. (217)

The foregoing clarity of *Boyhood* and *Youth* appears in the new context provided by *Summertime* to have been relying on a vitality that has now run its natural course. Of the third memoir, only the unfinished sketches are left, and these are further diluted by interview transcriptions of people who are not John Coetzee. Both the sketches and the interviews, we are asked to believe, have not been fully stylised. One effect of this immediacy is that it highlights the prior autobiographical writing's deliberateness. At the close of most notebook sketches, the late John Coetzee has written notes to himself suggesting how to later edit them, such as 'To be expanded on: his father's response to the times as compared to his own; their differences, their (overriding) similarities'²⁶⁷ or 'Caution: Avoid pushing his interest in Jesus too far and turning this into a conversion narrative' (13), which hints at the work that went into creating the transparency of the first two volumes.

A comparison between the accounts of John's notebook sketches and the interviews shows the omissions Coetzee might have made in his autobiographical writing even before the fact of its distortion of history. The drafts for the third memoir in *Summertime* cover a period of time that overlaps with the interviews, that is, between 1972 and 1975. However, the sketches

²⁶⁷ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 6.

completely fail to mention the four female interviewees with whom John has been romantically connected, while including only Martin, the male colleague, referred to by his initial MJ. Most of the notebook excerpts concern John's lukewarm relationship with his father, Jack Coetzee. We can surmise that the third memoir is meant to have the father-son relationship at its centre, and as its final evolving purpose.

From the interviews, we find out that John in South Africa continues to be awkward in his relationships with women as he was in the England of *Youth*. There is a deeply embarrassing episode when John asks Julia to make love with him in time to a Schubert string quintet so that they will learn 'what it had felt like to make love in post-Bonaparte Austria' (69). The episode ends with the frustrated Julia throwing a plate at John. John also doggedly pursues the Brazilian ballerina Adriana, registering for her dance class only to cause a scene when he touches her on the cheek.²⁶⁸ Yet none of these scenes, which could easily have been included in the brutally honest *Youth*, manages to leave a trace on the notebook sketches for the third memoir.²⁶⁹

The most significant absence overall in *Summertime* is John's father, whose shadowy presence haunts nearly all the interviews and drafts, yet whose inner life remains inscrutable to the end. He comes and goes without leaving any

²⁶⁸ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 184. Despite these reproofs, the women's viewpoints nevertheless afford some relief from young John's self-critical take. They seem to see in John potentially someone strong whom they can depend on, only to become disappointed in the end. The psychiatrist Julia speaks lovingly of the conversations she shared with John: 'In fact our conversations were probably what I missed most. He was the only man I knew who would let me beat him in an honest argument' (62).

²⁶⁹ Vincent presents Julia with the notebook pages in which she does not make any appearance but that cover the period of her relationship with John, and Julia remarks rather dolefully on her absence: 'I have my doubts that I made it to the important level. I mean, he never wrote about me. I never entered his books' (36). Similar to Julia, the French lecturer at UCT, Sophie, had an affair with John, yet cannot find herself in any of his books. She says she once 'believed you could not be closely involved with another person and yet exclude her from your imaginative universe' (235), but John has taught her otherwise. The cousin, Margot is clearly the favourite cousin of the boy John in *Boyhood*, though in that book she is referred to by her real name of 'Agnes.' With Adriana, Vincent suggests that she is the inspiration for Susan Barton in *Foe*, and to Martin, he shows the notebook entry that mentions him directly.

impression. John of *Summertime* notes that he ‘finds it hard to detect what his father cares about... If he could solve the mystery of what in the world his father wants, he might perhaps be a better son.’²⁷⁰ Through the unknown figure of the father, *Summertime* is ruled over by a gap in knowledge that contradicts the distilled confidence of the preceding two memoirs. That the father is the unknown here also prompts one to wonder if Jack Coetzee has ever made it into Coetzee’s novels in the way that Vera Coetzee did at least in *Age of Iron*. While there is no method external to J.M. Coetzee to positively answer this question, my own sense is that no characters seem to come close to the despondent father of *Boyhood* and *Summertime*. By directing the reader’s attention to the father’s absence in the fiction, the third memoir imagines the lives that the subject may have failed to acknowledge in his own obsessions. Its writing testifies to the thought that, no matter how well written and truth-directed a life story may be, the writing subject is bound to overlook or ignore something, or mortality will intervene before he gets there.

John’s estranged relationship with his father continues the memoirs’ dynamic engagement with the genre of the confession. In one of the undated fragments, John recalls a time when, at the age of sixteen, he scarred the surface of his father’s favourite Renata Tebaldi record out of spite against his father. In contrast to *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the account may be said to be an unsuccessful confession with a false and over-the-top tone. Worse still, if we compare its content to available external facts, the confession looks to be factually false. In a 1991 lecture, later published as ‘What Is a Classic?’,²⁷¹ Coetzee mentions that he does not come from a musical family: ‘At home we had no musical instrument, no record player’ (9). He relates that, at fifteen, he listened to music from the radio or from whatever drifted in from his student neighbours’ gramophone (9). This clashes with the story in *Summertime* that Coetzee’s father returned from war service—the return occurred in 1945, according to Kannemeyer, when Coetzee was five years old—‘with a new found passion for opera’ and ‘bought a

²⁷⁰ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 247.

²⁷¹ Coetzee, ‘What Is a Classic?’

gramophone, their family's first.²⁷² The father is additionally referred to in the memoir as 'Corporal Coetzee' (248), but Kannemeyer relates that 'Jack had never advanced beyond the rank of lance-corporal' though young John Coetzee often omitted the 'lance' when talking to his friends.²⁷³ If one of these accounts is false, the lecture and Kannemeyer's biography obviously have more credibility than the deeply fictional memoir.

For the first time in Coetzee's fictional memoirs, the narrative voice in this fragment identifies its utterance as a confession and has remarkably Rousseau-like characteristics. From his repeated returns to Rousseau's *The Confessions* in various articles and lectures, we have already seen Coetzee's significant resistance to the widespread critique of the truthfulness of Rousseau's confessions. Rousseau's work clearly has an irresistible intensity that continues to fascinate Coetzee, a fascination that Attwell picked up on and subtly proposed to Coetzee in their interview in 2002.²⁷⁴ Attwell asks Coetzee whether Rousseau's exuberant text might not suggest 'exactly the kind of creative self-invention that contemporary identity politics might admire,' but Coetzee limits himself only to saying: 'On the subject of Rousseau, let me merely say that I have not got to the bottom of Jean-Jacques yet, and, given the lack of nuance in my knowledge of French, probably never will.'²⁷⁵

The confession in *Summertime* may provide Coetzee's most sensitive engagement with Rousseau yet. By lapsing into the style of Rousseau, Coetzee concedes to its living mystical power. While *The Confessions*'s inauthentic tone and factual inaccuracies mean that it has often been shown in a bad light under the scrupulous examinations of scholars, yet despite having been repeatedly and conclusively proven to contain untruths and self-deceptions, Rousseau's confessions somehow survive better than many more 'truthful' and

²⁷² Coetzee, *Summertime*, 248.

²⁷³ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 38. Kannemeyer mentions that Jack Coetzee did go to Italy during the war and attended 'many performances' of Italian opera.

²⁷⁴ J.M. Coetzee, 'All Autobiography Is *Autre*-Biography: An Interview with David Attwell', in *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/Biography*, ed. Judith Lutge Coullie et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 213–18.

²⁷⁵ Coetzee, 'All Autobiography Is *Autre*-Biography', 217.

psychologically aware autobiographical writings. Freudian psychological clarity and poetic beauty might not be all there is to the task.

Without mentioning Rousseau, John's confession in *Summertime* is full of the Frenchman's marks. The voice of this episode throws away all the reserve and unreflexivity of *Boyhood*. After detailing how he secretly defaced his father's record with a razor blade, John of *Summertime* wails: 'For that mean and petty deed of his he has for the past twenty years felt the bitterest remorse, remorse that has not receded with the passage of time but on the contrary grown keener.'²⁷⁶ This is unmistakably the language of Rousseau's *The Confessions*. As we have seen, Rousseau writes similarly of his ribbon theft: 'I took away with me lasting memories of a crime and the unbearable weight of a remorse which even after forty years, still burdens my conscience. In fact the bitter memory of it, far from fading, grows more painful with the years.'²⁷⁷

The adult John manages to find a similar compilation by the same artist upon his return to South Africa, and timidly plays it for his father: 'He wanted his father's breast to swell with that old joy; if only for an hour, he wanted him to relive that lost youth, forget his present crushed and humiliated existence.'²⁷⁸ But his father shows no recognition: 'Tebaldi had, it seemed, lost her charms' (250). On the other hand, the language of John's guilt grows more fervent. It is said that John has wanted, but has not the courage, to express 'a full confession' to his father. Using the first person to address his father, John gives in fully to the confessional impulse in an imaginary scene of confession:

Forgive me for deliberately and with malice aforethought scratching your Tebaldi record. And for more besides, so much more that the recital would take all day. For countless acts of meanness. For the meanness of heart in which those acts originated. In sum, for all I have done since the day I was born, and with such success, to make your life a misery. (250)

²⁷⁶ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 249.

²⁷⁷ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 86.

²⁷⁸ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 250.

The pages that depict John's guilt towards his father are emotionally irresistible if rationally impeachable. One can easily imagine de Man dissecting this portion with the same arguments he has used on Rousseau. Similarities with Rousseau's account include John's self-important presumption that he has destroyed his father's life. Rousseau also exaggerates his crime of false accusation in this manner with no apparent logical support: 'I may have ruined a nice, honest, and decent girl, who was certainly worth a great deal more than I, and doomed her to disgrace and misery.'²⁷⁹

With its crude confessional tone, the writing of *Summertime*'s John in this part feels more emotionally immediate and intimate than in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. It has an unseemly yet affecting overspill of emotion that recalls passages from Mrs. Curren's letter to her estranged daughter in *Age of Iron*, particularly the passage quoted earlier in this chapter where Mrs. Curren writes feverishly: 'How I longed to be able to go upstairs to you, to sit on your bed, run my fingers through your hair, whisper in your ear as I did on school mornings...'²⁸⁰ Perhaps this sense of vulnerable intimacy has something to do with both being writings purported to be meant for no-one's eyes. It may be enabled by the fact that both texts are so wrapped up in fictionalisations that they can hardly be attached to the distant and authorial J.M. Coetzee. Whatever the reason, *Summertime*'s confession reminds us that Coetzee's fictionalisation is, for him, what procures the body-soul's vulnerabilities. These sensitive truths shy away from the harsh light of his truth-directed discourse and, therefore, have only limited presence in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. While *Summertime*'s confessional section is capped off with another author's note that signals the return of the author's calculating intellect and douses the emotional authenticity of the preceding confession: 'Theme to

²⁷⁹ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 86. A little later in *Summertime*, Coetzee goes beyond Rousseau to imagine that his father may not be his victim but a game master: 'or else his father was playing a terrible game with him. *My life a misery? What makes you think my life has been a misery? What makes you think you have ever had it in your power to make my life a misery?*' *Summertime*, 250 (emphasis original).

²⁸⁰ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 5–6.

carry further: his father and why he lives with him,²⁸¹ yet despite all the reasons to find the section false, it might yet have the staying power of Rousseau's text.

The limit of the transparent narrating voice becomes even clearer in the final undated fragment that closes *Summertime*, which sees its return. The fragment concerns Jack's laryngectomy for his larynx cancer, a condition that also afflicted the real Jack Coetzee in his final years. John is informed that after the surgery his father will not be able to speak and will need someone to take care of him. An unfeeling narrative voice relays John's thought in response to this news and ends *Summertime* with the following passage:

He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye.* One or the other: there is no third way. (266, emphasis original)

In this transparent voice, there are only two practical choices: between taking care of the father or abandoning the father. Whatever confusions may arise in the subject's mind is of no consequence; ultimately he has to make a decision between these two choices—that is the simple, irrefutable truth. In this voice of utter clarity there is no room for the softer, more conflicting sentiments that may be going through John's mind like love, anger, remorse, or fear. This might have been the reason why one finds no love or kindness in *Youth* nor does the boy of *Boyhood* love anything unconditionally but the unfeeling Voëlfontien farm. The failed confession of *Summertime* provides the occasion that shows Rousseau's *The Confessions* to be an emotionally richer discourse than one might first realise. The question left for the readers to decide is whether Coetzee's *Scenes from Provincial Life* has what it takes to survive like Rousseau's.

²⁸¹ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 252.

Conclusion

Coetzee's intellectual interest in autobiography, which began to emerge with 'Confession and Double Thoughts' in 1982, has been present in his writings for more than two decades. But the representation of its fading out in *Summertime* reveals just how committed Coetzee is to what I have been describing as the living and dying body-soul in his narratives. It is the fundamental reality that Coetzee seems to accept and allow to dictate his thematic interests. In the interview with Attwell quoted from earlier, Coetzee emphasises that 'the statement that all writing is autobiography is itself autobiography, a moment in the autobiographical enterprise. Which is a roundabout way of saying that [it]... [does] not exist outside of time and outside of my life story.'²⁸² *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* are different stories from a life that, in characteristic Coetzee's fashion, all gesture at their own limits and eventually at their collective limit as a series of autobiographical writing. But an equally important point to appreciate is that these narratives are openly under the influence of a body-soul and its position in specific time and situation—e.g., of South Africa, of lineage, of death—which is to say that they have a basis in a dimension of reality that is irrefutable. While they may be nothing more than records of a life that hope to live on under the auspices of their readers, it may be enough to be nothing less.

²⁸² Coetzee, 'All Autobiography Is *Autre*-Biography', 214.

CHAPTER FOUR

Writing evil, reading the body-soul: 'The Problem of Evil' and *The Master of Petersburg*

'While she has less and less idea what it could mean to believe in God, about the devil she has no doubt.'²⁸³

The above admission by the eponymous protagonist Elizabeth Costello from the chapter 'The Problem of Evil' strikes me as an incidentally apt summary of many of Coetzee's narratives. Coetzee's novels do not tend to support or construct any coherent system of ethics—religious or secular—that does not, later on in the narrative, become incompatible with the advancing situation. The interrogations performed by these novels tend to put the protagonist and the reader in a position where they grow to have 'less and less idea what it could mean to believe in God.' But the latter part of the quote that 'about the devil she has no doubt' touches on a truly fascinating aspect of Coetzee's fiction: its representations of a certainty that is grounded in the characters' own experience. In this specific instance, without any empirical or theoretical justification, Costello's belief in the existence of the devil is upheld by the authority of her personal experience of sexual abuse in her youth. So 'The Problem' turns this seemingly abstract statement about God and the devil into a matter of Costello's experiences as a living being.

If we compare 'The Problem' with academic studies on evil in literature, we can better identify the problem of expression that 'The Problem' cleverly addresses. Ewan Fernie's monograph *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*²⁸⁴ provides an excellent study on literary representations of the demonic. Fernie proposes that evil is an intrinsic part of lived experiences, which is also the very venue of the narrative fiction that he studies. As Fernie elegantly reasons, the demonic is the force that keeps things grounded in reality because:

²⁸³ Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil', 167. Previously published with minor differences as 'Elizabeth Costello and the Problem of Evil', *Salmagandi*, no. 137–38 (Winter-Spring 2003): 49–65.

²⁸⁴ Ewan Fernie, *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2013).

... the Devil is a tempter, because he is a possessor of souls, because he gets right into the bone marrow, making it plain that moral objectivity and pride are unsustainable, that life is a struggle in which we are always messily and ambivalently involved (6).

Costello and Fernie are clearly in agreement on the reality of evil in the world and the unsustainability of moral codes, but in his impersonal academic voice, Fernie is forced into making floating statements whose authority rests mainly on their eloquence and affective language—e.g., ‘the Devil is a tempter,’ or the insidious ‘he gets right into the bone marrow.’ If one feels inclined to agree with Fernie, it will not be because he convinces, but rather that his writing covertly evokes our comparable experience of being invaded by sinfulness. Against a hostile audience, however, this writing is unlikely to have its desired effect. Within ‘The Problem’ we also see Costello struggling to impart her fear of the devil to her confident lecture audience, but Coetzee’s lecture-narrative in which she is housed is alternatively upfront about the experiential basis of this fear.

The power of this honesty alone, however, may not be able to match the unsavoriness of Costello’s specific message. Even more than ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’ discussed in Chapter One, ‘The Problem’ shows Costello presenting an argument that contradicts the democratic zeitgeist of the time of its delivery as a reading in 2002. In the fiction-as-lecture, Costello brazenly insinuates self-censorship against representations of gratuitous violence right in the stronghold of the democratic world, which is built on the values of liberty and the Enlightenment’s self-confidence. On top of this, ‘The Problem’ does so with little of the rhetorical charm or the clarity that its real-world author is clearly capable of. While in general I see Coetzee’s oeuvre as striving for clarity, some of Coetzee’s texts are important exceptions. They seem to take on highly resistant, even ugly, human experiences that run counter to the rules of clarity and grace—experiences of what Costello calls evil and which deserve an equally crooked expression to match. These works require us to reach deeper into our own experience to stay with them. In these cases, the confidence in the body-soul

becomes pivotal as the last connection between the reader and the text. This chapter will examine two of Coetzee's narratives that fall into this uncommunicative category. In addition to *Elizabeth Costello's* 'The Problem of Evil' (2003), it will discuss *The Master of Petersburg* (1994),²⁸⁵ arguably Coetzee's most abstruse and unpleasant work to date. Searching always for their body-souls, my readings of these texts will attempt to uncover truths that are unfortunately without beauty.

Both narratives, for vastly different reasons, give a sense that they are avoiding stating their embodied truths. The negative early reviews that both texts spawned reveal the formidable challenge they pose to our establishing easy sympathy with them. James Wood recalls that, after Coetzee read out 'The Problem' at a conference on evil in Amsterdam, it 'instantly sparked heated commentary' in the lecture theatre.²⁸⁶ As a reading text, one reviewer of *Elizabeth Costello* confesses to feeling 'cheated' by 'The Problem' which 'promises drama and then withholds it.'²⁸⁷ *The Master of Petersburg* is also levelled with a similar charge of a lack in vitality. Among Coetzee's oeuvre, the novel has arguably been met with the most negative reviews in the press. Its distortion of the real Fyodor Dostoevsky's biographical facts confounds and often irritates early reviewers, who also find the novel's style and characterisation disagreeable. A common complaint is that the novel consists of many probing passages that fail to gather force and an unlovable, sombre and self-obsessed protagonist. In *The New York Times*, Patrick McGrath finds *The Master* 'dense and difficult, a novel that frustrates at every turn.'²⁸⁸ Jan Dalley of *The Independent* says it is 'more admirable than enjoyable: a powerful intellectual construction, but without the pulsing immediacy of Coetzee's previous work.'²⁸⁹ Also in *The New York Times*, 18 November 1994, Michiko Kakutani writes scathingly that 'one finishes *The Master of Petersburg*

²⁸⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Vintage, 2004).

²⁸⁶ James Wood, 'A Frog's Life', *London Review of Books*, 23 October 2003, 15.

²⁸⁷ Adam Mars-Jones, 'It's Very Novel, but Is It Actually a Novel?', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2003.

²⁸⁸ Patrick McGrath, 'To Be Conscious Is to Suffer', *The New York Times*, 20 November 1994.

²⁸⁹ Jan Dalley, 'This Is Russia', *The Independent*, 20 March 1994.

marveling at the waste of Mr Coetzee's copious talents on such an odd and unsatisfying enterprise.²⁹⁰ While harsh, these candid responses truthfully capture the unpleasantness that the readers have to confront in reading the novel. To appreciate these two unlovable and opaque texts will require more than our reading of what it says. It may require us to look beyond their surface with forbearance.

In his essays on rhetoric and English syntax from the 1980s, Coetzee has argued that certain grammatical constructions in the English language can embody unconscious meanings of the author.²⁹¹ This group of essays show Coetzee's keen interest in the capacity of linguistic structures to let slip an alternative truth of the human unconscious, which may have been intentionally or unintentionally withheld by the sentence's conscious signification. Coetzee's prime example of a sentence structure that carries such unconscious truth is the short passive sentence in which the agent of the action, usually indicated after the preposition 'by' in a full passive sentence, is omitted. The short passives, says Coetzee, are sometimes resorted to as a means of withholding the full truth; for example, in the sentence 'I felt compelled to steal' where the real desire of the 'I' behind the action is glided over. In 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device,' Coetzee argues against an adoption of condemnatory stance towards these concealments. For him, such an occurrence is 'as good a syntactic representation of the unconscious as one is likely to find.'²⁹² Later in 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English,' Coetzee again reiterates that grammatical choices that on the surface appear to work against truth and clarity should not be dismissed offhand as they 'are items of unconscious knowledge, though not unconscious in the same sense that grammatical competence is.'²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Michiko Kakutani, 'Books of the Times; Dostoyevsky's Life As a Departure Point', *The New York Times*, 18 November 1994.

²⁹¹ J.M. Coetzee, 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 147–69; J.M. Coetzee, 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 170–80.

²⁹² Coetzee, 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device', 175.

²⁹³ Coetzee, 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English', 169.

The underlying contentions of Coetzee in these essays—first, that clarity is not always the pinnacle of linguistic expression; and second, that it is sometimes possible to read in the style of the writing the unconscious tier of the truth—are helpful in appreciating the more abstruse section of Coetzee’s oeuvre. While it is feasible to dismiss ‘The Problem’ or *The Master* as minor blips in Coetzee’s otherwise consistent career, I would argue that, if we accept that all texts contain living truths, there is sufficient reason to persevere in feeling our way into the states of mind that engender resistant narratives and gain further insight into life beyond our immediate experiences. The singularity of each of Coetzee’s narratives means that these two texts convey dark experiences that can be found nowhere else in Coetzee’s oeuvre and to which we are also vulnerable. To do justice to them, however, requires more active reading on our part, before we can recognise in their so-called stylistic faults and disagreeable assertions a subterranean level of embodied meaning. Coetzee’s emphasis on the unconscious truth in his essays already gives us an affirmation of his own sympathetic outlook for writings that are not stylistically pristine. If Coetzee can maintain his interest in the being behind writing into his most technical and disembodied explorations, there are likely to be signs of the unconscious in his own writing as well.

While my readings of ‘The Problem’ and *The Master* uncover different truths from each text, the interpretative approach used is uniform in that I look outside the narrative’s direct significations for stylistic embodiments of the body-soul and its difficult experience. In ‘The Problem,’ Costello’s old-fashioned argument against representations of atrocities is made clear from the story’s outset, but additionally interpreting the piece as one would a work of fiction reveals a more sympathetic side to her case. Peripheral details such as the setting, the repetitive sequence of the story, or certain sentence structures suggest that Costello’s argument is embedded in her unspoken personal experience of gratuitous violence, which has convinced her of the human susceptibility to evil. The story poses an intriguing question to the current generation of people in the metropolises, whether their confidence in human ability to learn from

representations of violence depends not on their lucky fortune of being spared first-hand experience of atrocities.

The final part of this chapter looks at *The Master*, which, as a novel, offers no clear argumentative thrust that can aid our reading. Most critics take the point of the novel to be a commentary on art; that the novel uncovers the dark side of the creative process through the artist figure of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Such accounts, however, seem to ignore the novel's vital connection to Coetzee's own experience of loss. The narrative's many correspondences with the premature death of Coetzee's son play only an extraneous supporting role in these interpretations. With the help of new biographical works on Coetzee, I advance an alternative view that the novel can be most coherently experienced as an autobiographical writing out of Coetzee's conflicting emotions following his son's death. It may be best read not as fiction as it deviously purports to be, but as a partly non-fiction writing in which Coetzee recruits the freeing influence of fiction for his own ends.

I. 'The Problem of Evil'

Representing absolute depravity

The circumstances of Coetzee's presentation of the Costello story 'The Problem of Evil' are reported by Joseph Frank as follows:

In the spring of 2002, a colloquium on the problem of evil, sponsored by the Nexus Foundation, was held at the University of Tilburg in Holland. I was a member of a panel assigned to discuss Dostoevsky, certainly the modern writer who has given the thematic of evil one of its most powerful expressions. Our keynote speaker was the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, who, however, sprung a surprise on his fellow panelists and the audience by not speaking about Dostoevsky at all. Instead, he read a sketch supposedly written by a fictional personage already familiar from his work, a writer like himself named

Elizabeth Costello, presumably invited to speak at precisely such a conference on precisely such a topic.²⁹⁴

This sketch would be turned into Lesson 6 of the novel *Elizabeth Costello* titled ‘The Problem of Evil,’ in which Costello struggles in vain to convey the gravity of evil to a roomful of capable modern folks within the parameters of the lecture.

In the chapter, the reader meets Elizabeth Costello in Amsterdam as she is about to give a talk at a conference on the problem of evil. Costello’s subject for her talk is a real novel of much more limited reputation than Dostoevsky’s, namely, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*²⁹⁵ by the British-born author Paul West, a historical fiction about the unsuccessful July 1944 assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. Costello wants to communicate that West’s passages depicting the hangman’s intimidation of the arrested plotters and the execution scene, is playing with evil to the detriment of its author and the readers. However, to her dismay, she finds out that Paul West is also attending the conference, which prompts her to re-examine her thinking in a panic before finally deciding to go forward with the talk.

The significance of Costello’s message is, however, overshadowed by her mental and linguistic struggle that communicates its own subterranean meaning. Her argument appears didactic and obscure unless one pays attention to the evidence of her struggle in the grammatical patterns and word choices, the overall effect of which we can call the ‘style’ of the text. In ‘The Problem of Evil,’ Costello’s objection against West’s writing is also not directed against the story he tells, for she knows the full story of the July plotters prior to reading this novel, but against ‘a wanton, an *obscene* energy that exceeded his commission’ in West’s hangman.²⁹⁶ The objection is similar to the one that the monk Tikhon from Dostoevsky’s *Demons* (also translated as *The Possessed* and *The Devils*) has for the written confession of Dostoevsky’s greatest sinner Nikolai Stavrogin.

²⁹⁴ Joseph Frank, *Between Religion and Rationality: Essays in Russian Literature and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 204.

²⁹⁵ Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1989).

²⁹⁶ Coetzee, ‘The Problem of Evil’, 177.

Tikhon suggests ‘corrections’ for Stavrogin not in the content but to ‘touch up the style a little.’²⁹⁷

Between Costello and West, we have two texts that are quarreling about their imperfect styles rather than about what they each says. The style of ‘The Problem’ has a content of its own beside its rational argument, and this gradually comes through as Costello’s battle to find a clear exposition for her idea is met with repeated failure. The chapter has a repetitive structure that forces the reader to hear Costello’s one argument multiple times under different formulations. Her proposition—which, for brevity, I will summarise as being that certain things are better not to be read or written of—is first introduced in its raw stage as a sensation that overwhelmed Costello when she first read West’s novel, especially during his unsparing description of the execution of the conspirators: ‘... that is what she read, sick with the spectacle, sick with herself, sick with a world in which such things took place, until at last she pushed the book away and sat with her head in her hands.’²⁹⁸ In that moment, one word springs to Costello’s mind unbidden: ‘*Obscene!* she wanted to cry but did not cry because she did not know at whom the word should be flung’ (158). The word ‘obscene’ marks the very beginning of Costello’s tortuous attempts to capture the experience in words clear enough for the lecture hall. Immediately as the task begins, Costello perceives that this most basic speech act of exclaiming is already unbecoming the experience. Its utterance casts extraneous meaning of an accusation that she does not intend. How will she string sentences of subject-verb-object together for a lecture not knowing who is ultimately responsible?: ‘It is like a wall that she comes up against time and again. She did not want to read but she read; a violence was done to her but she conspired in the violation. *He made me do it*, she says, yet she makes others do it’ (180-81).

The problem persists as Costello continues her attempts to better articulate the experience. To illustrate her struggle, I will trace the different reiterations of her thesis statement and outline the conditions of their occurrence.

²⁹⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons : A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1994), 705.

²⁹⁸ Coetzee, ‘The Problem of Evil’, 158.

Costello's negative reading experience is soon transformed clumsily into more general statements: 'Specifically, she is no longer sure that people are always improved by what they read. Furthermore, she is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed' (160). However, when Costello arrives in Amsterdam and finds out that West is also participating in the conference, she is afraid that her lecture will be taken as a mean-spirited 'personal attack' on a fellow writer (161), and starts to rewrite and rethink the foundation of her lecture in panic. In the process, she poses a question to herself of how she, as a fellow novelist who has no qualms about speaking of violence in abattoirs, is any different from West, to which her answer is another reiteration of the thesis: 'The answer, as far as she can see, is that she no longer believes that story telling is good in itself, whereas for West,... the question does not seem to arise' (167). Then, in the auditorium prior to her lecture, Costello approaches West to warn him of what she is about to say and again rehearses her argument to him: 'I think writing like that can harm one. That is what I intend to say in my lecture' (172). Right after this private talk during which West utters not a word, the thesis is reiterated again in the lecture itself. 'That is my thesis today,' announces Costello, 'that certain things are not good to read *or to write*' (173). At the lecture closes, Costello proceeds to think to herself in yet another set of terms that '[d]eath is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others' (174). Throughout, Costello never ceases to feel uncomfortable about the expression she gives, and her tortuous review process grinds on as she leaves the auditorium and locks herself in the toilet cubicle, after which the chapter ends.

The examples I give by no means exhaust Costello's reproduction of her thesis, but they should be enough to demonstrate that while the different formations seem to point towards the same meaning, something else is also registered in the language. The opinion expressed in 'The Problem of Evil' when read as an argument may come across as overly rigid and even morally questionable in its one-sided treatment of West, but this rigidity is somewhat counteracted by the stylistic insecurity. The subjects and predicates of Costello's many thesis sentences shift around wildly between the writer, the reader, the act

of reading and writing, the scene of violence and its representation. There seems no beginning or end to what she is articulating, and her overreliance on signalling phrases such as ‘specifically,’ ‘this is what I intend to say,’ or ‘that is my thesis today’ read as deeply ironic.

How this uncertain form developed in relation to ‘evil’ can be tracked back to Coetzee’s meditation on the representation of torture in his essay ‘Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State,’²⁹⁹ collected in *Doubling the Point*. This essay is a provocative companion reading to ‘The Problem of Evil,’ which comes sixteen years later, since, side-by-side, the two works set off how Coetzee’s thinking on the representation of extreme violence has subtly evolved over the years.

‘Into the Dark Chamber’ (1986) comes out of a bleak phase in South African history when mass protests and boycotts against apartheid were met with increasing government brutality. The essay expresses despair towards the possibility of just representations of torture in the climate of violent oppression. In the essay, Coetzee produces a passage from Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*³⁰⁰ as an example of a nuanced representation of feverish violence, one that remains alert to the moral problem of representation. Importantly, Coetzee observes that the Gordimer passage looks back to a famous horse-flogging scene from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and it is possible to consider Coetzee’s thinking here as enlisting a panoramic view of violence, ranging from nineteenth-century Russia to twentieth-century South Africa, which I will then connect to the twenty-first century via Costello’s ‘The Problem of Evil.’

Set in mid 1970s apartheid South Africa, the particular passage from *Burger’s Daughter* describes the protagonist Rosa Burger as she witnesses a drunken black man—‘black, poor, brutalized’³⁰¹—madly flogging a donkey that is attached to a cart, which nevertheless stands still. Burger considers intervening but is suddenly troubled by the thought of being taken as one of the whites who

²⁹⁹ J.M. Coetzee, ‘Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State’, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (London: Harvard UP, 1992), 361–68.

³⁰⁰ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

³⁰¹ Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter*, 210.

care more about animals than black people. It is a scene piled over with multiple levels of violence—of Burger’s white gaze on black brutality, of the systematic white on black oppression of the apartheid, and of humans on animals.

Amidst this thicket of sinister connotations, Burger feels powerless to make a positive impact and her description of the scene reflects a unique view of depravity that has gone beyond human agency and history:

Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond the control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it.³⁰²

Gordimer’s vision here particularly grabs the imagination of Coetzee. After this point, Gordimer abandons full sentences, choosing instead to write in short, broken noun phrases, which soon break down further into semi-coherent listing of all the world’s sufferings, including and going beyond South Africa:

The entire ingenuity from thumbscrew and rack to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering... the camps, concentration, labor, resettlement, the Siberias of snow or sun, the lives of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Kathrada, Kgosana, gull-picked on the Island... (208)

Gordimer’s great insight lies in her capturing of the experiential truth about the kind of violence that cannot be explained within a logical/causal discourse. This is syntactically reflected in Burger’s inability to make subject-verb-object connections to speak of the scene. In fact, her attempt to make sense of the experience within the realm of human history and the human ability to comprehend brings about a tragic consequence. The senselessness of the experience ‘gone beyond the control of the humans’ temporarily shatters Burger’s belief in the possibility of a shared humanity in the country. Soon after

³⁰² Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter*, 208. This passage is also quoted in Coetzee, ‘Into the Dark Chamber’, 367.

the incident, she boards a plane and leaves South Africa; unable, as Coetzee puts it, 'to live in a country that poses such impossible problems in day-to-day living.'³⁰³ This passage led Coetzee of 1986 to conclude that this 'world of blind force and mute suffering' comes out of 'the inner reaches of Dante's hell, beyond the scope of morality' and 'beneath good and evil': 'For morality is human, whereas the two figures locked to the cart belong to a damned, dehumanized world' (367).

What Burger touches on seems synonymous with what Costello in 'The Problem of Evil' would refer to as 'absolute evil.'³⁰⁴ There is a comparable passage in the latter text that develops this theme of disengaged atrocity. The passage tells of how Costello was maliciously beaten by a man in her youth: 'It was her first brush with evil. She had realized it was nothing less than that, evil' (165). Similar to Burger's case, the writing shows a decisive break when the frustration of the man that was first understandable, turned into an inexplicable frenzy—into autonomous violence for the sake of itself. While the scale of the violence may not be comparable to the sufferings witnessed and endured under apartheid South Africa, their nature feels consistent, and part of Costello's message seems to be that evil remains a constant threat into the twenty-first century: 'In these unfamiliar times Satan is still feeling his way, trying out new contrivances, making new accommodations' (180).

Coetzee's description of the absolute experience in 'The Problem' nevertheless takes a decisively different approach from Gordimer's. His syntax is never allowed to break down, but is precariously negotiated. The writing is exceedingly careful to avoid assigning blame to any single person or particular action, but also to not allow the agents to evade their full responsibilities. The account begins with this striking double-passive sentence: 'When she was nineteen, she remembers, she allowed herself to be picked up on Spencer Street bridge' (165). Costello is portrayed as simultaneously the co-agent and the object of this car ride. This is followed by a coherent report of the facts of the event, chronologically organised and told entirely in neat subject-verb-object sentences:

³⁰³ Coetzee, 'Into the Dark Chamber', 367.

³⁰⁴ Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil', 176.

When she resisted, he tried to force her... To begin with he took it as a game. Then he got tired of that, or his desire tired, turned to something else, and he began to hit her seriously. He lifted her off the bed, punched her breasts, punched her in the belly, hit her a terrible blow with his elbow to her face. When he was bored with hitting her he tore up her clothes and tried to set fire to them in the waste-paper basket. (165)

As unseemly as it is to suggest, the beating Costello endured is continuous with the blows delivered to the Gordimer's donkey or Dostoevsky's mare. After a certain point, it ceases to be driven by the man's frustration at the refusal of sex and becomes the unknown 'something else.' It is as gratuitous as the beatings of animals that do not get the carts forward. From the position of Costello, the act is divorced from fathomable causes and effects, which leads her to appeal to evil as an 'absolute' and 'ancient' energy.

However, the traumatic incident does not come across in Coetzee's text as entirely incomprehensible or monstrous. This impression is due, I think, to the matter of style—of the regular sentence structures and their exceptionally clear relationship with one another. Costello even manages to make a limited logical sense of the incident that allows her to put it behind her: 'By fighting him off she had created an opening for the evil in him to emerge, and it emerged in the form of glee, first at her pain... then in the childish, malicious destruction of her clothes' (166). The subject of discussion is still the insidious and unknown evil energy, but the sentence's regular structure provides a measured sense of control that is absent from Gordimer's text.

This structure is enabled by the uncertainty of the term 'evil,' which like Coetzee's use of 'sympathy,' is left intentionally unsubstantiated. It is the sort of irrational concept that would have been distrusted by Burger's humanist discourse as well as by the expectations of an academic conference. Yet rationality cannot accommodate what Burger or Costello has been through and, as Burger's case has shown, it is not a match to the irrefutable reality of experience. Resting on Gordimer's heartbreaking portrayal, Coetzee in 1986

concedes to the powerlessness against an absolute violence. He ends 'Into the Dark Chamber' by idealistically looking forward to better days to come:

...when humanity will be restored across the face of society, and therefore when all human acts, including the flogging of an animal, will be returned to the ambit of moral judgment. In such a society it will once again be *meaningful* for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment, to be turned upon scenes of torture. When the choice is no longer limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one's eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life, and even the torture chamber can be accorded a place in the design.³⁰⁵

Coetzee's contention in 'Into the Dark Chamber' that morality is tied to the humanly comprehensible seems to have undergone a fundamental change by the time that he writes 'The Problem of Evil.' In the latter work, the ambit of morality has been pushed beyond human understanding to include incomprehensible embodied experiences. Meanwhile, the author figure has lost the belief in her authority. The human as embodied in Costello is openly small and weak, and susceptible to evil.

In order to show how the inclusion of the hazy term 'evil' allows an intelligible structure to be formed without compromising on the complexity of the event, I will go back to examine more fully Costello's final explanation of the abuse. The sentence ostensibly forges the cause and effect of the incident, yet the blame for what happened is indeterminable in the same manner as we find in Burger's description. The sentence in full is as follows:

By fighting him off she had created an opening for the evil in him to emerge, and it emerged in the form of glee, first at her pain ('You like that, do you?' he whispered as he twisted her

³⁰⁵ Coetzee, 'Into the Dark Chamber', 368 (emphasis original).

nipples. ‘You like that?’), then in the childish, malicious destruction of her clothes.³⁰⁶

The causal link is perfectly intact from beginning to end, while the man’s revolting words are safely contained in parentheses. Without the term ‘evil,’ this link would have been broken, leaving only incommensurable images of the fighting, the malicious glee and pain. If Burger’s stunted passages convey an unbearable helplessness, Costello’s speech seems to espouse a stubborn belief that there might still be some meaning left in acting and speaking in this day and age, which could partially explain her appearance in Amsterdam.

‘The weak vessel’

Since Costello feels herself to occupy a position of weakness in relation to absolute evil, she is doubtful about the climate of confidence in a twenty-first century cosmopolitan society. This tension is set off in ‘The Problem of Evil’ by the backdrop of an academic conference in the practical city of Amsterdam (which is of course also a simulacrum of Coetzee’s actual participation at the Nexus conference). Costello’s objection to the historical novel of Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, seems also to be based on the ground of its air of human pride, as Costello exclaims in a moment of passion during her lecture: ‘What arrogance to lay claim to the suffering and death of those pitiful men!’ (174).

Interestingly, we can perceive West’s self-confidence not only from Costello’s charge against him, but also from the claim that West himself has made in a published response to Coetzee. Following the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*, West released an article in the July issue of *Harper’s Magazine* in 2004³⁰⁷ where he asserts the ‘license of human creative power’ that grants artists access to all areas of human life. Rather unexpectedly, West’s response actually verifies Costello’s impression of his work. As his conclusion, he writes:

³⁰⁶ Coetzee, ‘The Problem of Evil’, 166.

³⁰⁷ Paul West, ‘The Novelist and the Hangman: When Horror Invades Protocol’, *Harper’s*, July 2004.

As I enter the arena of myth after life as a tax-paying novelist, we have all only just scraped the surface of what might seem a horrendous problem: starting out to denounce horror, yet, in the end, accepting it for its own sake, because it further reveals the unique license of human creative power. No matter how gross the outcome, it will be better to paddle around in its dark miasma than to ban it. So long as men are vile, so can art be too, and maybe even after. (93)

Clearly, Costello and West are categorically different in their views of the writer's work and his/her authority. While Costello is beset with doubts regarding the intrinsic value of her writing, West deems it his writerly duty to expand the frontier of human knowledge into every possible direction. While Costello considers tentatively that certain things are not good to know, for West to know is always good.

Not only do their beliefs clash, but Coetzee has also given Costello's speech a style of expression that is fundamentally different. The truth for the authoritative West, like his assertion of the 'unique license of human creative power,' seems always to be in the declarative mode that will remain unchanging through time and space. But Costello often feels the need to qualify her truth, plot out its limits, and diminish her own authority. 'She should never have come,' Costello thinks at one point, 'Conferences are for exchanging thoughts... You cannot exchange thoughts when you do not know what you think.'³⁰⁸ As a lecture by Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil' solves this problem of expression by staging the conflict in a narrative, but Costello is still left to contend with the inhospitable environment that demands intellectual clarity from her.

Costello senses her personal limits deeply in the words she utters. In the most critical moment of Costello's lecture where she tries to summarise her points, her speech is bogged down by the repetitions of 'I take' and 'I believe' or 'I do not believe' that occur in nearly every sentence:

³⁰⁸ Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil', 181.

I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places: risks, specifically himself; risks, perhaps, all. I take this claim seriously because I take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places. The cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is one such forbidden place. I do not believe we should go into that cellar, any of us. I do not believe Mr West should go there; and, if he chooses to go nevertheless, I believe we should not follow. On the contrary, I believe that bars should be erected over the cellar mouth, with a bronze memorial plaque saying *Here died ...* followed by a list of the dead and their dates, and that should be that. (173)

It would have been more in keeping with the lecture format if Costello had stated directly that ‘the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places’ or that ‘we should not go into that cellar, any of us.’ Instead, her insertion of the subjective qualifying phrases emphasises the close proximity of her speech to the private and contingent nature of her first reading experience.³⁰⁹

As Costello continues to question her own discursive stance, she begins to find that the opinion she is airing in public may be entangled with her advancing age and waning virility—her particularly weak position as an old woman. Part of her distaste may come from the fact that ‘[s]he does not like to see her sisters and brothers humiliated, in ways it is so easy to humiliate the old, by making them strip, for example, taking away their dentures, making fun of their private parts’ (178). If she had read the novel in her youth, not knowing what old age feels like, would she have had the same reaction? What if she were a man, would she be able to face the writing squarely since, as she notes, there

³⁰⁹ I decide not to include direct reading of West’s novel given that the basis for ‘The Problem of Evil’ is the lost experience of Coetzee/Costello’s first reading of *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* rather than West’s novel itself. Derek Attridge’s argument is apt here: each experience of reading is a singular event that neither Costello nor the reader can recover. Therefore, an attempt to do so seems likely to detract from rather than add to our sympathy with Costello’s words.

are '[n]o womanly presences in the cellar business' (181)? The further she gets from the experience, it seems, the less certain she is about what it means.

Costello's circumstances are particularly unpropitious to her intention. Apart from West's presence, she is besieged by the self-confidence that permeates the auditorium populated by people who have lived most of their lives in a milieu of peace—the last full-scale war on European soil having ended 57 years earlier. One male audience member gets up to suggest that Costello might simply be a 'weak vessel' who is not strong enough to face the scene of torture: 'Perhaps Mr West is made of sterner stuff,' says the audience member to knowing smiles, 'And perhaps we, his readers, are made of sterner stuff too. Perhaps we could read what Mr West writes and learn from it, and come out stronger rather than weaker, more determined never to let the evil return.'³¹⁰ At this prompting, Costello is overcome by the feeling that

...a limit has been reached, the limit of what can be achieved with a body of balanced, well-informed modern folk in a clean, well-lit lecture venue in a well-ordered, well-run European city in the dawn of the twenty-first century. (175)

In this atmosphere of utter lucidity—free from the shadow of petty secrets, of devilish violence or of the darker recess of human souls—Costello realises that she is fighting a losing battle.³¹¹ Meaningful communication feels impossible on this unsympathetic ground where knowledge is clearly valued over sympathy.

³¹⁰ Coetzee, 'The Problem of Evil', 175. Reality emulated fiction after Coetzee's reading in Amsterdam. As Frank reports, the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa was in the room and 'clearly felt provoked by the views of his fellow novelist.' Llosa responded to Coetzee with a similar claim to Costello's audience, which Frank summarises: 'some readers of the novel that so appalled Ms. Costello might have been strengthened in their hatred of sadistic cruelty.' For a full account of this exchange, see Frank, *Between Religion and Rationality*, 206.

³¹¹ The execution room and the prisoners' cells described by West in the Stauffenberg novel are also light-filled with 'the avalanche of light from the studio reflectors' in compliance with Hitler's command for a video footage. While the comparison is not directly drawn by Costello, it is possible to wonder if West's assiduous depiction manages to set itself apart from the content of that footage. West, *Very Rich Hours*, 297.

Her response to the man's question reinstates her position: that the terror of evil 'is something that can only be experienced. However, I am recommending to you that you do not try it out. You will not learn from such an experience. It will not be good for you' (176). But she cannot get the message across.

Coetzee makes the bright setting of the auditorium encroach further upon Costello's experiential mode of thinking, intercepting between her and the touch of evil she was at first so sure of. Stepping off the stage, the unsettled Costello locks herself in a toilet cubicle to regain her private space, which was where the accursed reading took place. 'Go back. Go back to Melbourne, to that Saturday morning,' she urges herself. But the privacy and her train of thought are short-lived. The cubicle door is raised off the floor, no doubt for the sake of public safety, and after a while Costello hears a child says in Dutch: '*Mammie, er zit een vrouw erin, ikkan haar schoenen zien*'—mummy, there's a woman in it. I can see her shoes (181, my translation). This minor event epitomises the oppressiveness of the drive for clarity in the public space, which is felt most acutely by its less able members. 'If she spoke the language she could enlighten the child,' Costello thinks, '*Because the older you get the longer it takes. Because sometimes you need to be alone*' (181).

Interestingly, various first-hand accounts of the Holocaust speak of the existence of absolute evil³¹² with similar combinations of experiential certainty and intellectual doubt as Costello does. One remarkable example can be found in 'At the Mind's Limits,'³¹³ Jean Améry's contemplative essay on his time in various Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. Améry writes specifically about the fate of intellectuals such as himself at Auschwitz, as they

³¹² Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is, however, a notable exception. Arendt's image of banal evil is based on a very specific entry into what is referred to under the umbrella term of the Holocaust. The work is a report and intellectual contemplations on the trial procedures of one bureaucratic and unimpressive Nazi member Adolf Eichmann. In its specific focus, the account does not include direct confrontations with the difficult violence and depravity that went on in the concentration camps, since Eichmann was only involved at a remove. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

³¹³ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

were a breed of men who fared the worst at the camp, being equipped with neither the practical skills of use to the SS guards nor the spiritual/political belief to contextualise their senseless sufferings. In that environment, they became in a very real sense the weak vessels among the prisoners. Améry felt betrayed by the impotency of his intellectual refinements. Acute hunger and exhaustion made child's play out of his habits of intellectual ruminations, while the poetic lines that had once moved him now lost its power. 'The word always dies,' he writes, 'where the claim of some reality is total. It died for us a long time ago. And we were not even left with the feeling that we must regret its departure' (20).

Through this wretchedness, Améry arrives at an entirely opposite view from the confident audience member of Costello and from West. For him, there is nothing to be learned from the absolute wretchedness of the holocaust. He writes:

We did not become wiser in Auschwitz, if by wisdom one understands positive knowledge of the world. We perceived nothing there that we would not already have been able to perceive on the outside; not a bit of it brought us practical guidance. In the camp, too, we did not become 'deeper,' if that calamitous depth is at all a definable intellectual quantity. It goes without saying, I believe, that in Auschwitz we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically. You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt.³¹⁴

If any positive can be drawn from the experience, Améry feels it to be the lasting damage inflicted on his intellectual arrogance. It has given him a 'certainty that remains ever unshakable' (20) that his rarefied intellectualisation is not that far off from play, and behind this opinion is an immensity of experience such that one can barely contend with.

³¹⁴ Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 19–20.

II. Everything turned to another use: The Master of Petersburg

Our discussion of evil in Coetzee's fiction can only culminate in a consideration of his most demonic work to date, *The Master of Petersburg*. I take the novel to be a true anomaly in the Coetzeean oeuvre. If Coetzee's other novels can be jointly characterised by an overriding desire to achieve truth and an unshrinking confrontation with complex realities, *The Master* has contrarily been accused, and accuses itself, of bottomless perversions.

The Master establishes a devious relationship with external reality, which is central to its perverse meanings. But for the time being, it is worth limiting our attention to within the novel's covers, where we join the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1869. Dostoevsky has just returned to St. Petersburg from his exile in Dresden, having received the news of his stepson's premature death by a fall. In order to hide from his creditors, Dostoevsky travels under the false name of Isaev, thus pretending to be his stepson Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev's biological father. There is no business he needs to attend to regarding Pavel's death as the body has been buried. But morbidly compelled to somehow resurrect his son, Dostoevsky spends his days wandering around Pavel's old stamping grounds and acquaints himself with Pavel's landlady and her daughter, and his radical friend, another real historical figure, Sergei Nechaev. The despondent visit finally bears a sour fruit in Dostoevsky's feverish writing of a stupendous character, Nikolai Stavrogin, the heartless and enigmatic centre of the real Dostoevsky's next novel *Demons*. In *The Master's* final scenes, Pavel is transformed into the rabidly cynical Stavrogin who violates a young girl's innocence and pretends to be the lover of a mentally ill woman to entertain himself.

Needless to say, Dostoevsky's final act of creation only serves to deepen the novel's repressive gloom. With its relentless and intentional despondency, *The Master* resists the ethical mode of reading that has been the main *modus operandi* of Coetzee studies and, noticeably, there are fewer critical commentaries on the novel than on many of its counterparts. In recent years,

however, we have seen a surge of intriguing commentaries on *The Master* of a non-ethical sort—most notably by Patrick Hayes and John Bolin³¹⁵—that accept the challenge of the novel’s perversity and read the text as a psychological study of human desires rather than as a narrative exploration of the ethical. These readings of the novel do not try to extort an ethical stance from the novel and, consequently, they are better at accommodating the vertiginous nature of *The Master*. Most importantly, this approach enables one to read against the changeable claims of the novel’s central figure. Hayes’s reading, for instance, exposes Dostoevsky’s amorous desire that at times overrides his attempt to open himself up to the text’s alterity, that is, to the voice of Pavel.

But while these psychological readings help to elucidate the internal logic of the novel, there remains a puzzling dissonance between *The Master* and the rest of Coetzee’s oeuvre. The turn towards the unethical and the untrue in *The Master* becomes all the more baffling when one remembers that Coetzee has elsewhere expressed his uneasiness over the endless explorations of psychological impulses. Drawing on none other than Dostoevsky himself, Coetzee on that occasion contends that ‘Dostoevsky is not a psychological novelist at all: he is finally not interested in the psyche, which he sees as an arena of game-playing, of the *middle* of the novel.’³¹⁶ Then, in his essay ‘Confession and Double Thoughts,’ Coetzee echoes Michael Holquist in saying that the great achievement of Dostoevsky’s later years is his knowing how to put an end to this endlessness.³¹⁷ Yet when he writes of Dostoevsky in *The Master*, Dostoevsky is playing endless games with his own life and work. His final demonic writing is still portrayed as part of a game, not existing for itself, but is ‘a trap, a trap to catch God.’³¹⁸

Another prominent feature of the novel also repressed in the non-ethical readings is *The Master*’s half-buried relationship to the reality outside the text.

³¹⁵ Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 165–93; John Bolin, ‘The Sinister Mirror: Desire and Intensity in J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*’, *The Review of English Studies* 65, no. 270 (1 June 2014): 515–35.

³¹⁶ Coetzee and Attwell, *Doubling the Point*, 249.

³¹⁷ Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, 281.

³¹⁸ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 249.

There is first the covert distortion of Dostoevsky's life that has already attracted a number of criticisms from the novel's reviewers. Coetzee's novel revolves around the death of Dostoevsky's stepson Pavel, but the historical Pavel actually outlived his stepfather by 20 years. As Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky's prominent biographer, explains; in 1869, the real Dostoevsky stayed with his wife in Dresden, Germany in an attempt to avoid debtor's prison.³¹⁹ On another level, the novel also contains the half-buried truth of the death of Coetzee's son Nicolas on 21 April 1989 under similar circumstances. Countless fragments from Coetzee's relationship with his son are inserted into the novel. JC Kannemeyer's biography of Coetzee, in turn, relays how the complaint Dostoevsky makes about young Pavel's refusal to wake up in the morning reflects the same problem Coetzee had with the young Nicolas, while the words Dostoevsky's wife used to inform him of his son's death: 'Fedya, *Pavel is dead*,'³²⁰ echo those of Coetzee's ex-wife on the phone to him.

To maintain that these perversions of historical truth into fiction are of no relevance to the text would, I think, be unrealistic from both a practical perspective and from the standpoint of authorial intent. For even though they are not explicitly stated, the perversions can be easily recovered and are bound to enter the public's perception of the text in due course. Already two substantial publications have been released in the form of JC Kannemeyer's biography *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* and David Attwell's study of the Coetzee archive *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*,³²¹ in which the autobiographical circumstances surrounding the novel are made central to its meaning. It is perfectly conceivable that, a few decades down the line, a republication of *The Master* would feature a preface that makes these historical discrepancies immediately available even to the casual reader. Further, Coetzee's decision to leave partially exposed the images from his own life, while at the same time undermining the mimetic pretense of his biographical tale of Dostoevsky with obvious factual

³¹⁹ Frank, *Between Religion and Rationality*, 196.

³²⁰ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 124.

³²¹ Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*; Attwell, *The Life of Writing*.

contradictions, inevitably challenges any reading that complies strictly with the text's surface meaning.

There is also a strong argument to be made that these invisible biographical alterations are in fact not external to the text at all, but form a continuous landscape with its textual trail of perversions. Dostoevsky seems to suggest as much about his own writing: 'Not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal—betrayal of love first of all, and then of Pavel and the mother and child and everyone else. *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use.'³²² By the same token that Stavrogin is oblivious to Dostoevsky's hand in his creation, so is Coetzee's Dostoevsky to his author's, and we are elicited by the novel to situate them—the author and his character—on cascading plains of perverse significations. What is so far apparent is that the bracketing off in critical analyses of these perversions of external reality has resulted in a critical oblivion regarding Dostoevsky's grief and guilt despite their prominence in the novel. For Attwell, unless the biographical loss is acknowledged, the novel 'will have at its centre an unaccommodated grief.'³²³

From grief to perversions

From Attwell's research into Coetzee's manuscripts, it is clear that the writing of *The Master* was part of Coetzee's effort to come to terms with the death of his son Nicolas. Attwell quotes from Coetzee's notes for the novel on Christmas Day of 1992: 'Christmas Day and Nicolas is not here. The project: to recover the truth of his relation to the dead boy. That truth: not to bring the dead boy back into this world but to go into the world of death without fear.'³²⁴ Then, in another entry, Coetzee has his protagonist declare an intention that could also be assigned to himself: 'What kept him calm at the funeral service, what gave him an air almost of equanimity, was the vow he had made: that he would write his son into immortality' (193). The intention Coetzee had, as Attwell gathers, was to breathe life back into his son via a reworking of fictional materials (199).

³²² Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 235.

³²³ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 208.

³²⁴ Coetzee Papers, *The Master of Petersburg*, quoted in Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 199.

It is a baffling project for Coetzee to have conceived: to bring the son immortality through fragments of stories from Russia as opposed to a more direct representation, and the indications we have of Coetzee's reasoning behind its conception are similarly tortuous. Late in January 1992, almost a year into the writing, Coetzee begins to conceptualise the work as the thematisation of 'the question of disguise, of pretending.'³²⁵ According to the author, it is a concept that he had yet to explore in his work: 'In my own fiction, there is plenty of pretending to be natives, women, but all the pretending is done by me. Disguise is not thematized. No one in the books pretends to be anyone else' (521). Coetzee explores the possibility of disguise as a means to disrupt the rigidity of names and subject positions in realism, which he collates with the immutability of death that 'cannot be pretended' (522). He surmised that to pretend, which is to give in to a '[l]ove... that transforms the face of the beloved,' might offer a way of 'bringing Pavel back to life' and he was hopeful that this strand might yet lead to a liberation that will 'redeem [Dostoevsky's] betrayals' (522).

This reasoning is shot through with the desire to alter the reality of the son's death. For this, Coetzee was prepared to play fast and loose with signs until 'death' can again mean 'life,' and the being behind the name 'Pavel' or 'Nicolas' will not have disappeared but become transformed into another immortal name. That this name will be Stavrogin, Coetzee has decided from his very first entry in February of 1991,³²⁶ but his personal mission was that, unlike in the Dostoevsky's novel, his Stavrogin would not in the end commit a suicide:

The idea was that his son could be resurrected in Stavrogin, if Stavrogin could be resurrected from the death to which Stavrogin's maker had consigned him. It was an audacious idea, since Stavrogin's maker was Fyodor Dostoevsky and the death to which Stavrogin has been consigned by his maker a powerful death. But the idea could not be forgotten, which is to

³²⁵ Coetzee Papers, *The Master of Petersburg*, quoted in Bolin, 'The Sinister Mirror', 521.

³²⁶ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 199.

say (he thought) he must have faith in it. What he thought was:
there must be life in the idea, or else it would die.³²⁷

As before, the above passage contains the hopeful desire to restore life that motivated the writing of the novel. This is an invaluable thing that has emerged from the manuscripts for the fact that it finally provides a credible motivation, a vital life force, for a novel bogged down by unrelenting despondency.

While the justification can be found outside the novel, the novel itself gives us glimpses into the emotional state that accompanies this rational sophistry. Near the end, Dostoevsky reveals his great sadness that his acts of love can turn sour against the best intentions—that even love can become perverted. In the chapter ‘The diary,’ Dostoevsky discovers in Pavel’s diary a derisive version of the night when the stepfather found his son incapacitated and barefoot after a bout of heavy drinking. Dostoevsky guided Pavel home and washed his feet. However, the boy registered only the furtiveness of his stepfather and recorded in his diary: ‘had he been with a whore?,’ ‘loves to play the father forgiving the prodigal son,’ before concluding ‘All v. embarrassing.’³²⁸

To Anna Sergeyevna, Dostoevsky pours out his own very different memory of that time in words full of loving imageries; of how, undressing Pavel that night, he was struck by ‘how small his toenails were, as though they had not grown since he was a child.’ Dostoevsky had that day imagined ‘Pavel tramping the cold street after midnight in his socks. A lost angel, an imperfect angel, one of God’s castoffs’ (220-21). The boy is recalled as ‘[f]eathered but unable to fly,’ like ‘pelicans: gangling creatures, ungainliest of birds, till they spread those great wings of theirs and leave the ground.’ At the end of his reminiscing, Dostoevsky laments: ‘Unfortunately, that is not how Pavel remembered the night. In his account there is nothing about birds or angels. Nothing about parental care either. Parental love’ (221). The image of Coetzee and his strained relationship with Nicolas poignantly overlays his character’s here given the sudden burst of rich detailing.

³²⁷ Coetzee Papers, *The Master of Petersburg*, quoted in Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 201.

³²⁸ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 218.

This painful recognition seems to gnaw at Dostoevsky's faith in a coherent world—where a father's love should have produced positive effects—and it eventually initiates his fall into an utterly perverted writing that produces Stavrogin. At the same time, *The Master* serves to turn the sense of personal failure as a father into a flaw in the system of Russia, a fault of the age: 'But when was it last that words could be trusted to travel from heart to heart? An age of acting, an age of disguise' (195). It is better that Dostoevsky's whole world be cast in chaos than the thought that he has failed his son.



The commanding scale of Dostoevsky's task to refute his son's death may be best gauged by our reactions to his constant outpourings as well as those of the people around him. From his first visit to Pavel's grave with Anna Sergeyevna and her daughter, Dostoevsky has been denying the death: "He is not here, he is not dead," he says, his voice cracking' (10). To Katri, Nechaev's Finnish comrade, he repeats 'Pavel is not dead. He would have died, but by great fortune he escaped with his life' (99), but no one takes him seriously. Dostoevsky's practical task, as he sees it, is to find a way of speaking this untruth in a way that it becomes, as Coetzee has said of Robinson Crusoe: 'transfigured, real.'³²⁹ Faced with the impatience of Anna Sergeyevna, he muses:

To make her understand he would have to speak in a voice from under the waters, a boy's clear bell-voice pleading out of the deep dark... the voice would have to call, and she would have to hear. Somewhere within himself he would have to find not only that voice but the words, the true words. Here and now he does not have the words.³³⁰

The boy's words cannot be realised perhaps because the voice is gone forever. Dostoevsky is, in a sense, fighting the cruel and unyielding reality of death.

The novel's realist mannerism is arguably a part of this project to create a false reality that will rival death. Coetzee constructs plenty of the mimetic signs

³²⁹ Coetzee, 'Daniel Defoe', 24.

³³⁰ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 110–11.

of Dostoevsky's Russia, but behind this smokescreen, reality is in fact being fundamentally dislodged and betrayed. Page one of the novel bears the title 'Petersburg,' which is followed by a historical scene setting that leads the reader to expect a historical novel: 'October, 1869. A droshky passes slowly down a street in the Haymarket district of Petersburg. Before a tall tenement building the driver reins in his horse' (1). Uncharacteristic for Coetzee, the text does not doubt its own authenticity in putting forth this simple toy model of St. Petersburg, a foreign city and culture where Coetzee had never personally visited.³³¹ The text is not after the truth but, on the contrary, hopes to transform truths. Margaret Scanlan delightfully sums up the little quirks of Dostoevsky that Coetzee inserts to great realistic effect:

[T]rue enough to the biographical facts: his Dostoevsky worries about his indigestion and his hemorrhoids quite as much as about the famous epilepsy; evinces mild anti-Semitism, needs a bath and a change of underwear, is improvident, writes begging letters to his long-suffering friend Apollon Maikov.³³²

Only by consulting external historical records will the reader learn that this realistic effect is false. Within the novel, everything seems as innocuous as it should be. At the time of its publication, *The Master* also deflected many people's expectation in its abandonment of the South African context at a moment when the country was undergoing important reform into a democratic state,³³³ which in a sense also deepens the betrayals that the novel accumulates.

In contrast to the real names used in Coetzee's fictional memoirs, *The Master* produces the situation where the characters have multiple names. Dostoevsky also assumes the name of 'Isaev.' The figure of the son in the novel appears under 'Pavel,' 'Nechaev,' or 'Stavrogin.' Finding the one true son

³³¹ Attwell, *The Life of Writing*, 192.

³³² Margaret Scanlan, 'Incriminating Documents: Nechaev and Dostoevsky in J.M. Coetzee's "The Master of Petersburg"', *Philological Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (22 September 1997): 467.

³³³ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 117.

amidst this confusion becomes an impossible labour, yet one finds the narrative boldly following through with the consequences of its desire to bring back the son under a different guise. Chapter 8, 'Ivan,' demonstrates the overflowing of mystifications within Dostoevsky's psyche as a result of this perverse task. One night Dostoevsky is awoken by a 'disembodied' call he first hears as '*Isaev!*'³³⁴ It is not his name but the false name he temporarily assumes—and as the reader we are aware that the novel's use of the name 'Dostoevsky' rests on similarly shaky ground. Whatever the name called, the fact is that he is stirred by it. As the call repeats, he realises it is not a human voice but the wailing of a dog, and the misrecognition launches him into a tortuous contemplation that is emblematic of the novel:

A dog, not a wolf; a dog, not his son. Therefore? Therefore he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore—paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness—he must answer to what he does not expect. (80)

Since nothing is to be what it seems, the regressive and equivocating logic draws on, seeming to reach a plan of action but then turns on its head. When the disoriented Dostoevsky finally locates the dog chained to a drainpipe in the freezing temperature, he untangles the chain but does not release it. Symbolically, it seems that something in Dostoevsky still resists cutting loose the chain that connect signs to their intended meaning—resists, that is, the notion of the dog as his son and the boundless responsibility that the refusal of the established system would demand.

³³⁴ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 79.

It is not my son, it is just a dog, he protests... Yet even as he protests he knows the answer: Pavel will not be saved till he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought *the least thing*, the beggarmen and the beggarwomen too, and much else he does not yet know of; and even then there will be no certainty. (82)

It is in this chapter that the motif of gambling is introduced into the novel to signal Dostoevsky's further steps into the abyss. The idea of gambling provides a comforting rationale for Dostoevsky's inability to cope with the rapidly multiplying signs of his son. It offers him a blind to block out the devastating thought that he is a father who has failed to nurture his son into life. Unable to save all, Dostoevsky begins to think of his finite action in terms of a random bet. He is 'betting... that the dog is not the sign' (83). Within this metaphor, Dostoevsky's half-hearted response to the dog belongs not to a straightforward causality and is, therefore, not entirely blameworthy. Beyond everything, it is not the dog that he wishes to save but his son. Any action of his towards the animal is but a blind wager whose significance is arbitrarily determined. 'Without the risk,' Dostoevsky reasons, 'without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere in the fall of the dice, what is left that is divine?' (84). It is an irresistible argument, but also one of the long string of excuses produced in the novel that deplete Dostoevsky's agency and chip away at his more immediate responsibilities, not least the wife and child he has left in Dresden, his unpaid debts and the promised visit to the grave of Pavel. Fittingly, the policeman Maximov, the guardian of order, reminds him at one point: 'But remember, you have a wife and child who depend on you. If only for their sake, you cannot afford to abandon yourself to fate' (43).



Beyond the dog, the next perverse figure of the son that Dostoevsky has to cast aside is embodied in the destructive force of Sergei Nechaev, a historical figure behind the 1869 murder in Russia of Ivanov, a fellow student activist. With Pavel being portrayed as the helpless saint, Nechaev is the rebellious son

par excellence, and he perhaps gives Coetzee the occasion to explore the father-son animosity that was very much a part of his own relationship to Nicolas.³³⁵ The Freudian primal horde myth of rivalry between fathers and sons for riches and women has been alluded to in various readings of this Nechaev-Dostoevsky relationship,³³⁶ but it may be too simplistic a model for the varied sentiments *The Master* gives rise to. Unlike the horde myth, this novel struggles to determine what sentiment is truly foundational in the father-son relation: love or hate.

Before their meeting, Dostoevsky has declared his abhorrence of Nechaev's ideology and practice: '[He] is a conspirator and an insurrectionist whose designs I repudiate with the utmost force'; 'I reject everything he stands for' (35), but Nechaev has the same—if cruder—desire for a new beginning as the grieving Dostoevsky. As Bolin notes, Dostoevsky becomes increasingly aware of his similarities to this ideological enemy.³³⁷ '*He is like me, I was like him,*' Coetzee's Dostoevsky thinks, '*only I did not have the courage.*'³³⁸ Nechaev's goal to bring about 'the end of everything old, including fathers and sons... When everything is reinvented, everything erased and reborn: law, morality, the family, everything' (189) is a variation of Dostoevsky's unspoken task, even if it comes from the place of hatred rather than love. The two share the method of perversions as theirs is mimetic rivalry as defined by René Girard. For Nechaev too, '[e]verything is permitted for the sake of the future' (200).

Listening to Nechaev's vision for the new world order, Dostoevsky cynically questions the young man without any sympathy for the cause—'And money... will you redistribute the money?'; 'And God?'; 'And the angels?';

³³⁵ According to Kannemeyer, a childhood friend of Nicolas recalls how both of them were 'against all forms of authority, especially that exerted by the teachers.' At the age of ten, the boy staunchly refused to go to bed, with Coetzee unable and unwilling to assume the position of authority to make him; and, as a young man, Nicolas struggled to support himself but steadfastly refused financial help from his father. However, the political obsession of Nechaev seems to be the Russian's own. See Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 322.

³³⁶ In addition to Bolin, 'The Sinister Mirror'; see Sue Kossew, 'The Anxiety of Authorship: J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and André Brink's *On the Contrary* (1993)', *English in Africa* 23, no. 1 (1 May 1996): 67–88.

³³⁷ Bolin, 'The Sinister Mirror', 524–25.

³³⁸ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 193.

‘And the souls of the dead?’—yet in the artless answers of Nechaev lies the world vision that Dostoevsky is also after: ‘The souls of the dead too, Fyodor Mikhailovich, if you like. We shall have the souls of the dead walking the earth again—Pavel Isaev too, if you like. There are no bounds to what can be done’ (190). ‘What a charlatan!’ Dostoevsky thinks, but he also knows he has been perversely comforted by Nechaev’s lie, the very same lie he has been maintaining to everyone. His initial disgust transforms into amusement, unable to say ‘whether he is playing with Nechaev or Nechaev with him’: ‘All barriers seem to be crumbling at once: the barrier on tears, the barrier on laughter’ (190). In the next moment, quite inexplicably, Dostoevsky embraces Nechaev, who is no longer referred to by his name as before: ‘Embracing the boy..., sobbing, laughing, he kisses him on the left cheek and on the right’ (190). From enemy, Nechaev is morphing into a surrogate prodigal son for Dostoevsky to play the forgiving father.

Unmistakably, both characters are playacting in the roles of their respective fantasies, competing for the ascendancy of their fictional narratives—one of the oppressed son and the other the forgiving father. Nechaev proudly stresses that he ran away from his oppressive father when he was sixteen ‘[b]ecause he beat me’ (194), while Dostoevsky privately notes that the radical is ‘[d]esperate to be betrayed, desperate to find a father to betray him’ (194). But Dostoevsky is also desperate to find an unrepentant prodigal son whom he can pardon and be betrayed by. Already, he has acquiesced—suspiciously easily—to giving the roguish Nechaev money during his escape from the police like a devoted father would (158), and then takes on the responsibility to dispose of the incriminating evidence the radical left behind (162). For a brief moment before Nechaev’s plan implicates him, Dostoevsky has the image of the man as ‘a child alone in the sea, fighting and drowning’ (195), echoing the vision of Pavel he has had several times before.

It is difficult to discern the truth of the two characters’ psyches in all the rehearsed and self-satisfied performances. Uncharacteristically for Coetzee, the free indirect voice of his protagonist Dostoevsky leaves so much of its own pretensions uninterrogated in a pertinacious effort to disrupt the reality of the

son's death. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky is after not just any perversion, but one that will become as powerful as truth itself—an autonomous, *bona fide* literary creation. To revive his son, Dostoevsky feels his way through the falsities and disguises that remain attached to the old order of the truth, that are not perverse enough, and eventually overcomes them. Strictly within the novel, it has much in common with Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*,³³⁹ which, as Michael Holquist put it, has 'a plot against plots.' Holquist explains the novella in terms that also feel applicable to *The Master of Petersburg*:

The basic pattern of the *Notes* is a cycle of well-made stories that—in themselves—make sense, have traditional, *literary* plots. The structure of these stories is then subverted, one by one, as they are shown in the face of reality, in the face of the very contingency they abjured to achieve their shapely form—to be just that: shapely forms.³⁴⁰

Nechaev's rejection of the father, for instance, comes in words that break down under scrutiny; a reflection of Dostoevsky's current unconvincing role as the forgiving father. 'I am my own father now. I have made myself over' declares Nechaev, 'I don't need any father to hide me. If I need to hide, the people will hide me.'³⁴¹ It would appear that Nechaev's political cause provides a surrogate paternal care—his ferociousness a disguise he hides behind for protection.

In the chapter 'The printing press,' Nechaev manages to 'deceive' Dostoevsky into writing a pamphlet for his illegal press, but predictably Dostoevsky relents too easily in a show of fatherly sacrifice: 'I am the one who carries the madness. My fate, my burden, not yours. You are too much of a child to begin to bear the weight' (202). The content of the pamphlet, which accuses Nechaev of Pavel's murder, is of no significance to Nechaev. Any sensational claim would do to create the condition of social maelstrom that will stretch the

³³⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2000).

³⁴⁰ Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 57.

³⁴¹ Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 194.

authorities and further his cause, but his guile is evenly matched by that of Dostoevsky, who quickly takes the opportunity to portray himself as a loyal father betrayed for his love: 'A trap, a devilish trap... Pavel's death was merely the bait to lure him from Dresden to Petersburg. He has been the quarry all the time. He has been lured out of hiding, and now Nechaev has pounced and has him by the throat' (203). Dostoevsky's self-important tone and the sudden diminution of Pavel feel false, but the novel insidiously lets it stand.



The Master is edging ever closer with each chapter to the agentless condition in which absolute evil thrives. If Pavel is to be brought back, Dostoevsky reasons that he has to get to that final stage where all ties are severed. Everyone connected has to be betrayed before the words can be re-signified and Pavel resurrected. In the final chapter, 'Stavrogin,' Dostoevsky finally reaches the ultimate state of untethered madness where the meanings and attachments in his heart are ferociously invalidated. He is left with only a self-aggrandising vision of himself as 'a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness.'³⁴² The detachment reaches its completion when Dostoevsky sits down to write a character study that will become Nikolai Stavrogin in the novel *Demons*. In the draft, he describes Stavrogin having sex with a girl with the door ajar, knowing that a child is also home and watching. Having written it, Dostoevsky then leaves the draft open on the table, knowing also that it would attract the interest of his landlady's daughter, Matryona: 'It is an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. With it he has crossed the threshold... *I have lost my place in my soul*, he thinks' (249). Shedding all pretence of his obligation to Pavel, '[f]or the first time it occurs to him that Pavel might be better dead' (247). Dostoevsky's earlier comment on Nechaev, in a sense, applies to him too: 'Lonely, lone. His proper place a throne in a bare room' (196). His standing was once determined by his social and familial responsibilities, but now he has betrayed all. It is a state of death in life in which finally he can fall with his son: 'Nothing he says is true, nothing is

³⁴² Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, 234.

false, nothing to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed. There is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall' (235).

Dostoevsky is under no illusion about the heinousness of the writing he is about to commit or the harm it will inflict to his soul. He confronts it as 'representations that have no place in the world,' but then 'if that is what must be' to bring about 'the resurrection,' then 'he will do it' (241). Given Dostoevsky's brutal lucidity, the narrative of *The Master* never achieves better moral clarity than its protagonist. The novel is indeed fundamentally uninterested in ethical choices, for which personal responsibility has to be assumed. It knows the responsibilities and has chosen to shun all in protest against the world that has taken away the beloved son. It is difficult to imagine how we can appreciate this perverse novel if not with the firm knowledge of the inconsolable grief from which it has sprung. With its unapologetic attitude and repeated falsehood, the novel makes it near impossible to sympathise with Dostoevsky and follow him on his devious trail unless we read against him, behind him, and outside him. For the novel's real beginning and end seem to be outside the fiction. They are in the life of J.M. Coetzee that has here been betrayed.

CONCLUSION

None of Coetzee's fiction I have examined in this study offers resolutions for its characters. Resolutions, for Coetzee, seem to signify death, when his fiction strives to embed itself as intimately as possible in life, and to hopefully live on beyond its author on account of being read by other living beings. Despite the lack of resolution, Coetzee's narratives can be observed to embody the realities of different body-souls at given times and places, whose truth-value cannot be thoroughly delegitimised by remarks about their transient nature. Since critical discourse is wont to argue that the instability and self-consciousness of Coetzee's narratives disrupt stable meanings, it may be easy to lose sight of the fact that the narratives still *mean* something—that is, they are still capable of affecting us as readers, as embodied souls, despite our inability to conceptualise what their meanings are. So while it is true that Elizabeth Costello's vegetarianism wavers in front of her family members; Mrs. Curren's angel of death is himself vulnerable to death; the literary novel is losing its purchase in *Slow Man*; the truths of John Coetzee change with his chosen register and age; or *The Master of Petersburg* contains only false names, etc., this thesis has been an attempt to reinstate the fact that Coetzee's narratives have given life to these positions and invited us to experience them sympathetically as embodied truths that had lived, even if imaginatively, and are real.

I do not propose, however, that one should always read Coetzee for the body-soul. It should be made clear that the concept came into prominence with Coetzee's late apartheid novels—namely, from *Age of Iron* (1990) on—and becomes explicit in his Australian fictions. To apply it outside of this window will likely entail some failure to respond to the other texts' different singularity. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how attention to the body-soul would significantly add to existing readings of Coetzee's novels from his early apartheid years, during which the literary universe provided Coetzee with a much-needed shelter from the demands of the political. Writing of *Michael K* (1983), Valdez Moses identifies a desire that resonates through Coetzee's early works: 'the desire for a

realm outside of history: a life on the island of fiction.’³⁴³ The sense of embattlement between the literary and the political also pervades Coetzee’s 1988 essay ‘The Novel Today,’ whose impassioned plea betrays its author’s painful struggle against the pressure of historical reality, as well as his preference at the time for novelistic truths. Because of the early novels’ active involvement with the novel form, literary criticism as a discipline becomes well situated to respond to them and to defend them. On the other hand, Coetzee’s genre-crossing Australian fictions in which the literary gets differentiated into a myriad of genres, each representing a facet of the truth alongside other non-literary discourses, can be much better accommodated in a reading practice that looks beyond the text to the body-soul. The one constant and unquestionable truth by this point in Coetzee’s career is the living beings, both of the author himself and the characters, that engender each piece of writing. This presence of the body-soul provides a way for us to sensitively approach and situate Coetzee’s Australian texts and fictional memoirs within a coherent oeuvre along side his previous novels.

This ground of reading cannot be true unless it is itself subjected to the reality of living and dying. The body-soul in Coetzee’s fiction also has its shelf life, and already Coetzee’s most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, shows clear signs that Coetzee is moving his attention beyond ‘life’ and into the afterlife. The story of *The Childhood* is populated by characters who are washed clean of their past memories, all of whom have landed mysteriously in a Spanish-speaking port town of Novilla with the purpose of starting a new life away from their old attachments. In the narrative’s formal simplicity and generic details, it shares clear characteristics with parables, and its title recalls the parables of Jesus in which the meanings of what is said are never immediately apparent but have to be allegorically deduced. In contrast to Coetzee’s preceding embodied novels, this story plunges into the world of spiritual and universal truth and tries to imagine the difficult journey back to life. As Simón remarks near the end of the

³⁴³ Moses, ‘Solitary Walkers’, 154.

novel: ‘*how shall I ever get from zero to one?* From no where to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time.’³⁴⁴

Within this parable world are two misfits, the protagonist Simón and the boy in his care, David, who appear trapped in the parable when they long to be returned to the full life of Coetzee’s previous novels, or at least to be delivered to their new ones. Though the novel’s imaginary setting may be compared to that of Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, life inside Novilla is distinctly devoid of the predecessor’s gritty reality or the pains of the body under torture. In all areas, the people of Novilla desire no more than their basic needs, which the town’s system adequately caters for. They are neither burning with Paul Rayment’s love nor Costello’s fraught writerly desire, and they certainly do not experience hunger like Michael K—a hunger that forcefully reminds K that he is alive. Instead, hunger is treated in Novilla as a beastly desire to be overcome. Ana, a staff member at the town’s relocation centre, advises: ‘Adapt to a moderate diet... Hunger is like a dog in your belly: the more you feed it, the more it demands.’³⁴⁵ Fittingly, the novel follows *Summertime* (2009) in which Coetzee imagines the creation of his biography following his own death. *Childhood* is a story of the afterlife beyond the body-soul, in which there are still remnants of the body-soul’s desires in the novel’s main characters that keep them moving and eventually taking them away from the town of Novilla towards another new life.

Many of the claims I have made in this study, especially one about the general clarity of Coetzee’s meanings with their clear correlatives in the body-soul’s reality, is flouted by this new tale that imagines the hereafter. One can still trail Simón and sense his lingering habits from the days of living, but it is undeniable that he is consumed by an inexplicable loyalty to the boy rather than to his own existence, while the boy himself seems magically above matters of mortal vulnerabilities. His make-believe magical quality is a new addition to the Coetzee’s oeuvre that even the fabulist Costello cannot lay claim to. To approach the singularity of this narrative may require another reshuffling to our mode of

³⁴⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2014), 249 (emphasis original).

³⁴⁵ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 27.

reading in which allegorical meanings take precedence, while the body-soul only makes faint, thought distinct, calls. But whatever is required, at least it is worth making an effort to understand the novel knowing that Coetzee's most recent work is still alive and kicking, even after four decades of writing.

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